

Tokyo to Tijuana: Gabriele Departing America

Steven Sills

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By Steven Sills

Book One: Sang Huin

"It is probable, then, that if a man should arrive in our city, so clever as to be able to assume any character and imitate any object, and should propose to make a public display of his talents and his productions, we shall pay him reverence as a sacred, admirable, and charming personage, but we shall tell him that in our state there is no one like him, and that our law excludes such characters, and we shall send him away to another city after pouring perfumed oil upon his head and crowning him with woolen fillets; but for ourselves, we shall employ, for the sake of our real good, that more austere and less fascinating poet and legend-writer, who will imitate for us the style of the

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virtuous man." Plato (Republic)

Chapter One

At Toksugum Palace in Chongno of Seoul Sang Huin (known by his friends in the states as Shawn) felt an empathy as deep as the gods; and the reconstructed walls of ancient buildings that he could see into and imagine long deceased emperors in coronation ceremonies or reading their mandates became irrelevant. Yang Lin, parting from their movement toward the steps that led toward the Royal Museum, began to walk to a distant place where a woman in a western wedding dress stood at a pond posing for a picture with her groom. Near earlier buildings Sang Huin had noticed him looking at them questioningly. He had seen a sad and innocent yearning in Yang Lin as if, after a long search, that creature had found his alter ego in the woman and would not let it go.

After five minutes of waiting alone, sitting on those steps and letting a cigarette dangle limp in a frown, Sang Huin realized that this new friend of his was not just straying off briefly, so he gradually went over there in a circuitous and jaunty stroll as if other things had gained his attention and only by accident was he moving there. Yang Lin told Sang Huin that he longed for her: longed for himself within her beautiful clothes, within her commitment, and within her sex. He had been so sincere. Sang Huin felt a worse form of compassion for him. It was sorrow, the enlightening, sweet venom, and it sank into him. It was deep empathy. It was God. It was definitely something that was not wanted. It stayed with him on the bus.

On a ride from the Nambu Bus Terminal to Chongju, Sang Huin's sleep was spastic like a nervous twitch that would every now and then startle him into wakefulness and he would wonder where he was: Muguk, Chongju, Seoul, or "Miguk." Sometimes at the primary school in Muguk he would ask, "Where are you from?" Then once, in a coaching effort for the pitch of a complete sentence, he had made the mistake of "Miguk...Miguk" ("America...America") and the class was in an uproar. He thought of this in one of his startled awakenings. He looked from the window to flat patches of skimpy forest that most Koreans thought of as so beautiful. The way was straight, south and barren and made him almost yearn for the tortuous roads that appeared near Umsong to be rid of scenery so bland. Although the bus traveled down the highway as a solid, jitterless mass, he jittered into more drowsiness. The contents of his head shook and his mother's voice cried out to him like locusts from the branches of trees. There was a hot sticky childish oozing within him. Within dreams his fortitude was like marshmallows when pulled off of sticks after roasting in a bonfire. He heard voices of he and his sister counting 7 o'clock, 8 o'clock, 9 o'clock rock. 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock, twelve o'clock rock - Ghosts won't find me. Ready or not we'll find you.

Then there were those macabre photographs, at the trial in Houston, of his grown sister's skeleton. The police had looked for his sister's body in the park but obviously not thoroughly in the ravine. In one year they had only searched that park once and in the meantime her body had decomposed. He dreamed of those photographs of skeletal remains and the other photographs of more than a few bones that had gone off from the rest. They were marred too but by the fangs of dogs or other beasts dragging them around before dumping them away from the rest of the remains. He dreamt of these photographs exactly as they appeared from

the slide projector and in that sequence as one of those most godless days of that long trial when one's whole body trembled in continuum through bits of the hours with stolid, cadaverous expressions throughout the ordeal. He assumed his parents had also behaved the same. Before the real confirmation of her death, all three had been functioning with such dead but hopeful words and perfunctory gestures which were then ripped out of them as the program, memory, and energy cells can be pulled out of robots and soon they were thrust in their own personal black abyss with none of the three able to see outside of blackness and pain as much as they might have wanted to offer solace to each other.

Who could offer solace when the conclusion of life as an evil and godless place had solidified into consciousness like Death etching her name in wet cement? Back then, it had been obvious that the trial, a pantomime of the mute for justice, could never be allocated to the dead under the best circumstances, and this particular trial was going nowhere. The conclusiveness of the evidence and motive had been defaced with time that had entirely decomposed her form. There had been theories. Plenty of circumstantial evidence had been presented. Her employer had done it to her as conclusively as a feeling could testify. Then and now there was plenty of indication that she had been pregnant with his child. Twenty years ago Sang Huin (Shawn then) had swung a golf club into her eye and the blood had splattered everywhere. On that day, as a boy, he had thought nothing could happen worse than that; but back then there was blood and back then there was composition. He woke up and once again knew that even in sleep there wasn't always repose. Sometimes, without finding a way of sealing memories in tidy body bags, one's inner voice was as active in sleep. He said to himself that he shouldn't be surprised by such restlessness when life's conundrums were so horrific. The passage of a few years, and the passage through a thousand times of falling asleep could not even restore one's equilibrium in something so horrific. He shook off his sleep like a dog its wetness. He tried to think of Yang Lin whom he had left: that mild voice so slow and deliberate in its intensity, the morbid and thoughtful eyes like an ocean containing its ecosystem, the muscular young body that had an orange hue like a Chinamen who had sucked up too much sun.

After the revelation he had listened to him repeatedly talk about wishing that he had been born a woman; and except for once of saying, "Well...I understand, but" (and stopping not knowing what to throw in as the "but"), he had been silent with eyes of empathy. It was painful to see a perspective; and Sang Huin broke out of his skin like a reluctant and tortured snake but accepting the inevitability. He just stared at the fountain for many uncomfortable minutes hoping that the mouth of the fountain could articulate a statement that would solve the situation as well as ease his discomfort.

At the fountain, in silence, he had thought of rigid Texan horses and the lazy meditative cows of his home state in warm fields at mid-afternoon--creatures of the gods with no sense of the vile practicalities behind their domesticated state. During his times of stress long ago they had often seemed to Sang Huin as so aesthetic that one could wish to slip within them for an hour or a bit of the day; and surely after having done it one might instantaneously wish for the freedom of whatever was beyond the fence. Maybe, he had thought to himself, something like this was how Yang Lin felt.

He had suddenly blurted out, "You commented that the pigeons and the fountain in the pond are beautiful. Maybe they are." He had

hesitated feebly. The coarse words and tone had surprised both of them. "I hear that doctors can now make a man half pigeon if he dares to have a mixture of pubic hairs and pubic feathers; or if you prefer a beautiful fountain-surgery a continual waterfall can come from your ass." Sang Huin had not known where the words came from. His gentle imagination had rarely formed such an aggressive flare of thoughts and yet he had felt that he could not let this stranger--this recent buddy--this someone he had slept with--save up money on the assumption that he could be made into a beautiful woman. Twenty years from now he did not want him to be made into a hybrid mess from a lifetime of painful surgeries... hormonal confusion...mutilations.

But had he not mutilated four months earlier? A video "pang" girl [the clerk at the video room where he had watched a movie with his friend, Yang Kwam] tracked down the friend's license number, and then the friend's telephone number, and began to inundate him with a flood of messages. It was quite flattering and Sang Huin finally returned the calls. He was curious. At that time he wanted a girlfriend. From an erection, a yearning, an ejaculation, and more than he wished, knowledge of his own virility by the conception, he proved the very essence of manhood. She aborted at his request but nature aborted and mutilated: still-death, genetic defects, and miscarriages. Human beings were rifted apart from each other by circumstances of separation and death despite love. The life of a being, itself, was nothing but different transparencies miscellaneously tossed onto an overhead projector. No, he thought, maybe that was just his own life. The transparencies of most humans were in order--the last of which would be old age and decay but what was written on them was meaningless. His transparency recently had been to prove his manhood by having sex with a woman and it had all gone awry.

Sang Huin sighed. He took off his shoes in the bus. He stroked his feet, in short white sports socks, across the vinyl of the back of the chair before him as if he were giving a massage to the person seated there. He needed sex. He needed to lose himself in a pleasure that would reduce his headache and release him from worries even if it was an illogical frenzy far removed from reality and only lasted for a few minutes.

He tried to rest comfortably in his seat, absorbing himself in Time and Newsweek. Then someone yelped at him in Korean, pushing him out of his sympathies toward the bondage of the Afghan population under the theocracy of the Taleban and the tattered infrastructure of the country. There was no way to catch even a word or two of it and this balding and middle aged man gave Sang Huin a look as if he had wasted his time talking to the world's biggest dummy. Sang Huin gave his typical defense of "Miguk sareum" ("American") which would bring on a confused and critical look--in this case, it was a closer examination of Sang Huin and a slanting of the man's face as if he were ready to give Sang Huin a big fat kiss. Sang Huin picked up his book bag on the spare seat near the window and sat there.

It was complicated, in a sense. If he had been less temerarious perhaps to not have the support system of this whole chain--family, city, state, nation, and racial identification-- might have posed a problem. To have lived all but the first few years in America, and so existing as a Korean only by birth and race definitely made him American in every way but a legal one. Most persons under such a scenario would have clung to the country that had made up nearly all of his experience.

At least that was what he told himself. Effrontery and cowardice were two sides of the same coin. He loved his mother and she was alone on the American continent as he was in Asia. They were indeed alone in the world.

Even though he cared about family (what was left of it with both his father and sister now dead) it did not deter him from leaving America. To be on a traveler's visa with his own Korean passport did, however, seem to be a bit strange but he could not think of a situation in life that was not confusing. Relationships were confusing although he had never possessed one for very long. When he had the ineluctable sympathy for another person, it deflated all the romance. He didn't mind that so much. To embark on a deep friendship with strong personal commitment and devoid of the bouts of infatuation and frenzy like seasickness seemed the right course; but all partners of the past seemed to him to have wanted only to cast a romantic aura around him as if scared to see the real person inside, and scared to look at beings that were also banal and in continual suffering. Reflexively jumping into pleasure like a lifebuoy, as a human did, what could one expect? One thing was sure: he had experienced a deep pain that his fellow humans wouldn't even give the briefest of stares if they could avoid it. Besides, no one wanted his enlightenment that the world was a bad place when each was trying as best as he could to find an entrance into Disneyland to which there were no security guards to force a departure.

He searched though his billfold for a calling card. He went to the front of this high-tech bus and made a call.

"Yoboseyo."

"Yoboseyo. Yang Lin bakwa chuseyo."

Silence.

"Yang Lin or Antonio. Ku nun manhi irum ul cajigo isumnita. I sarem i wanhamnita." He threw in both names that the little guy went by and the telephone clicked off.

He called again.

"Yoboseyo."

"Yoboseyo. Yang--"

"What do you want with him?"

"I'd like to talk with your son. I am an acquaintance of his. He helped me to get to Toksugum Palace. I want to thank him. I'd like to talk to him again." Yang Lin had told him that his father suspected all male callers and that Sang Huin would have to give a defense of his acquaintanceship but Sang Huin felt awkward in his misrepresentation. Here he was playing with a man's reality concerning his son. He did not feel good about himself.

"Well, he isn't here. He's never here!"

The telephone clicked off. Sang Huin felt hurt. He felt a morbid clarity behind how people always left his life. He thought about what he "knew" of this Chinese friend, Yang Lin, if he knew anything at all: he

was adopted and lived in America; that those parents died-- his mother first and then the father in a drunk driving accident; that he was readopted by Korean parents; that his father despised him and suspected his son was gay; and that Yang Lin felt that his English level was the same as his Korean. Abstract ideas must not have existed in his head at all. In short, he "knew " very little and the scanty but pathetic information he received might, for what he knew, have been nothing but a mendacity. Sang Huin had a great empathy; but now another friendship had just bit the dust.

Had it been a month ago that Sung Ki had left him. Sung Ki: even now the name sounded musical. After the video pang girl's attempt at marital entrapment, this neighbor boy had been most alluring in their nightly rendezvous of two months. The sister who fed him rice and Korean pizza and the father who wanted to introduce him to his native country by teaching him the sounds of Korean letters were glad to get the youngest child an English teacher. Little did they know of the pleasurable respites from pain Sang Huin was getting in the back bedroom. Homosexuality was so taboo there that nobody believed in its existence. In that respect, free of discrimination, one was free to be gay in Korea. Then the 18 year-old boy was told to meet the masculine and the vicious just as his country dictated. Right after getting his letter from the military, Sung Ki laid out Sang Huin's blanket in a different room. He talked of needing a girlfriend. It hurt; but, Sang Huin rationalized it was what Sung Ki needed so why shouldn't he talk about it? Superiors in the military often beat a man if they felt that he didn't have a girlfriend evidenced when no letters and photographs were forthcoming. Then one day he was gone and soon thereafter Sang Huin lost the address book and key chain from the souvenir shop at the history museum Sung Ki had given to him. He lost both by leaving them in the locker at the mokotang (bathhouse). "We lose our friends," thought Sang Huin, "and then we lose the things that our friends give to us." It felt less harsh to make the idea applicable for all mankind.

There had been no real reason for him to go to Seoul this time. There were no private lessons there. His reactions toward Umsong also did not have much of a rationale. Occasionally, even when there were no private lessons in that area he sometimes got up around 4 a.m nonetheless; took an hour long bus ride to that small town he had once lived in; walked near bowing rice and corn; crossed the bridge around a thin circular lake at a small park; and stared at the Korean moon bolted tightly against the Korean sky. He wanted for the night to capture him somehow--for a drunk motorcyclist or a lazy trucker to whisk a wild adventure and physical intimacies upon him and yet, in full wistful innocence, he equally wanted what he would always go there for: to hear nothing but birds and a whisk of wind in the tranquility of that sleepy town in one of its most tranquil hours. Nothing of the former ever happened and he would always come from the impulse to a feeling of loss. His impetus to go to Seoul this week had come from a dominant feeling of disconnection experienced by one who knew the extreme violence of the world, who knew the madness of hope for anyone, and felt being buried alive in that one perspective that the world was an evil place--a perspective that was not ethereal but solid as a coffin even if it did spill over into other things. A further disconnection of any significance would cause such an individual to let a numbness and deadening of the concept of self to take place. The day before his fleeing to Seoul, his platonic friendship with Kim Yang Kwam had gone awry and he found himself floundering in suffocating despair as that time years earlier at the trial. Yang Kwam was asleep with his hand in

his underwear when Sang Huin awakened. Sang Huin touched him. It was the end of the closest Korean friendship that had been his life support in the six months he resided in this foreign country, South Korea, which was his birth home and the source of his nationality.

Now it was Kim Yang Kwam he kept thinking about in the bus. Sang Huin was labeled as dirty a few nights ago: the way he walked on the floor with his shoes instead of taking them off at the door; the half open window that allowed any insect an easy passage; the fact that he didn't have any rubbing alcohol to cleanse the mosquito bites that his friend gained while sleeping in Sang Huin's room; the fattening mess of pancakes with half burnt ridges in place of rice which Sang Huin prepared for him despite the criticism; and then came questions about the nature of his relationship with Sung Ki.

Glancing out of the window, he pulled out a pint of "ooyoo" (milk) from his sack. His throat was not dry or hurting but for some reason he felt the need to caress it with what he drank as well as with his fingertips. He drank his milk, attempted memorizing a few words of Korean, and then went back to sleep. He had a strange dream of some inconsequential happening in Seoul. The dream was not much different than reality. In the dream the subway (Orange Line, number three) stopped and he noticed a young blind man with a dog getting into one of the cars. Sang Huin quickly moved toward that door. Then he found himself walking through one car after another since the blind man and the dog passed through the inside doors. He woke up and thought of the dream in the context of himself. He was drawn to beauty and carnal activity but also to those captive in some imperfection for within them sensitivity, existential and knowledgeable of suffering, would be complete. He yearned for the deep intelligence that knew such things. His imagination swelled with the thought of this individual just as it had when he actually encountered him in Soul. Sang Huin was always traveling--especially when he was in the States. He was discontent and was seeing himself falling further and further away from the normal path. He had nothing but a college degree, no specialty, no ambition for money, he couldn't really think of a field or discipline for himself, family was a deep life altering wound that made the thought of gravitating himself around a wife and children unbearable, and even his hobby of playing a cello was as a musical dilettante. He looked out of the window and smoothed out his hair. The bus was becoming full now. Still, no one was standing.

Maybe, he thought, he should have been proud at the restaurant. Instead, when Yang Kwam said that he never wanted to see him again Sang Huin said, "I understand," but was thinking "Well, then why are we eating together?" Yang Kwam's eyes were stern. Indeed, it was the end. He felt stunned at that table: to lead a person to a restaurant so that he could not talk to him and then at the inquiry on if he was upset-- Oh, what did it matter? Sang Huin's head hurt thinking about it. He put his hand on his forehead and looked out of the window. Sang Huin said nothing to the statement of "Don't ever call me." They both ate sparsely in thorough silence, Yang Kwam paid the bill, and then he was gone. Sang Huin's instinct was to follow his former friend to the ends of the earth on the public bus system and to harass him in the bus by making him feel miserable for his declaration that he was a dirty person. No, he told himself, he had handled the situation the best that he could. After sitting at the table for a while, he had withdrawn to his home passively. On what seemed like an eternal trip, cramped on a seat in the bus, disconnection was making his mind jittery, soft, and rolling like a

ball away from him. He tried sleeping but his mind kept trying to imagine what really took place between his sister and her boss at the park if indeed it had been really him at all. The jury years ago had not thought of the evidence as being conclusive. In sentencing a man to a life of imprisonment it couldn't be done on a feeling.

He felt lost and loose. He still felt stunned. He remembered that he had only touched him by barely stroking his hair and his hand and then touching his underwear. It only lasted a minute and then he turned on his side away from him and his own instincts. It was an insignificant minute in one's life and he could not figure out why it became such evidence of the accuser that he was dirty--the charge of homosexuality not being directly stated. He asked himself why, even now, he was staring at moving forest and long stretches of road with this yearning for love. He opened another pint of milk. He sipped and then rested its opening to his bottom lip. Why did human beings end in such closure? Why did they gain worth and awareness of their being only in personal interactions? Was he nothing but the composite of other people's impressions of him? These impressions--these judgments-- could not be real. They were based on brief outward gestures and the judges had nothing but their own usual experiences of their petty and selfish lives to compare others with. In Japan women who left their children locked up in hot cars were rarely accused of the crime of manslaughter; and in Korea the handicapped, he had seen, were left to crawl like worms, pushing their carts and singing their songs as traditional music blared forth. He died every time he saw one of them. He yearned for the love and the language where he could befriend someone who was handicapped and he chastised himself for only being able to lay money in some of their cans. Once he put his hand into the hair of such a man. He stroked the hair around his face. The gesture lasted only a couple seconds. The man screamed out something and a security guard began moving toward them. Sang Huin placed money in the can and went away. Then he began to question himself. Maybe it was loneliness that had compelled him to do that. After all, the action was undoubtedly bizarre in the sense that no one else did such things. He was not wearing a monk's robe. Another man's fate was none of his business. This type of action just was not done; and yet, he was not the same as others. Suffering the paralysis that would not allow him to make a full smile and finding the eyes x-rays that could go, for the most part, beyond pleasant countenances to a suffering innate in other beings, it was no wonder that he was peculiar. It was no wonder that at Christmas parties or barrooms he sat and drank in silence feeling like a buffoon for not acting like one. In ways he was a buffoon: his taciturn ways that thwarted the lighthearted frivolity of a world conceived out of motion was the substance that often caused contemptuous laughs.

What did it matter? What did any of his actions towards others matter? Everyone came and left him. He was dizzy on a merry-go-round.

"You must all eat," said Sung Ki as he poured water into the remaining rice in Sang Huin's bowl. He had heard it so many times. How they had carried on an affair with the sister staying there and the overnight visits of Sung Ki's father was a mystery.

They had met in the park in Umsong. Sang Huin was memorizing words in his textbook entitled Let's Speak Korean. Sung Ki spoke something to him in Korean. "Miguk Sarem imnidad" responded Sang Huin (I am an American). Sung Ki, accompanied by a high school friend, took him to eat kimbop (a Korean version of sushi). He spoke in English the entire time

neglecting his school friend from the conversation. After visiting a couple museums, Sung Ki gave Sang Huin his beeper number. Sang Huin invited him to a Christmas party held for students at a language institute but stayed contained to his own students and his new friend, Sung Ki. That night they slept together; and the boy that had stroked Sang Huin's leg with his foot when they were eating kimbop wanted to hold hands while the two of them lay next to each other. Sung Ki, soon afterwards, began to plan out their time together. Sang Huin did what he requested: touring the Independence Museum; mountain climbing; free English lessons, and visits to his Buddhist temple and congregation. Soon Sang Huin was spending every night at Sung Ki's apartment and a month later their relationship was a sexual one.

Sang Huin thought about how Sung Ki cleaned the apartment by putting a wet towel under one of his bare feet and sliding across the floor with it; how he used to go into the bathroom with his newspaper and would not come out for over an hour; and that sentence he would always say, "you must all eat" meaning that every speck of rice left in the bowl should be mixed with hot water into a soup so that nothing was wasted. On the day that he learned that Sung Ki was going away he came to his apartment and asked if there was anything he could do or get him. There wasn't. He sat on the sofa, cold and pierced, as Sung Ki ignored him, cleaning one thing or another and then reading something or another. Sung Ki lit a cigarette and sat on a balcony that overlooked the mountains and rice patties of Umsong. After a few more moments of silence, Sang Huin went to him. His voice was shaky like a faltering foundation. He cried. It wasn't so much in reference to him as it was his sister. It was his first tears for her. It was in reference to non-ending perpetual loss. He knew that Sung Ki would construe it as solely for him. He felt embarrassed and the embarrassment increased as the two men hugged. Sung Ki began to cry. Sang Huin said, "I want to apologize. I'm sorry if I did something wrong. You wanted a girlfriend and my friendship and I made you have a boyfriend."

"It's okay. I liked the feeling then." That friendship had bit the dust.

Right before the bus came to a stop, he fell into a dream where there was a dust storm in Pyongyang. He ran through one dong (neighborhood) to another lost, looking for distinguishable signs, shapes in buildings, and widths of streets. Everything from the thin dust-sheathed roads to the hangul (Korean language) on the signs, looked as identical as the occasional mom and pop stores and it was all indistinguishable from what he saw minutes and hours earlier. He ran into no one since the streets were empty. Then he became careful of where he stepped. "The dust storm," he argued, "could have slid land mines up from the thirty eighth parallel." The more he thought about it the more nervous he became and the more hurried. When he became breathless, he sat on a rock and drank the last of his bottled water. The taste of sauerkraut and hot dogs was in his thoughts and the boiling, bubbling surge of his saliva but he would have eaten kimchee or someone's dog being as hungry as he was. It became fully dark and he would have known entire blackness were it not for the speckling of stars, the moon, and a fire at a distance. He walked over to the fire. He saw four whores seated around a bonfire. He recognized different buildings, and the curves of the street near a hard dirt tennis court. This was Ne Doc Dong. "Do you want me," said one, "or do you want another?" Sang Huin's face turned a bright red like it did with drinking a bottle of beer. He smiled and looked toward the sidewalk in his

embarrassment. He said, "No, I wouldn't; but would you have a brother?"

When he arrived in Chongju from the desolation of what was in between Seoul and it, the population and activity of this small city recreated an insatiable yearning for Seoul, which to him was a storehouse of all extraordinary venues to the mind (encounters both sexual and cultural). Large buildings were like the small mountains of Umsong with a topping of cloud on a rainy day--monuments of beauty welcoming him to its domain that edified and exhilarated his appetites and his love. The mountains, until recently, transported his imagination to green blankets of waving rice, and from there to farmers' markets and rural parades celebrating the farmer, the daily appreciation of the faces he saw, and the monotonous sounds of "Hello" from children and high school students who knew of him. Those students always made him seem retarded when he couldn't communicate to their Korean rambling but when he spoke to them in English with the same stream of words they became giddy and the outcome was usually a positive one from his perspective. That was before he decided to sue his boss for the 10 million won that was owed to him. At that time he lost faith in the man's decency and began to find the countryside monotonous even though the continual exposure to greenery and remoteness had been healing to his soul.

He left the bus in Chongju (where he was more or less residing) and walked to the bathhouse called a mokotong. The day was fiercely hot and he wondered if it would be better to jump on a city bus since he had experienced heat exhaustion a week earlier and had to be put on an IV to replenish his system. He pulled out some bottled water and crackers for countering any remaining potassium deficiency. He needed a walk and was not willing to be impeded by a weakly cowardice in broken manhood that was contrary to his muscular form. He passed coffee shops, Samsung stores, a convenience store called Lawsons, and one called Best Store. Even though he could read some of the signs in Hangul he did not know what he was reading for the most part. He wished that his family had taught him his native language. Here he often felt like a handicapped moron. If he were an Anglo-Saxon, a blue-eyed Miguk sarem English teacher, spending 6 months in the host country without learning much of anything about the Korean language, it wouldn't have been even a minor offense. To most he was a retarded Hanguk sarem. He chuckled and then smiled at the faces he took in.

He waited at a red light with other pedestrians. He sifted out bodies and faces. For a few seconds he appreciated the old and the young whom he saw. It was an unselfish sensation. It was spiritual and he liked it. Then he lusted after the young men. He had hardly looked at them lustfully while in America. Occasionally Korean women also got his attention but not as much as American women. He had trouble believing that such predilections were a summary of a man. In fact they seemed to him a cathartic release of energy that blocked manhood if manhood was gaining equilibrium when coming up from the punches or finding a positive expression of himself and the world, and even a pride in both, within adversities. Since he quit his job following the suit and the loss of Sung Ki from his life he went to Seoul often more for sex than anything else. How easy it was. All he had to do was put his eyes on someone at a bar called "Trance," around Pagoda Park, or at the movie theatre behind it and off they went to his hotel room. What was it? A strong yearning for his native land and the man he might have been had he not been replanted in America, an over-identification with his own sex, or fragmentation from violence that had disgorged a close family

and made him distrustful of those bindings and obligations that could go awry. He did not know. He did not know that it mattered. Anyhow, here his lusts were pursued cathartically in part and lovingly in that addictive clinging in part but always he was falling free and naked into their pools of sensation.

He did not think that he was all that bored. He had around fifteen hours of classes a week and was able, with that, to gain a salary commensurate to what he should have received monthly from his former employer. It turned out to be perfectly legal. After all, he was a Korean citizen, albeit one on a traveler's visa, and so he did not have to work for anyone but himself. He didn't have to do all that much but be able to speak English. He went to museums in Seoul on his free time even though the experience was a bit redundant since there weren't enough temporary exhibitions to entertain and enlighten him for long. The period after sex cloyed empty into the night like a finished game of solitaire. He knew that reality whenever he chose to engage in it and yet he did it nonetheless. He wanted an exchange of higher and lower energies (or at least thought he did), but men throughout the world were afraid of anything but the latter. Reality was as it dictated: and for the most part he did not want to make a seedy experience into something transformational by exchanging names and telephone numbers, and making subsequent calls although that was what he secretly wished-the tattered man that he was.

He entered the mokotong. He picked up a key, a toothbrush, and a razor at the counter. He took off his shoes and left them with the worker who deposited them into a small shoe locker; and then he went to his clothes locker. He took off all of his clothes except for his underwear. He locked them in. Then he went to the toilet. He put on the typical bathroom slippers made of plastic that were used in toilets because they were often wet and dirty. He went back, after urinating, and reopened his locker. He took off his underwear and deposited it there. He had become so socialized to the need of a beeper (not that he ever got any calls apart from students needing to re-change their hours of study) that he hated to keep it there suffocating under his socks. It was an inanimate object but, instrument that it was, it was a source for possible connectedness. Like a child, in his more subconscious thoughts, it was his friend. Still, Koreans, as addicted as they were to pagers and the new popularity of cellular telephones, could not easily dangle them from their penises at a mokotong. He locked the locker and felt "Honja" ("alone"). Even among large groups of people he was alone. When he went to restaurants he was usually "honja," and had to declare it. When he studied Korean, read great literature, went to a museum, saw a video at the video pang, or went to a mokotang he was alone and often questioning how anything could be enjoyable in such remoteness. There was pain in it but like any adaptive mammal choosing one lesser pain to the greater one (in his case choosing the aloneness of his thoughts to the sociability of the masses) there were times when he wasn't even aware of how alone he really was. Everything was measured by its impact on others but the pre-adolescent, found buried deep in the man, could always play alone. When violence was really known and the world was conclusively bad in one's perspective one could go at it alone.

In the shower he used a type of dual washcloth connected together like a mitten. He put his hand inside of it and used its abrasive side to scour his body. He tried not to stare at all of the bodies doing the same. He spent just a few minutes in a whirlpool because of the

intensity of the heat and then dived into the extremely cold waters of the pool. His heart raced and coldness tingled through his body. Koreans believed in the salubrious qualities of ginseng, dog meat, and sudden exposure to extreme heat and cold. Besides him, there were only two boys and a young man with a rubber ball within the cold pool, but only he swam circularly enjoying the solitude as much as one could. Every now and then, by his lack of focus, he swallowed water in his lust for a man or two lying on the edge of the pool where the heat of the whirlpools in the adjacent room entered and hypnotized them dozingly. He concentrated on the steam that rose above his head, exhausted itself on the mirrors, the waves that he had created which massaged his psyche in sight, feel and sound, and the three figures that enjoyed the water with him at a distance.

It had been disconnection that had brought him here to the mokotong, as it had to Seoul or even to South Korea itself. People had come and gone out of his life in such a storm, and he was in an existence floundering on something without a stable foundation. It was a miracle, to him, that he had been able to finish his studies at the University of Houston following his sister's death. Back then while students paraded themselves in the insouciance of sociable gestures reflecting their sexual rhythms he had dangled alone like a skeleton in a neurosurgeon's office. He liked the flexibility of his schedule here in Korea. He needed plenty of free time to think his weird thoughts and reconstruct himself as long as his thoughts did not collapse onto him, burying him alive.

At the least provocation, in late August, he began to come to her, his favorite city, lost and uncertain with eyes somewhat wild and fearful but yearning and believing in Seoul's power to provide him with experiences that would thrust him into a better knowledge of himself and the world. She would reflect onto him a more refined and loving being (or, at a lower stage, a loved one since he knew that it might be true that he was one of those tattered souls who weren't needing to learn how to be loving at this point but just needing to feel loved).

Four or five times around the pool were enough to tire him to a respite of ten minutes sitting on its edge and contemplating the movements of the people around him. Their forms transcribed into ideas concerning what he thought their lives might be like; and from there, feeling and the musical notes encroached from distant spaces within his imagination.

There had been a time when the whole world seemed to him full of connections. Perhaps that is what made his childhood memories so special: as a child he believed that their meaning would go on forever. The temporary nature of family marshmallow roasts and monopoly games with his father; tire swings and neighbor's tree houses; bicycle radios fastened to handlebars; selling snow cones to passing cars; bicycle routes; meatloaves, potatoes, and onion rings; bi bi bop and kimchi chige; that trip to Arkansas at a distant relative's house and how he and his sister had played in the snow with a "cousin" the whole day; his sister....

Oh, how painful! He didn't want to think of that ever. He wanted to find the beauty of the present moment. How good it was to stretch out into motion; to feel the power of his arms; and the embrace of water.

He thought about how on his walk here an ordinary happening had

touched him without even then being aware of it. A young boy standing at a curb with other pedestrians waiting for the light to change rocked a metal, rectangular trash container, which swung back and forth on a hinge. Sang Huin put his hand on his head in passing; and the world could not have seemed more rich and connected by this impersonal incident than if Sung Ki's Buddha had manifested himself supplying answers to every question that Sang Huin had ever had in his head. This contentment and absorption in the poetic qualities of the present moment lasted only that long: a moment. He told himself that he continually wanted to be in the present moment as fully as this no matter how banal or what lonely patterns it consisted of. It was better than searching through memories of people long gone who had no capability of returning to him again.

He pulled his dangling legs from the pool. So much came and went. It was hideous in a way: he could not determine who or what was important. He wasn't even sure how much people were supposed to mean to him, if anything at all. Of his friend, Yang Kwam, what importance to the long-term aspect of his life did this man make? Disconnection ran amuck looting the benign corpses of good memories. After sitting himself on a bench in front of the pool, a sadness at the loss of his friendship with Yang Kwam made him feel age that he did not possess.

He watched a couple young men stretch out in motion. He watched their splashing, their excitement, and their frenzied limbs with the awareness that this tousling around had no higher significance. He got a vision in his mind. It was a feeling with musical notes. He got his underwear and his book bag from the locker and dressed himself marginally. In the dark sleeping room of the mokotang, where many businessmen got their only bit of relaxation from the week, he sat in a reclining chair near the window and began writing down notes but he felt that he was dabbling. He deluded himself that an ability to record notes on a staff would transform him from an amateur cello performer and general musical dilettante to a composer. It was a dream for dreams meant that he was more than a marginally educated professionless clod kicked by circumstances to job, residence, and sexual orientation. Dreams meant that he was more than a mere carbon organism jilted around by electrical activity in the circuitry within the result of hormonal activity and the results of genetics. Dreams deluded him with a sense of purpose that would be more pleasant than reality.

One man's long and thick penis throbbed up and down on its own volition by the impetus of dreams. Sang Huin tried not to stare but he could not help it. His eyes, still getting over an eye virus, began to hurt and he felt tired. He put away his composition and then put his hands over his eyelids.

He went to sleep. He dreamed of a woman named Gabriele driving down a country road in Arkansas. She reached for a can of snuff that was on her dashboard. The roads she chose were random and she kept yearning to move southwest until she was out of America to that neighboring country of Mexico so different than the homogenous American model that was rife the world over. He saw into her mind and her hopes to cross over the Mexican border and veer off the main road through adobe hamlets, and cacti and past Mexican Indians.

When he woke from his epiphany he wasn't sure what to do with it so he returned to the pool only to find it had been drained. Seven streams of water gushed from spouts at the bottom of the pool and three young

boys were running around in the collecting waters--one kicking water up to the lower parts of the mirror that covered the walls. It all reminded him of his mother blowing up a plastic pool for he and his sister and how she ran the hose over to the pool to fill it with water. He could remember how the two of them had splashed freely inside it for hours but were so prudishly careful that neighbors hosed off their grassy feet before entering with them. He remembered telling one neighbor boy to get out after he had disregarded the rule, soiling their clean waters, and when he, "Shawn," wouldn't leave he got out to tell his mother only to gain the enflaming sting of Texan fire ants on the souls of his feet. He could remember his screams more than the sting. He looked toward his reflection on the nearest part of the mirrored wall, but still steamed, it wasn't there.

His thoughts crumbled like Graham crackers and spilled like pints of milk that Mrs. Ghrame, the kindergarten teacher, had given to each class member as they watched Winnie the Pooh and Piglet on television before being made to sleep on mats for a nap. He felt lost childhood with so many forgotten memories sucking him into an invisible vortex of dust. He was running around with a cowboy hat, a play gun, and a holster. He was running around in his own wayward thoughts before adolescence created a hunger for beautiful bodies and a neediness that he would never be able to shake.

He jolted up and went where there was more light. He seated himself on a bench near a row of lockers believing that what he had was some story unrestrained by notes but when he put the pen to paper notes exuded there. He sensed the brilliance that came to him and felt awe toward the paper that could magically reflect the mood and full realm of his mind. He yearned to embrace his cello and to practice the notes of a Gabriele symphony that he was composing.

Chapter Two

He dressed himself. As he put on his socks, he did it with the mentality of a small child who still felt newness in the sensation. Sexual glutton of adult games, introvert, a man perpetually weakened and wary in ways unbecoming to a man, he still was a little wiser than most on a couple issues. He was cognizant that as an effect of adolescent awakenings an adult often was so obsessed with being in the company of others that finding any degree of happiness could not occur without them. He was a lot different in that respect: influences by hormones to sociability were thwarted by his wariness that gave him back his childhood innocence. Although he was an adult he could still play alone albeit uneasily. Also they, the unwary ones, were so fixated on gaining bigger and more complex pleasures in their gross gluttony to have everything before death that the marvel of air rushing into one's lungs or the feel of a spring breeze brushing against one's face was lost to them entirely. He wanted the remnant of early childhood--the memories of strong aromas, sights, and sounds as his senses depicted them-- to live in him and not be the cause of mourning. He wanted to find the traces of deceased family in those early days and be able to glance back onto those tenuous decaying remnants of memory with a sense of happiness at what was once there. Still, even with the earliest and most benign memories furthest removed from the tragic end, such a feat was difficult to master. Everything in the mind of a 5-year-old from the smells of greased telephone polls to the sounds of the school bus that picked up his older 7-year-old sister, and everything in the mind of a 10-year-old

from getting his first b-b gun to spending his first time away from family at a summer camp was like walking barefoot on sharp gravel. This, however, was better than having his entrails hacked out of him in that shock of finding his father dangling from a noose in the workroom of his basement. Thinking that early memories were even more benign than the present, he knew that it was only his thinking that made them painful. He judged that he was the source of his misery and with application he would find a way to plant himself in their fecund topsoil and burgeon into the future. His childhood memories were mostly American in origin although it was difficult to isolate the Korean episodes from that of the latter. After the school bus would rush in front of a road near the trailer park and whisk his sister away, his mother would pursue her early morning exercises in front of the television and he would emulate her movements. He remembered loving the thought of catching lightning bugs like his sister and the neighbor children and his repulsion towards it when his mother stated that they were "God's little creatures." He remembered getting lost in a store, feeling tiny among lady mannequins, and being nearly hit by a car as he played in the street. A man yelled at his mother for letting her child run around unrestrained in the streets. Humiliated, she sent him to the bedroom of the trailer. The radio on the mantle of the bed was playing "Raindrops keep falling on my head" and other lugubrious folk melodies. He listened. He cried on her white blanket as if she had banished him forever. He remembered that his father came home on that occasion and took him to the Orbit Inn for a coca cola. He twirled around on a stool restored to his euphoria as his father strutted his work talk to men his age seated on other stools.

Walking from the mokotong he thought of a story that he often read to the children in Kwang Sook's kindergarten in Chongju, a place where he often worked for a few hours each week. But his mind distorted it as the benign and innocuous innocence of childhood is mutilated and the mutilation calcified by experience. Seoul Tiger gets on a plane. He waves goodbye to his mother and father from the window. He feels the plane move and rise in the air. He shuts his eyes briefly. Then he opens them widely in amazement. Seoul Tiger looks through the window. He sees a valley of clouds below him. Then he looks down further and he sees Sri Lanka. The plane lands. Seoul Tiger gets out of the plane. He gives the deferential slight bow and says hello to Tamil Tiger. Tamil Tiger picks up his suitcase and takes it to a car. Tamil Tiger's mother is in the car. She says, 'Hello' to Seoul Tiger. They all go to the home of Tamil Tiger's family. Tamil Tiger's mother slaughters a pig and boils it in her stew while her husband brandishes a machete playfully. Then they all eat at the table. 'Do you eat rice?' asks Seoul Tiger. 'No, I eat unleavened bread,' says Tamil Tiger. 'Here are some Rotis.' Tamil Tiger passes him the plate. The plate has rotis on it. Seoul Tiger holds the unleavened bread in his palm wondering how to eat it. Then a stew, called a curry, is put upon his plate. 'Do you eat kimchee?' asks Tamil Tiger. 'What is kimchee?' asks Tamil Tiger.

Again he was bouncing around in a bus without time to rush back to the yangwam, the room he rented outside of an old woman's home. He questioned himself on why he had agreed to give private lessons in various places outside of Chongju. He answered to himself that the strung out schedule and the long rides matched his disorganized, wayward thoughts. It felt comfortable to bounce around in the similar movements of his circumambulatory personal life. He hoped that the bus would arrive in time so that he could eat a meal before going into those lessons. People in these small towns would not acknowledge his handicap of linguistic ignorance. They demanded more than his short, concrete,

and ungrammatical utterances. If he had been an Anglo-Saxon he would have been served in restaurants with simple statements like "Chop che bop, chushipshio" (chop che bop, please). But in small towns even a waitress who had experienced him before would come forth with entire paragraphs to serve onto him and then would stand there bewildered that paragraphs of reciprocal eloquence would not be returned by someone clearly of her nationality. At last she would go away and the dinner would come for the retard. This time, as always, he ate quickly and then waited for some woman's children to get him at the bus terminal. He did not know the woman's name even though he taught there and she gave him money and he did not know her children's names even though he taught them. They were just his "little tongmuls" (little animals). Sang Huin did not like the difficulty of memorizing Korean names so he did it seldom.

Inside the bus station he changed to a different bench. A two or three year old girl, chastised by her mother, sought refuge between his legs and would not come out. She closed the legs like an iron gate. The mother did not seem to demand that she leave the fortress; and he enjoyed the fact that she seemed to gain comfort from his presence even though his face expressed the awkwardness of having her there.

He missed childhood. Surely all people did. Was it so awful to admit this? No one that he had ever known had spoken of his or her loss. Granted, one could not stay comatose in innocence--the delight of pulling some trivial plastic or paper objects from cereal boxes; Halloween costumes; or the Christmas togetherness. The newness of running around trying to beat the clouds or run barefoot after balls in the ecstasy of just being alive ended quickly to girl chases, obligations, family, and all of such dead weight. He couldn't have stayed with his mother forever. If he could have remained steady on the American continent he would have needed more than just her; and so alone, with a sense that he would never find family or closeness again, he had ventured here to another continent that was and wasn't his home, and where he did not speak a language that was and wasn't his. Still, coming here was not entirely bereft of positive notions. Being an innocent, a childish perspective prevailed.

He wanted to once again hold something tenuous and fragile in the palm of his hand as a child would a tintured caterpillar, the butterfly. He wanted to be there with it innocuously in awe of something that really had no use to him. He loathed this interaction, this anathema of the soul so intertwined in insatiable and wanton selfishness. He wanted to be Seoul Tiger once again but such was not in the survivalist impulses of man. Such was not destiny. Hadn't there been numerous times when as a boy he would sit hours with a stray dog that was needing to claim a gentle master, scared to take it home and yet, like a true friend, sensitive most to creatures that could not articulate themselves in any other way than in the eyes. The eyes, that dilated neediness to be in the presence of a friend in a hostile world where being born was not a sanction to live well or live long. One's innocence ran by like a shell-shocked soldier; circumventing normal sexual drive by being gay would not free him to an innocence that was forlorn. Now there was just the wistful need for family, children he helped to say small things, and his strange obsession with empty physical connections he could depart from easily. He preferred young students because they did not make him uncomfortable by pressing the issue that a man in his early twenties should be planning to have a family. His private domain consisted of a blessed, taciturn instrument

called a cello that required no words to say something deep. He had dragged it on the plane and had paid an astronomical fee to get it onto the airlines. What a burden it had been to him lugging the thing around and yet, dilettante that he was, he needed some beauty to exude out of his hardened mud. He needed reverberating notes to sink into the plaster cast around his mind, which had the signature of the world as an evil place upon it, and caress his soft and lonely brain.

Finally, the two or three-year-old parted one of the kneecaps and the mother pushed candy bribes before her nose to keep her quiet and contained. Soon they bought a ticket in the Chinchon station and boarded a bus. All bus terminals in cities under a million people had cement floors and were dark and dirty like a cellar. Just like he had seen in myriad other terminals, here a man came along with a plastic watering bucket with a nozzle used for watering plants. He rinsed the floor with the water contained in it but did not follow that with either a mop or a broom. A few minutes later, two boys came into the terminal. One had a basketball in his hands. The other one stood a few feet behind him. He looked bored and fat.

"Anyong Haseyo" (Peace you do)

"Anyong Hashimnika, Sonsaeng nim," (Peace you do, teacher), said the one with the basketball.

"Uri-tul nun taxi ul sayang hata?" (We taxi to use?) He knew it was as ungrammatical as a pig. He knew that again there would be no taxi. Again they would be walking. Still it was his way of saying something. The one with the basketball who could figure it out shook his head.

They walked down the sidewalks. The two boys lead the way. Sang Huin felt that the roles had been inverted and he felt a twinge of resentment that he was a child or a retard in his own native country and that children were dragging him about. The three of them moved down sidewalks like window-shopping loiterers looking into every mom and pop store along the way. "Ilchik tangshin-tul rul basketball ul hayoshimnita kachi?" (Early you basketball did?) The fat boy nodded his head silently. The boy knew his genius in interpretive skills. A sense of pride exuded over his face in a white light but the flush of expression was extremely ephemeral. It came upon him and vanished in just a few seconds.

"Who won?" asked Sang Huin in English.

The fat boy pointed to himself with his thumb. He even smiled for a second in a sort of bored way.

Then they opened a gate and they went into what looked like a house only it was separated into two apartments.

Sang Huin used his photograph cards like magic tricks to get them to practice tenses and syntax. He liked seeing their tiny house and thinking how his life might have been--for better or for worse--within the childhood of his race. He loved English as he loved music; and sometimes he combined the two in such classes, but with a small feeling of resentment (to which his smile and gentle nature gave no indication) as if his time was sodden in musical doggerel that defiled him like a solecism when he might well be playing Haydn and Boccherini.

He wondered about the girl dressed in the dumpy blue skirt of her school uniform, and the boys in jeans. Were they content to be Koreans or did they yearn for bigger and better things seduced by the American culture that came to them through the cinema and the music and through his presence as well as the English that they studied. If they weren't content, he thought, it wasn't for him to say they were wrong. It was a globalized world and America was the power and the standard that was the impetus for its formation. That was why he was here with his English. He couldn't have gotten any other job in Korea when he couldn't master the simplest of sentences in the native language. He didn't like the sour perceptions that he had of America. It was home. It was still home.

In Umsong, during those times he had waited in the office of the kindergarten for his class to begin, the children would always see him through the window. They knew at that point that he didn't speak Korean and wasn't one of them and for that reason they were attracted to him. They would bang and climb on the window in their eagerness to be near him; and some, using a runny nose as an excuse, would be permitted to go into the hall. To the side of a fish aquarium hung a roll of toilet tissue. They would wipe their noses and peak into the office. They would squeal. He liked it. He liked being an American--sometimes.

He looked more intensely at these Chinchon students. Who would they become? As they begin to feel hormones, the adrenaline of the four-year high called love, and the frenzy of sex luring them into steady relationships and accompanying obligations, would they have moments where they too yearned to be in a hammock under their Grandma Lee's cherry trees? In his case he could recall the image of a photograph of a neighbor his family had labeled as "Grandma" Vera with her black dress rustling in the wind carrying him in her arms. Would they think upon theirs--something similar to Vera frying hamburgers on the grill as the scents of angel-food cakes came from the windows of her kitchen? He chastised himself. He told himself that only broken people looked back on childish irrelevance. The rest looked to the future in their insatiable hungers for bigger pleasures and their present connections that they might use to secure their hedonistic whims. But he was a "broken" person and the thought of Vera returned to him. When he thought of her intensely the image emblazoned in memory shook him and it was hard to think that it could not make her alive again. And yet to have had a connection (and the most unfortunate of lives surely have had many) would justify everything. A personal contact in the past or when the wind...or the sun...or the rain touched him, that alone would justify a life of barren prospects.

"Unto us a child is born. Unto us a child is given." He thought of the words of the composer, Handel. Yes, he thought, he had done a horrible thing by encouraging his girlfriend to abort their child. It was wrong to have robbed a being of life and any connections the fetus might have had beyond its own cell divisions. Secondly, this cynicism that a woman, spellbound in romance, robbed a man of his sperm to produce a baby by which to devote herself and obtain a purpose in life while thrusting him into the financial maintenance of this prize had caused him to abort major connections in his own life. Now, apart from his mother, there were no connections. There were only phantoms of people flitting through ethereal consciousness, and by coming here to find his land he had parted from her. When his sister was murdered, he was just beginning his studies at the university. When his father committed suicide, Sang Huin's cadaverous numbness was on fire and he felt that any trace of himself was being incinerated. Mentally, he was

running to and fro in the hope of retarding the flames that were eating him for their fuel. Back then the thought of his father dangling from the noose recurred to him every few moments. At that time he wanted to check himself into a hospital for he felt a loss of sanity. His world was three dimensional but totally impersonal and wobbling. After months of virtual silence and the icy stares of his mother through the most enervated and perfunctory movements of planting flowers and trees no different than what she had or stripping wallpaper and putting up patterns that were nearly identical to the old ones, he spent a month in Galveston. A month watching waves dash against the shore was enough to make him see that being one of a billion waves dashed into the sands was a pattern engrained into life that he must not take personally; and so he returned to school. By will and discipline in reigning in his thoughts he made it through college and a year of graduate school. But he could not take the stagnation that scholarly pursuits forced him to endure and became the animated billiard ball being shot from one area of the table to the next--one part of the country to the next--falling homeless into dark holes.

Sadness punched him in the stomach. It was enough--"nomu" (too much). He frowned. He didn't care. Six or seven minutes early--who would mark the time especially when he traveled such a distance to give them these lessons. He told them that the session had ended and they got an envelope of money from their mother, which they brought to him. The session didn't seem as if it had begun. It all was a vacuum--a void. He untied the double knots that were contained on his shoes and put them on. Korean people were so quick at slipping on shoes, and he assumed that anytime someone waited for him to leave it was a complete aggravation for them. His mother had spent so much time teaching him to tie and then double-tie. He had been such an ignorant and inept child. The habit was deeply engrained in his psyche. The students stared and waited at his childish wrestling with his shoes. He knew that he needed slip-ons that would foster a quick exodus after he had taken them off at the door.

He stepped out over the crevice of a yard. A light sprinkling or heavy mist was falling upon him. Past the gate and into the street the generalized memories of a hundred such days with a hundred similar rains came to him. Rain was for him only a baptism of emancipation. From a glance up at the clouds he was compelled to acknowledge realities outside his own thoughts--and indeed Sang Huin needed the rain of Noah to get out of his own ruminations. Yet, a foreigner's experience was indeed like no others' and he was an introverted being traumatized by the great chasm of the murder of a sibling and finding the blue dangling body of his father. At 24, any man's boyhood was buried under only a shallow layer of dirt and for one with maimed manhood the clay was never solid, was partially washed away, and boyhood often resurfaced. He was a runaway from the American experience and his thoughts, when not able to do it in deeds, almost always ran to Seoul. The rural areas where he worked and at one time had lived gave him the solitude and the meditative power to think his weird thoughts as he tried to reconstruct his manhood but the problem was that he did it too much. Seoul was felicity, the exhilarating movements, the museums, the symphonies, and the sexual bliss. Within it the hurt was diffused and boyhood was gagged and he was rarely cognizant of its screams. At the bus station it began to rain heavily. A few years ago, he thought, the sun had droned on with the days of the trial and the rare rain had been his only comfort.

In an hour's time, during the bus ride, each of these students would be completely gone from his mind exuded like the entangling conundrums of feeling, ideas, and senses in sleep. If all people were shadows of this realm in the flickering of light, what solid entity cast the shadow? Was it God? Was there a god? If the shadows were more concrete than the light, what would this say about life? He decided to stop thinking such things. Myriad complex and morbid thoughts, profound or inane, would not raise him to a wiser man. They would just get him stuck in their muddy ruts.

Back in a bus, he thought about how much of his life was dragged about in transportation here and there for a Korean buck. He didn't know anybody in Chongju but a simple advertisement in the paper would have been enough to solve his dilemma in providing him with private lessons near his home for needed South Korean Won. Still, if his whole life was spent in these bus rides, fate was not bad. He could be a starving North Korean or one of the dead soldiers who got their submarine trapped on a reef in the South Korean jurisdiction of the ocean and had been hunted down by the South Korean soldiers. He had a South Korean passport and an American residency. He was single and free to see the world. He didn't do that much and had lots of time and some money to spend.

He had little mastery over his thinking. Since he was a creative person it often went running wild through meadows with the gods. He knew there was genius to be gained in the company of deities so wild. He had left his mother's home and his mother country to find manhood-perverse, greedy, manhood with its insatiable wants, its selfish calculating plans, and its grandiose desire to find its own unique adventures and habits. She, his mother, would meanwhile be re-planning and redecorating rooms. He loved her deeply but she was not everything. He needed more connections to keep himself from rising like a balloon and going adrift; and lacking them, looking onto his life from the clouds, he could see the obvious: that this mortal would not be there when he became much older. For all of his life there was only one claim to be made and that was upon himself. In this respect he was quite American.

Chapter Three

Traditional homes often had extra guesthouses as an extension to the main unit and it was within this "yogwam" in Chongju that he more or less had residence. Luckily for him, during summers these outdoor rooms were not so horrible but in winters the cold snuffed the residents out of sleep in early mornings as animals from forest fires and the mostly aged tenants, before finding warmth elsewhere, would individually go to splash their bodies and faces in a shared bathroom not much different than the ones bears use in zoos. One low faucet fed the cement creek, which had a plastic bowl floating in it. No different than one's paws, the bowl was the means of obtaining a bath.

It was in a bland closet sized room that his cello was in one corner and he, a laptop computer, a short wave radio, and his stack of clothes were at the other end. When he arrived there after teaching in Chinchon, the ride made him feel exhausted; and after an hour of work, his notebook paper with the Gabriele symphony was under the sweaty socks of his feet, the Voice of America news broadcast became nothing but static, and he was asleep.

A person remembers his last dream if awakened in a specific stage of dreaming, if the mind is devising some way to startle the dreamer into going to the bathroom, or if the examination of present problems in a skit becomes violent images running amuck. Unrepressed wishes, and rehearsing events before they actually take place to gain some sense of how to respond before they occur are the ideas most often given for dreaming but the brain is a revelatory organ not of future events but of present realities; and so it was with him.

He dreamt it was Buddha's birthday and that Yang Kwam was under a huge canvas canopy on a university campus where the ground was a hard sandless desert. Those under the canvas were resting and drinking as the others played soccer; but Sang Huin was alone on a dry and grassless bluff that overlooked the activity. He was drifting on and off in sleep; and although a bit conscious of being alone and feeling reluctant to have Yang Kwam involved in a host of other lives in his absence, he was unwilling to tamper with fate or reduce his exposure to the sun, shaped with divine human limbs like Aten himself, that kept putting him to sleep.

A man came up to him. He first spoke in Hanguk mal (Korean), but upon getting no acknowledgment of having been understood, he changed to English.

"I thought that you surely knew a little Korean. It is my mistake."

Sang Huin sat up.

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Kim Jin Huan. My major is tourism. I study here at Chongju University and I'm part of the English club here among other things. I'm very pleased to meet you. You can teach me lots of things and we can become friends but I can't learn at this altitude--not even of you. I think it is best to come down below where the sun is not so hot. You are surely thirsty."

Sang Huin shook his head and laid it back on the big rock that he used as a pillow.

"I came up here to ask you if you would like to come down and join everyone else although it was suggested that it would not be an easy task. Sung Ki [the dream now made Yang Kwam Sung Ki] was saying that you like dirt. He said--I don't know why-- that the floor of your apartment was dirty and that there were lots of mosquitoes there. He said that is why he tells you to stay with him. He said that I'd have trouble getting you out of the dirt. I don't know that this is all true but you surely know by now that dirty rooms, dirty plates, and dirty dogs--Koreans have no tolerance for these things. You really should not be lying in the dirt like this. I know you don't know me but that is my advice." Then he smiled ingenuously.

Sang Huin knew the man's snobbishness showed that he was ignorant of suffering and deliberately ignored the dirt from whence all carbon molecules spring into life. "Koreans--North Koreans or South Koreans?" asked Sang Huin as he propped part of his upper body with the use of his elbows.

"South Koreans, of course."

Sang Huin didn't say anything. He was from the greatest and most

powerful nation on the Earth (at least it was at the present date if the European Union "stayed out of things"-a common idea of his father's that made him smile) and, in his perceptions, it was being equated with dirt the way Americans envisioned most all other countries including those in Western Europe.

"Everyone wants to talk to you in English."

"But I don't want to," said Sang Huin kindly. "I'm tired of saying little things and hearing little things. I don't mean to be rude."

"Are you happy to lie out here like an animal?"

"Yes. You know..." he paused. He had trouble getting out words that would refute the visual evidence of him lying in the dirt. Such words had to be special if they were to vindicate a nation and its people not to mention himself and all physical evidence. There were no words that he possessed for such a feat so he reverted to attitudes fixated in his childhood and thus became childish in the process. "You know, Americans think that South Korea is a little third world country composed of nothing but dirty people."

"Is that so? Is that your opinion of your people?"

"No," he said sullenly as he shook his head, not knowing who his people were. "I have to think out here in the dirt. I know it is strange. You don't know me. Of course you think I'm strange. I just enjoy seeing insects crawling around in the dirt and the dirt itself-everything that comes from it is inspirationally calm." He laughed. "I guess I like playing in the dirt like a child." He knew that he must be an amusing caricature for them.

"You don't have to do much. It is kind of hard to fail. Just drink a beer and ask them little things. 'What is your name? Where do you live? How many people are in your family?' They can't interact with tape recorders. Can't you do that?" Sang Huin ignored him.

"Don't you have any goals?"

"No, not really." He sat up as if he were taking a defensive posture within the limits of his personality. He spoke with mild sincerity squeezed in with a bit of sarcasm, giving the depths and secrets of his being in a laconic paragraph to this stranger. "No, I have come to the conclusion that doing nothing in a bad world is improving it so I want to contribute in this way. You know, maybe there are people out there who do nothing but lie around in the dirt. I don't know that they are any worse off to be dirty. I don't know that I'm better than they are by usually preferring not to act that way. I'm just another creature out there with microorganisms in my body helping to clear out my intestines." He felt his warm burning face. "I guess I am getting a little sun burnt out here but so far it has been a good experience." Around him little pieces of trash were dancing around circuitously. He heard the sound of a vehicle he could not see since it was at a distance. The world was alive.

"Suit yourself," said the man.

Upon awakening and sitting up in his blanket and futon on the floor, there was such a clear image erect and tilted in the forefront of his

mind that it almost seemed to be registered in his perceptions as reality and not a part of his dreams. It was of a German American woman in a Volkswagen driving southwest through America's heartland to the destination of Mexico but driven insatiably to an isolated state as if the car could take her straight into Antarctica. She, Gabriele, spit her snuff into an empty beer can as she drove. This odd and unusable vision was not, to his knowledge, reflective of any psychological state of his own, and yet it somehow seized him. She was broad and burly, isolated and insulated but worldly and perceptive. Sang Huin sensed a story within her. It was not music. She had too many notes. The stagnation of the room, however, pushed him into the drone of movement and this movement flattened this vision and made him the doormat under the weight of the day.

He got dressed. He felt agitation at the idea of having to go all the way out to Muguk for his doctor's class but at 4:00 A.M. he slipped on his pants, regardless, and walked outside to the bathroom. He would have to get in a taxi by 4:30; be on the bus by 5:00; and travel an hour and twenty minutes all for a class that lasted less than an hour. The class was composed of psychiatrists, surgeons, and those practicing internal medicine but they were on a soldier's salary and the payment he got for the class was paltry. Still, he said that he would do it. They had lost money for classes they did not receive at Shin Se Gye when he quit there.

Near Muguk, from the bus, he saw farmers of the dawn planting their weedy rice patties by hand. They were dressed in baggy shirts and rolled up pants and pointed straw hats covered their heads. Their long boots were entrenched in mud. According to his romantic perceptions of them, each one was august, unpretentious, and melting into the morning sun. Those rags they wore were more patriotic than flags and more majestic than King Sejong the Great's crown. Once their farms had been irrigated into ponds and frogs croaked within the allure of their enclave they would have sewn not only rice but the continuation of civilization. Their footprints in mud were ephemeral, but they had their eternity in their families. He asked himself what eternity he would have in such a decadent and disconcerted existence that was obsessed by this mixing of people in an emotion of love that brought the selfish and altruistic splashing of the other in one's container and he or she into theirs. Love still was something that he hadn't really experienced and he hadn't experienced it because of his greater obsession with carnal devouring.

What made him attack himself so? It was obvious. As a gay man he reshaped perception in an uncomfortable way (although undoubtedly he was not the first): his life became an admission that there was no operator's manual for any man's life; but when he saw couples with their babies he believed, in contrary to this, that a natural course in a man's life had been severed or abducted from him and so life became all the more confusing. He could not do otherwise than to feel sad and insecure. It was a loss in his life and he did not deny that it was such. He was not really envious when he saw them. It made him pleased to see them even though in such occurrences he felt empty and stunted at best.

It made him sick to think that--oh, the same old disconcerted thoughts spun around and around in his head like when a bad tune by its prevalence repeats itself over and over in the tape recorder of the psyche and the repetition feels like drudgery. It made him sick to think

that he had caused a woman to conceive and then had not been forceful enough with his will to ensure that the child would be born--no, that was just a fantasy albeit a partially believed one. Really he had insisted on the abortion but as time went on the perception changed with the neurons and the desire to have a good self-image. But this was the past: immobile, irrelevant, and except for occasional lesions that opened up the bleeding of memory, forgotten by all. The future was anxiousness where hopes of happiness were thoughtlessly draped against despair.

In the doctors' class, held at Dr. Lee's breakfast table, he brought up articles and political cartoons for discussions. Everything from the continuing menace of Saddam Husein, incursions into the demilitarized zone by North Korea, the Yonsei University student demonstrations, the convictions of the ex-presidents, and all of the most newsworthy of the world's unhappy events were there for the probing. But today, upon leaving, he remembered an article he had forgotten to bring to them: the Taliban's restraint of war ravaged widows from work. The doctors liked such things. As Dr. Lee had pointed out, even happenings in the most remote parts of the world often spread amuck like an oil spill in a global community. He remembered having forgotten this article when he was walking out the door and then it slid from and fell off his memory altogether.

After walking to the Muguk bus depot he had second thoughts about going back to Chongju. He got in a taxicab. That was the easy part. He said, "Anyong Hashimnika?" and then probed his mind. "Odie ka?," (where you go?) asked the taxi driver sharply. The word, "kang," meant river and "mul" meant water. What, he thought to himself, was the word for lake? "Kun mul? (big water)...no, that would never work!" Somehow he found it and got out a coherent sentence. The taxi took him there leaving him on the shoulder of the road. He got out. The highway that was the main road of the town was sandwiched between a bluff and a lake reflecting the marginal space of the Korean landscape. There were no classes for a while and the day was there to celebrate like the disrobing and denuding of a goddess--or in his case, a god. Sang Huin pulled off his shirt and rolled up his slacks. He sat down under a small pavilion. Near it weeds grew. He plucked one and put it into his mouth. He chewed it and sprawled himself on the bench thinking himself as a more worldly version of Huckleberry Finn. Looking down at the waters and the small fishing crafts that were tied to a few docks at a distance, he thought about the Korean landscape in general images: the croaking of frogs in the irrigated rice fields near the apartment that he once had in Umsong; the farmers ("nongmin") who would insert each individual plant as painstakingly as a plastic surgeon grated each item of hair. In galoshes, they would trudge into the depths of mud to sow, reap, and thresh the rice. The moon above the empty Umsong stadium was a lambent glow over the rice and gave a slight visibility to the forest that interconnected a nearby field to the stadium. None of it was all that spectacular when compared to the variety and splendor of the vast country, America, that was and wasn't his country; but still it was new and he sometimes liked it.

Then, in full broadness, he saw Gabriele. There she was in a tight t-shirt and wholly jeans. Hail beat upon the tin can of a trailer where she lived with an infant and a cat. The hail seemed to her like the bullets that she imagined from the distant war that America wedged against Iraq. Then he saw the antithesis of this: big diamond earrings dangling from her lobes and that she wore the most expensive fashions of

the elite that gave her broad and muscular German frame elegance as she got ready to take her son to galleries, temporary exhibits, and then to have him sit alone in a corner at these art parties where cheques were often signed. He saw him sitting in those strangers' homes as Sang Huin himself had sat on the bleachers during his sister's basketball games. He saw him taking umbrage with the gods (the sun god in particular if He existed) for they had bore him in the suffocation of her gray colors that sprayed out onto the world like a mist that none of his friends went through. For them it was sunny picnics of complete families, weenie roasts, and marshmallow burnings over bonfires. And there she was again a younger entity, youth asphyxiating in the dust storm of talcum powder that, in her trailer, she swept across the hills of his buttocks, wishing to walk across hills and depart from family. . He felt her true, committed, objection to everything in her big lonely home and with everything consisting of so much it stayed latent in the confines of her leaden eyes. He pulled out a notebook and sketched her different varieties. Underneath her image, he began to cluster a second draft of words and notes. He didn't know what he was doing.

Chapter Four

Having had no book to sink into when he arrived at an apartment in Umsong months earlier, he (this new arrival from America) must have seemed like a bird trying to build a nest with two or three sticks. It had been an insane episode for the scrutiny of his roommate-coworkers: the way he had organized and reorganized his few things in the loosely partitioned area of the living room and how he had been so reluctant to speak. Hadn't he, in his disconnection, looked like a man suffering from some neuron-entangled nervousness, heavy neurosis, or a bad prion making the holes in his head to match the holes of his being.

His sister had been raped and mutilated. At least that was the theory-as much as one could assess from skeletal remains. The prosecution wanted to horrify the jury with photographs. Maybe they had succeeded inordinately disconcerting the jury so that it couldn't ascertain the facts and probabilities. The only measurable impact that he knew of were ramifications of deep, paralyzing shadows that the three of them fell into--so far and so eternal had been the abyss. "Were the perpetrators human or hominids? If they were human, what did that say about being human?" It had been their first unshared question easily sensed in the eyes of each other. "Are all Americans like this?" they had all silently thought. No one would have said such a thing. "Was all humanity this way?" It was in their eyes--that and the wish to escape the species. They were there: in this word "hell" that all had talked of and few had ever gone into. Hell was full meaninglessness and savagery without rationale and with a judicial system forcing the mutilated further into unprecedented horrors.

Pusillanimous and cowering in fetal positions within themselves, limping around the days with perfunctory and lifeless movements, his father had nonetheless spoken of "getting on" with things although he couldn't define what one was supposed to get on with or what was worthy of getting on to. They all could perceive the horror of everybody and everything so no matter what they did--even killing themselves--it would all be equivalent to meaningless and savagery.

It was good to have this hour of complete silence near the lake without any sound but the rushing of cars, which also came in inundated

waves, peaked, and died. Still, one would have to hear a language sooner or later. At times if only he could have a silence, a respite, from his thoughts to go with his free time to think his recovery would be expedited. He thought of his sister. She had kept her Korean. Occasionally, even as a teenager, she would mutter off some idea in Korean to which his mother returned some reply. He had always felt jealous of this secret language and here he was in Korea but the language was still a secret to him.

Chapter Five

The social creature that even he was, if he were not to hear a voice for long even those boats in the lake would have been a discomfiting image--interspersing his conceptualization of them in depersonalized momentum. He wanted to call Kwang Sook to hear her voice but also to cancel his classes. He didn't need so much money. His former boss had deposited some of the owed money after the issue had gone to the Department of Labor. He wanted to go back to Seoul but classes were his equanimity. They personalized his world in a professional and impersonal manner that gave him fortitude to float through the expanse of his existential turns where it seemed that there were no other sailors.

Maybe, he thought to himself, he would go into a video pang later and let drama absorb him in a personal intimacy with a fictional entity of depth and substance. He had no misgivings. His life was a stunted one. Still, back in Chongju, he made the call and cancelled his classes. Then, near the bus terminal, he went to a restaurant. He ordered some bogum bop, a thick mixture of rice and vegetables that one mixed into a thick brown gravy that stood off aside on the plate and the appetizer of kimchee maundu. Alone, eating and reading a Newsweek he pulled out of his bag, he began to wonder of the lives of those that owned or managed the restaurant. Their area was shielded only behind sliding doors. Behind the tables and the chairs, their living area consisted of just one space. A girl came out and he could see within it clothes drying on a plastic rack and a small television that was on the floor. Then a man came out with a baby in his arms. He wore an undershirt and boxer underwear. The women cooked. Then, after they served Sang Huin a second helping of kimchee maundoo, they put breakfast on a table for the family. They all ate together. Like Yang Lin at Toksugum Palace seeing newlyweds and the wife he should have been, Sang Huin saw his alter ego in the man. His life was probably limited. A wife and children pinned him into a small existence with family commotion and responsibilities. It floated in non-ambitious swaying like a plastic boat on ripples in a bathtub. It probably droned on in its unaware and insignificant tedium through the years, but it had its connections.

Chapter Six

Attempting to thwart his primitive hungers for sex and socialization (synonymous words of civilization's shaping, but base nonetheless), and sensing the true vacuous abyss that would exist without learning or creating, he went into a park that was near the bus station. There, he worked on his amorphously wordy musical composition that was a bit of everything and nothing. Still, he told himself that this potpourri was worthwhile even though really he had his misgivings about it. He told himself that he needed to test the musical aspects of it on his cello later that day when he returned to the yogwam. It was a plan of a

return "home"(whatever that word meant) and a means to contravene his deviance to Seoul. It was a self-created urgency to repress his sexual obsessions and to clothe the animalistic movements and hunger of his naked soul. To his delight, from previous recitals of Hayden at the yogwam, it would probably bring to his door an audience of elderly tenants and one of his more fulfilling connections.

He came upon a crowd of people clustered around an elderly man. The man was a governmental employee paid as a teacher of Korean traditional dance. He was promoting the program by a slow and illustrious dance. He wore the traditional hanbok of the paji and chogori. Sang Huin was inveigled by the dance but the sun god was putting him to sleep and 15 minutes into the performance he was on a park bench fast asleep. When he awoke, the crowd that had gathered around the dancer and the dancer himself were no longer there. Just as Sang Huin, the boy, had skipped around the kindergarten teacher's desk, sat down to drink his chocolate milk with his Graham crackers, and found himself a grown man listening to a university professor's lecture on biology, so the sunlight of this day's slight 2:00 descent vaporized the people he had been witnessing no differently than it had vaporized the dinosaurs myriad afternoons of myriad centuries ago or the body of his sister that had decomposed in a park. It had all gone-gone but where it had gone he couldn't say.

Like a 5 year old, he rubbed his eyes to wake up. Following an instinctive response that was a yearning overwhelming his common sense, he felt the impulse to stretch forth toward Seoul: toward adventure in the masses and bathing the rational mind in sensual massage. He wanted meretricious sex. Young men encroached on his mind in droves. Maybe this obsession, if it were such, was from an inability to communicate in any other way. He did not mind--well, he did, but what could he do, he argued, when the irrationality of pleasure seeking sedated one as he journeyed around alone on the rugged terrain of the Earth. He did not believe in much platonic constraint. When his hormones were boiling to overflow he "hauled [his] ass" to Seoul. There, a theatre existed for meeting and touching men near Chongno Samga Road and he had been told that there was a gay Turkish bath in the area of Myong Dong. Too much creative energy would be depleted if he were to lasso the wild bore for long. Too much craziness would go into creating sense in insensible passions. Wasn't marriage created to give sense to such passions? Hadn't this lifetime contract that his parents signed in their marital vows caught two of life's myriad souls in the idea that they could defy a changing universe and be as non-changeable as rocks? Hadn't their confinement of each other in this materialistic American dream become the incommunicable cries of two strangers tied back to back by weeds from their many parcels of land after all substantial conversation had been exhausted? Yet, his liaisons were not exactly more viable versions of relationships. He did not want to talk to these men nor, as he knew, would they to him. Ideally he did; but it was just a fleeting expression or whim. Reality sang another tune. There was this day's ticket to a symphony in Seoul that Kwang Sook had given to him because she couldn't go. He had taken it. He loved symphonies and there were parts of this day when he told himself that he would go to Seoul for that purpose. Really, however, he wouldn't have bothered at all had it not been for the urges of his body anxiously nudging him northward.

He bought another ticket to Seoul and drank milk he obtained from the bus station vendor while waiting for his designated departure. The noxious smell of bus exhausts filled the open cavities of the bus station. A torn back on a plastic seat seemed to snag his shirt more

than once like a cat's claws. The wait was not long since a half hour later he was part of a line to get on board. This particular flatulent bus seemed to say his name, Sang Huin, as a feces colored gas, carbon, exuded from its rear. Strange ideas like the talking bus and the clawing chair, in the back regions of the mind, were only experienced by the lonely and the isolated. He knew this. Those who were isolated were such out of their contempt for the sadistic and hedonistic impulses that were hidden in smiles. They were such to protect their own ingenuous vulnerabilities despite being sociable human creatures; and they weren't always so firmly in their right minds. The landscape seen from the moving bus was unremarkable but still the beauty that was there dazed him into self-reflections. More than the physical response what did he crave? To be loved and to love was like a dog chasing its tail; and if his tail were long enough he would have it in the mouth. He would have it there in his mouth if the mouth liked the taste of the tail and the tail the feel of the mouth. Foolish as he was going to Seoul once again for his fun, he wasn't a fool. Most people obeyed their sexual inclinations as if they were great oracles of wisdom that would broaden them beyond the limits of themselves in such a primitive interaction. He couldn't say that he wasn't as they were, but unlike them, he knew that the whole thing was a mirage for those who couldn't or didn't know how to build worlds within themselves. A Newsweek article had proven to his satisfaction that love was not a splendid thing. It was just a four-year addiction at best. The article had theorized that primitive man needed to stay with the woman long enough to help with the child's welfare by feeding the creature and its mother during those years when the baby encumbered the woman from hunting on her own. He didn't need more than that.

In Kwang Sook's school, Sang Huin had asked the children to draw verbs next to a series of words they found from his handout. When this was finished, he would read sentences with those vocabulary words like "A tall boy hits a ball in the air." "How many people are there?" "There is one person," they would say. "What does he do?" "He hits?" "What does he hit?" "He hits a ball." "Where is the ball?" "It is in the sky." "What does he look like?" "He is tall." The younger ones were so competitive with each other in the games he devised for them as if beating others in the game of survival were entrenched in human curiosities.

They had also done English exercises together on the roof where he had been the military sergeant giving peremptory whims and they had to jump, run, go to the right, go to the left, etc. at his command.

The boys had been especially fond of him chasing them around trying to eat them on the roof as he sang, "This is the way we kill a pig, kill a pig, kill a pig. This is the way we kill a pig so early in the morning." This play-acting and making the brutal world seem as nothing but an innocuous frivolity caused them to squeal like piglets. It was insignificant wrestling around with the children in a job that did not take too much talent or knowledge but it was a silly example of love. He wanted to give that spark of imagination and knowledge just because it seemed right to give it. Weren't more altruistic connections really what life was about? And yet if this were the true form of love, he often asked himself, wouldn't it be so fulfilling that he would give himself to it completely?

When he arrived at the express bus terminal, he took the subway to Chongno. Near Pagoda Park, he went to Hardee's. The break from Hanguk

food (particularly kimchee) he found nourishing to his imagination that craved variety. He wanted to be a vegetarian but at times he thought that he almost lapped up the grease like a starving dog. When he finished, he found himself on one of his first safaris to a gay sauna. He was still unsure how to get there and so he looked down at the "chito" (map) a fellow hunter at the theatre had drawn for him on the back cover of his "Expatriate In Korea" resource book one time when he was at the theater.

Once there, he took off his shoes at the front desk and collected a key and a toothbrush. Then he went upstairs. After his shower, a brief phase in the hot whirlpool, and a second cool shower, he put on a robe from those that were on hangers and went to a hallway of rooms where orgies were in progress. Some men in the hallway wandered from room to room, selective of that which most excited them on the tatami mats of the floors. Others joined shadows of faintly visible figures groping around in a state of almost complete darkness. For him only lighter rooms were an option since less illusionary beings were the only meat and grease he could stomach. With the barrage of his passions released in one of those rooms, he became a perfect receiver of transmission. There was no interference from either psyche or physique. He relaxed on one of the leather sofas in the lounge with other smokers and those limp individuals in between engagements. Visions came unto him and he almost felt holy writing out aspects of Gabriele's life within the fog of his smoke. Naked bodies in contrast to his, that was now clothed in underwear, did not distract him. In the next room men bathed themselves in the whirlpool or heated themselves in the sauna and behind him were others engaging in what he had done. If human beings were only shadows passing in and out of memory, which was nothing but the night sky for such ghosts, what then, he asked himself, were one's dreams? The fantasies and emotion propelled thought; and thought propelled action. Surely action was more real and tangible than the hopes and dreams and yet how could it be such if dreams and emotion conceived action.

Ideas of Gabriele grasped him as if she were more real than he was. Pages of words created themselves on his lap while above the couch was a television showing a drama of an ancient Korean period linked with reverberating melancholic Buddhist melodies. Toward 6 o'clock, he was still there--and for his excesses his underwear was stolen off of his body when he was performing on someone else. He wasn't sure exactly how it happened. His head hurt; and he felt a nausea concerning his life. He left wishing that he were ten again gaining the rapture of a millefleur morning of dandelions patterned into a greener fabric of grass after the evening's rain and exploring a more oceanic landscape with his sister as they splashed through an alien terrain in their rain boots. He wished for the time when she existed long before her attraction to older married men like her boss--long before her attraction to men at all. He reassured himself that he wasn't completely bad, that he was a caring person who did not harm others even with the knowledge that there was no real right or wrong on the planet, and that innocence hadn't left him entirely. He told himself that he was innocent in many ways, if not an outright fool, since he had shown himself to be kind and easily taken advantage of in business (he would have continued to tolerate only getting two-thirds of his salary so that the other teachers would get paid had it not been for the fact that he stopped paying his secretaries as well and began to rehire new ones when the old ones quit). When he arrived in Chongno Samga again his pain did not abate. He went to a pharmacy. The woman at the pharmacy was a grandmotherly type and a little boy sat on a stool in front of him. She asked what he wanted. He

told her in his babyish Korean. She asked how many aspirin he wanted. He told her six. She asked him other things. He told her that he was an American and could not say much anything in Korean. When he was leaving the boy told him, "Good-by" in English. The Grandmother laughed warmly. Sang Huin felt pleasure from this little minute of his life as if all sweet and little moments were not gone altogether; and his nausea from believing that all human beings perceived each other as a voracious fulfilling of appetites diminished.

From the cannibalism of sexual excess, he ate a salad at Wendy's restaurant despite its exorbitant price and the one plate serving rule. It was a nice respite from eating too much of the dumpling snack of kimchee maundoo. The thought of eating meat did not agree with him. He shoved down some aspirin with his chocolate frosty and stared out of the window. It was past 6:30 and this area of Chongno Samga was already riveting in youthful crowds. In a few hours young men would be vomiting on the sidewalk for their alcoholic excess as he had done on Uchiro Samga after coming out of the sauna. He hurriedly got a yogwam. He turned on AFKN, the American military channel and saw a bit of a movie on Franklin Delano Roosevelt while he pulled out a suit jacket and a tie that he had folded away in his book bag. Then he got into a taxi and went to the Sejong Cultural Center. His seat was located in the middle of the auditorium. As he sat down his cigarettes fell out of his front pocket and as he picked them up he noticed the blind man he had seen before in the subway seated with his dog in the same row. Time had made him think that the person had just been a flitting fantasy but there he was. It was a basic instinct of the lonely human psyche to wish for meaning and connection in such events as if God would move heaven and hell to give him a companion. He put the cigarettes into the slit of his pack and then glanced over to his left in the hope that no one had noticed his clumsiness. A man that looked like his sister's boss was seated next to him. It was a slight resemblance but still it horrified him. When that "thing" had been declared "not guilty" in reference to his sister's murder despite all the evidence that the prosecution had brought forward, he had fainted for a few seconds. Then, in a slow dizziness, some feelings had assembled themselves and then he had begun to think that he wanted death; and then he had just wanted out of America.

Chapter 7

During an intermission, while others were leaving, the stranger got up and left with his dog. Sang Huin, on impulse, followed. Without yearning for a cigarette, he lit one in the lobby and waited at the entry of the bathroom. If he were troubled by the peculiarity of his actions, he was only marginally reassured by the fact that they were not witnessed. His actions seemed that of a stalker although this seeming, this appearance, was only ruminated on by himself. His motives, however, were nebulous in this desire; and this inability to understand why he was seeking this individual was a troubling factor. It was the impulsiveness of one lacking social skills who suddenly drives up to a school playground to form intimacies, discards the body in abhorrence and disbelief over being the perpetrator of the crime, and in a half hour finds himself to be a pedophile and a murderer. And yet he wasn't stalking a child but a man and he wasn't running on the energy of sexual conquest and hate, but just running away from loneliness. If this innocuous action were stalking, all humans, he told himself, were stalkers. Without question, he was so desperate to disrupt his

isolation like the pensive ruminations of a mute circus gypsy alone in the back of his tent. He was so anxious to escape his incommunicable thoughts through friendship, or the hope of it, that he was ready to shoot it out randomly to whomever caught his eye. Many selfish whims constituted an attraction, but he told himself that this was not the making of a stalker. Then the stranger and his dog came out.

"Anyong hashimnika," greeted Sang Huin as he touched the man's arm so that he would know he was addressing him.

"Anyong haseyo" (informal: peace, you do). They spoke loudly because of the noise of the crowds loitering and coming and going from the restrooms.

"Yongo mal ha su isumnika?"

"Yes, I can speak English. Can I help you?"

It was interesting for him to be thought of as an American instantaneously. Sang Huin found it refreshing to not have someone give him that surprise and grimace for being a Korean without a language.

"No. Good symphony. Do you like Rimsky?"

"Rimsky-Korsakov. Yes, not all of the music is Rimsky's but they were playing music from that composer earlier. He is Russian, one of the best, I think." Sang Huin smiled at the acquaintance and then realized that his smile wouldn't pierce through the sunglasses. Unable to let his benign nature penetrate through the plastic, he again thought of himself as somewhat equivalent to a stalker. He felt nervous.

""Would you like a cigarette? We've got ten minutes." He thought of the words and instruments which human beings employed to break from their innate states of emptiness; and the connections sought from attractions that would be forsaken if the experiences seemed shallow and there was an assumption that no major connections would evolve from them.

Sang Huin crunched the pack for a bit of noise and the stranger took one of the cigarettes which he then aimed toward the hiss of the emerging flame that Sang Huin provided with the click of his lighter. The blind man inhaled a couple times but then coughed in perpetual rhythms like the beats of a drum. The seeing-eye dog gnarled its mouth the best it was able to do and growled importunately. "He doesn't like," said the blind man barely able to get out his idea from his stanch breath. Sang Huin thought of Sungki's syntax which also lacked object pronouns in "You must all eat."

"Is there an ashtray? I'll put this out. I'm sorry I wasted it," said the blind man.

"No problem," said Sang Huin as he took the cigarette and smashed it into an ashtray a few feet away and then walked back to where he was. "I feel a bit foolish." He chortled for a couple of seconds nervously. "I was seated alone, really, not liking that feeling as much as I thought I would; and then I noticed you. I've seen you before on a subway: you and your dog. It was a few days ago. You got out shortly after I did in Tonggyo-dong."

"Do you stay in a hotel in that area?"

"No, but a few times when there were demonstrations at Yongsei University I went there and watched the police and the tear gas from the fourth floor of a building that has a pastry shop. I guess that is a bit strange, huh?" The stranger filled air and space with a feigned smile and a nod, not knowing what to say. "No; I live in Chongju," continued Sang Huin, "but I come to Seoul as often as I can. I'm American. At least I say I am. My friends call me Shawn in America but my friends here call me by my real name, Beck Sang Huin." He knew that he didn't really have friends in either place.

"Saeng Sob," said the acquaintance. They shook hands although both were doubtful that they could concatenate a conversation. When the man said his name, Saeng Seob, Sang Huin thought of the boy in Kwang Sook's school who also had this name. He was in his class; but Kwang Sook said that the last year he had to drop out of her school completely after going through more surgeries from being hit by a truck. That accident had happened a year earlier. Even during the brief months Sang Huin was familiar with him there was yet another surgery for his legs and feet. Sang Huin brought him toys every few days. During this time he hated having the poor boy languish in the bed--skin from his buttocks used to supplement the thin blackish skin of his legs and the pins in his toes. It was the least he could do.

Hadn't there been a time when he and his sister were driven to the home of their Grandma Vera and rather than connecting to her chose to run across the street to a nearby park and feel alive with the swing against the winds as their parents socialized? Hadn't there been a time when he knew the brilliance of grass poking through the crevices of his bare feet? Then puberty came and there was an aching need for other people. The aching was incessant.

"I guess you are here with friends and family. I should let you get back to them and the performance."

"We're here alone," said Saeng Sob, " but I guess we should go back in before the second part begins." Sang Huin did not know if he was included in the conceptualization of "we."

"Do you live in Tonggyo-dong?," asked Sang Huin creating a mental barricade to stop the closure.

" No, but I work and study at the university." He paused and then filled in the silence. "My cousin is a dean in the mathematics department. I work part-time at Yongsei as his receptionist so that is probably why you saw us there," said the man speaking of himself in plurality.

"And you take classes?" asked Sang Huin.

"Sometimes," said Saeng Sob.

"Maybe we can get something to eat after the performance if you aren't busy," said Sang Huin.

"Maybe. They're probably ready to start." Sang Huin and the blind Saeng Seob returned to their seats.

Then, after the performance, he cornered him in the ambiguity of a "maybe" which a strong will could distort to affirmation. Such enthusiasm could not easily be negated especially if it came from an American and soon he was with the blind Seong Seob answering questions about his life in the US and eating some cold noodles in soup that was as flavorless as water. The meal tasted like a cold and bland version of Ramen noodles ("Ramyen" in Korean) but he was told that it was not Ramyen. He didn't like the food and yet his closed lips twitched up smilingly as if the opposite were true. Deferential deception seemed the most cordial solution. Through children observing it in his society in various forms it was passed down through the generations by imitation. And as humans had and in interactions proliferated these tactics of coexistence to the young that were successful enough to keep the species, so far, from self-destruction, what did he in his short life know that was a better substitute? In reinventing etiquette, it was hard to know if the new behavior was better or worse than the old one in the abstract. The only measurement would be the reaction of others. To eat and smile while hating what was being eaten and to succeed at it pleased him. It made him feel that he was a decent person. In that minute it picked him up on a wave of optimism that distracted the lonely, mundane, and stunted life that he chartered for himself. Sang Huin spoke frankly about why he had come to Korea. He had been so lost after his sister's death, his father's suicide, and the exacerbated disconnection from the robotic and perfunctory movements and rambling of his mother month after month. He had to break away and become acquainted with his heritage the way Seong Seob, as much as he was capable of, had to flee from the cousin and then him, as perverted as he was, to end those 20+ years of disparaged containment. Both had to chart independent lives exempt of family and without the possibility of ever having one; but really was that so bad - to be ungrounded and to float on winds of circumstance. In the right perspective it was liberation.

Sang Huin wondered what this name, Seng Seob, meant (not that he knew the meaning of his own) and why he was so excited to be with him. They agreed that they would just be together for an hour. That hour became two and then it was the rest of the evening. They drank soju, a mild equivalent of sake. Late into the evening Sang Huin had the waiter calculate the tab and then suggested that they continue drinking elsewhere. Both were drunk at this time and drunkenness was making them thirsty. He and Saeng Sob returned to the yogwam with a case of beer they purchased at a convenience store.

They slept together. Naked and awakening from sleep, Sang Huin listened to the breathing of his friend. For the first time since his sister's death he did not feel alone. Later on in the morning when the light began to shine into the room he continued his prose, every now and then looking at the presence that slept there as well as the imposition of his dog.

Book Two:

The Book of Gabriele and Sang Huin

"Thought is the idea of extension and extension the embodiment of thought" --Baruch Spinoza

"Mind+entity=truth Sensory perception+things=opinion"
--Parmenides

Chapter Eight

Hunched over a TV tray, with the baby locked into her lap in one hand and snuff locked into a cheek, she wrote her story. Occasionally she would write while dribbling brown into the open portal of her empty beer can. She needed her portals for they led her, like a child, into animistic realms far from the mundane of soiled diapers or the powdering of a bottom as repulsive, to her, as perfume scented women. She was dressed in nothing but a dark bathrobe of a bosky fabric and like a soldier in military fatigues, she blended in with the subdued light of a tepid morning, which stumbled onto the floor of her trailer like a collapsing drunk. Every few moments while she wrote, her thoughts became distracted by the hail that besieged the roof and walls or by the screams of the baby which made her glower whenever he spat out his pacifier to become the self-centered squealer that she knew to be the base nature propelling human actions and society's disarray. Richard Dawkins' idea that one was born selfish but did not have to stay that way was an adage that, with the energy she had in her glowering eyes, she wanted to etch onto him if only her eyes were lasers where her commandments could cauterize the human brain. It seemed to her that Jehovah, had he existed, would have glowering eyes no different than hers and such lasers would have gone simply into the malleable substance of the human brain instead of searing it into stone. With aversion to reading anything printed on paper let alone etched in stone so acute it would be more sensible. Had Piaget really studied beings such as this, she thought, he would have seen them as the making of Wall Street and the thunder of armies. She listened more intensely to the hail that was like a machine gun with rubber coated pellets. She imagined herself riding on a tank through a desert and into Baghdad half-naked and exposed, waving her red white and blue brassiere from the opened hatch of the tank. Yes, she admitted, she needed portals. She needed her exits. She needed a change, a respite, from the monotony of motherhood that was sinking her into it like a hole. The baby was a gift, and more a choice and for these points a sacred responsibility to which, she told herself, she would rectify past grievances that her parents, and even Aunt Peggy herself, had done to her. She would never engage in the treachery that had flattened her out under its tank when she was so young (although, she had to admit, the demise of early sensitivities had made her, in such early childhood, reconstruct a new and indomitable self). As she thought this she noticed a spider crawling onto her hand, which held the pen. When the hurricane of all the air from her lungs was not enough to release it from her palm, she did not drop the pen. She decided to look on the intruder as a lecturer on persistency and to gain inspiration from it. She knew that once she finished writing her piece, the spider would be smashed, but she believed that the act should be performed with conscience. Gabriele did not subscribe to the idea of civilized man that life was ranked into a hierarchy of importance. A human certainly could not get by without killing, or picking up killed produce from a grocery shelf, but the idea that there should be a real distinction between a can of beans and the entrails of a local senator seemed absurd, although she did not think that being put in an electric

chair for having eaten her local senator ranked very high up there in the chances of probability. Yes, she again told herself, the child was a gift and a responsibility but she would not dote him. The world flattered itself that doting mothers carrying their worms to the baby birds exuded such a profound love by this thoughtless emotional instinct of proud and adoring pampering. They thought that pampering the pleasure-seeking savage was the acme of nurturing motherhood and the making of good human beings. She thought to herself that such mindless bitches, doting as Aunt Peggy had done with her children, were an embarrassment to this word love. Love in its purest sense (what little one was humanly capable of) would be a selfless caring of another without such instincts to keep one's genes replicating for all eternity. It was not suffocating one's children in dependency so that one could have the role of mommy to avoid rolelessness and void. It was not needing a child. Being a doting mother was as far from her instinctually as those bizarre apathetic ones who could toss a child on a relative or an ex-husband himself before joining the military. The other day, on page 2 of the Ithaca Times she saw that there was an article on some such oddity although much bigger stories with more bizarre and sadistic ramifications were buried each day on page 1,999 of the New York Times. She would always read voraciously and thereby find their cadavers. "Piaget, Piaget, go away, go away," she mumbled inaudibly to herself slurring and babbling the consonants and vowels as if she were now beginning to imitate the language of her son atavistically.

Her calligraphy was composed of letters that were large, circular, and loosely connected. The sentences contained at least one or two words scratched out with others sustained above them. She considered herself a scholar when it came to writing and so imaginative works, in such a medium, did not come easily. Still she could not fathom in herself such a shallow stream of sentiments that would actually cause her to repeat the words of the lullaby, "Rock a by, baby, in a tree top" nor hum even the notes of the lullaby symphony of Brahms. For this reason, she allowed her back to ache and a slow-moving spider to climb along her hand to finish an alternative lullaby--a truth beyond a myth although she did not delude herself by thinking it other than her own personal concoction at a different mythology the way Psalm 104 might have seemed original long after the Great Hymn of Aten was written in Ancient Egypt. In constructing another paragraph she began to ask herself whether or not she had ended the story. She wasn't sure how one would know about such things that were so lacking of scientific or mathematic certainties. Then she began to wonder if she should have written it with a zoomorphic emphasis (maybe a bovine God standing there in its pasture cognizant of nothing, wholly holy in the innocence of stupidity and lack of aggressive tendencies--great virtues to which no other gods comported). She stretched her large muscular framed back; heard a thump on the bookshelf but, in her state of concentration, she dismissed it; dropped the baby back into its crib, and took the top of a TV tray off its legs. In place of the baby, she sat the tray upon her lap providing a close-up foundation for her manuscript.

The hailstorm that was once like artillery against her flimsy enclave now seemed a milder sleet tapping and scraping the ceiling and walls. This type of weather was a bit like the tapping and scraping of her cat, Mouse, clinging and banging its body on the screen of the door in the hope of getting in during the times she threw him out, and she imagined that it would go on this way 1990 times. She listened intensely to some of its 1990 scraping taps, tapings of "the year of our lord"

which also happened to be the year of the American war against Mesopotamia. The sleet was mixed in the wind; and for those who resided in warmth and even those who ran through it in the hope of finding shelter such falling crystal, that was once an ethereal gas, couldn't have been anything other than splendor. At least, in a diminished way, it was for her who could only hear and imagine it within the ruminations of her cynicism and maternal gloom.

For a couple of distracted seconds she contemplated her isolated existence in an obscure trailer park in Ithaca, New York within the middle of winter in contrast to the crowds of Iraqi and American soldiers ready to ignite the deserts the way crowded rats, too overpopulated, too irascible, and too conscious of the movements of other rats, kill each other off. The whole thing should have made her feel leery: a single woman near the outskirts of the city limits all alone with a baby, hearing banging against her home and listening intermittingly to the news on her radio about the Persian Gulf War. She did have knowledge of Judo and fully believed that any violent intruders would regret trespassing on her space but she knew that it did not protect her from the fact that she was a tenuous mortal, a woman with a baby in a flimsy trailer, and that this trailer was in an inauspicious location in one of the more violent countries on the planet. To compound matters, she didn't have any friends or much society except for her bovine-thinking neighbor, Rita. That woman, who called herself Lily, was like a lackadaisical grass-snacking cow right before slaughter time. She had been a former group-home girl at a home for schizophrenics and manic-depressives although she recently graduated to semi-independent living. For Gabriele, her intrusive presence often cut through the black gauze of isolation that could cover every aperture of one's senses prompting her to feel an extreme numbness. But, apart from this mental sustenance, isolation was something that she thrived on like a light hating moss deep in damp and obscure crevices. The walls seemed to shudder in the winds but she did not mind the cold. She felt that it was comforting and when it crept in it seemed to be tangible and come through the cracks around the windows and the door like waves. The baby, however, was another matter. It sneezed out into the cold.

The previous day he was crying in part from the cold and the need to be suckled. And she did suckle him occasionally although, less euphemistically, she saw it as him being allowed to devour her. She did this to pass on her nutrients and antibodies, although giving milk and having a child use her for her tit repulsed and stiffened her posture at times like a soldier at a machine gun in a trench and at other times like a soldier in a queue waiting for inspection. This act more than any other was a reminder of the fact that she was a bit like all other women: a female animal there to be bred and to nurture the continuum of her breed. She fed him and dressed him even more warmly, then, but it was to no avail. Lacking options, she repelled her repulsion toward the rock-a-by song by telling herself that it was the collective culture in the earliest of all primitive American, if not western minds, and so inescapable in a sense. On that day she brought herself to hum a few bars while rocking him according to the melody of the song; but he frowned and looked at her skeptically if babies were capable of skepticism, and so she had to speed up the movement. The faster and harder she rocked him the more he seemed to enjoy it, baby-laughing that one monotone squeal and slobbering all over her. At that time of such Pavlovian drooling she wondered to herself belatedly if having him there to seize her day was worthwhile but the squealing gave her a sense that it was. This roller-rocking of her arms was at first enjoyable because

his squeals of euphoria were delightful to listen to but soon she found them to be a tiring repetition and so she gently tossed him back into the crib which inadvertently caused him to cry once again.

This was a new approach following a few minutes of having him "swig [his] bottle." "Unlike present day Ithaca, in the land of Ancient Atlantis," she read after raising the baby up to the tray like a cold piece of meat and then squashing the insect into her composition, "there was harmony;" and even when he "puke"-she would never say 'spit-up' because it was not so--she recited a few paragraphs of what she had written while the vomit seeped into her bathrobe. Her bold attempt to be indifferent to such an inauspicious start to the morning was becoming a poorly constructed facade for her determination was crumbling like a desiccating sand castle. The smell of the vomit and all of the baby smells bothered her. As her body fidgeted, which in turn caused the cat to bury itself behind the lowest area of the bookshelf (although this time avoiding the tripping on a ceramic dish) she contemplated this euphemism, "spit-up." The term didn't matter in public, she argued; but to oneself, she thought, one had to be honest. Puke was puke, and she had a tale to tell, and her child needed to listen and she needed to resist shoving her child back into the crib to change out of her bathrobe.

As one of her long arms stretched and she grabbed one of his baby bibs that was folded on an end table, dabbing herself with it, she thought about how the two of them were family because of a sexual indiscretion. Fate had backed into her earlier thinking that family was nothing but war games. At one time she believed that husband and wife soldiers of the same side often acted as if they were enemies; and as they played with each other they often forgot about the children, inadvertently or deliberately rolled their tanks over them, or abandoned them entirely to pursue a second honeymoon. At one time she believed that all good soldiers (all military families) did the same thing as this. Her pregnancy (fate) had flattened her notion that an individual only had herself in this world. It had rolled over her idea that a collective unit was a neurotic delusion like the concept of God. She had been rolled on by a tank a second time and had been forced to reassess earlier conclusions. Motherhood was beginning to make her fully aware of the extent by which there was an interdependence of the social members of society and she was beginning to think of her son as a gift from God since the birth of a baby was such a miracle. And here they were tucked away in their home in a scantily lit morning. The trailer was the fortress from artillery shells, taps, and scrapes. For a moment she listened to its splendor with her usual intensity: the tapping of it, the refrigerator mysteriously clicking into life with a hum slightly like a ticking heart of a great body in hibernation, and the heater that didn't work so well exhaling in dreaming snores through the mouths of floor vents. She listened until it all abruptly ended by his cries. She then thought that she was becoming overly sentimental if not completely and loathsomely maudlin in the scramble of impressions that spewed out from her subconscious. She wondered if she could shut him up in time to perform aerobics with the television instructor.

The child she had given birth to had been like a dragon of the womb, pushing its young being of fiery hell out of her. This was an image that Gabriele conjured up in her imagination as the bathrobe, that was the only thing separating her from complete nakedness, began to have such an acrid and fetid stench. She changed his diaper and lodged a pacifier into his mouth. "Unlike present day Ithaca, in the land of Ancient

Atlantis, which the residents of this small island called Antinomy, there was harmony." She again recited and adlibbed the beginning of her story as a wild idea of cracking her inattentive child's head like a nut crazily passed through her consciousness, quickly diffusing and departing like a bad smell. "Once upon a time they were the happiest of people glowing from ear to ear almost as cute as you do, Adagio, on those rare times that you actually do smile. Their smiles were not inane and senseless as giddy American teenagersE no,no-Americans as a whole really before they have their heart attacks from the stress of competing for more and more or the greasy food they clog into their blood vessels or from fright at possibly being blown away when some stressed out nut comes into a fast food joint with a semi-automatic. Their kindness was genuine because valuing their link to the energy that radiated into them, competing for conveniences and pleasures was not their priority. And they weren't just happy and nice but these residents of Atlantis or Antinomy (I give you, Mr. Adagio, permission to use either word---either word depending on Adagio's silly whims). And they weren't just happy and nice but they were also resourceful. The Antinomians when they took a crap did not have diapers to catch it. They preferred the natural way of letting it drop, and dry out a bit under the sun god, so that they could make bowls and pitchers from the dung heap. When they climbed coconut trees for the fruit, they could get up the trees in three seconds. Likewise when they hunted their wild boars they didn't need spears, little man. They just ran and pounced on the animals. Now you may ask how they did such things so well so let me answer the query of your inquisitive mind. These superhuman people were everything good: kind and gentle, strong and smart because they weren't arrogant. They had no civilization that told them to flush dung down the toilet, and no amicable smiles that are part of business transactions. They were natural, ingenuous people who meditated on the energy emanated by the sun and this link of themselves to natural forces prompted them to be more than ordinary men. The sun god liked those who meditated on the energy he supplied them so he gave them a boost-a bit of caffeine if you will. That's the way it was, Little Man, in maybe the 8th century B.C." She knew that if he were to squeal during the story this behavior would be most inhospitable to the story telling host, and so as a preemptive move she used crazed gestures that would get his attention. By getting his attention she could lure him into a story that had the potential of putting him to sleep. The name on his birth certificate was Nathaniel, a name she liked but regretted having given to him. It was her hope that the nickname, "Adagio," would, like magic, get him to be calm if not elicit from the child a rather scholastic attentiveness within his infantile limitations. She often played for him the classical music, "Scaramouche-moderne" by Darius Milhaud. It was her favorite adagio if indeed it was an adagio at all. It was adagio enough for her and she believed that was all that mattered.

She was seated on a director's chair looking at the slight movements of her child's body and wondering why its mouth could not be equally delicate. She silently called it the Spanish word of "criatura." Her extended family had been a mixture of Germans and German-Argentineans, a passionate and passionless crowd who often did not know if they should call her Gabriela or Gabriele and so they had been reluctant to say anything at all to her. She kissed her son on the forehead but this action provoked vehement cries of cacophony. Assessing that her son had reactions no different than any hard Visigoth, she ignored his bellowing voice and continued the story. "Listen to this, little man. Concentrate. Scream as you will, but concentrate! They, the Antinomians of Atlantis, considered themselves a

loose conglomeration of a tribe and did not have any inclination for a central government for governments are only needed to control malevolent men. When the scattered men unified for monthly reproductive sessions with their estranged spouses to ravage their fluids on their--quote-unquote 'their'--women, they were not protected under roofs from the elements but did the banging on the backs of horses. Uncomfortable, you say. I'd agree: uncomfortable but quick and quick ejaculations were what they wanted. This doing it in the open was a rather brave act, wouldn't you say, considering that they could be struck down by lightning should the sun god deem them as gaining more hedonistic pleasure, or spending too much of their thoughts in activities not suited to gentle, uncivilized men. They did not marry in the auspices of a sacrament-oriented fiend from the heavens but acknowledged the vulgarity of their intersections not in affected guilt but by cleansing and anointing their horses afterward. They weren't selfish creatures apart from those 15-minute rides and so they didn't have this wish to hide themselves in the affectation of matrimony and love like modern men and they did not need to hide themselves in clothes. The land of Antinomy was warm, you know. There would have been a different reality if Antinomy had been a little island off of our beloved motherland of Antarctica. Anyhow, in the land of Atlantis or Antinomy a child was born in this manner and grew up not with Mother or Father but in independence and its relationship with the Earth and the sun. She, the Earth, would find him. She would tell him that he was hers. He would know that there was no purpose to being alive other than living and being grateful for life. Of course, in modern societies like Ithaca, Adagio, you have no merit at all--you aren't even thought as worthy of the respect of an insect--unless you have a job and are in one way or another part of the Great Factory but not in Atlantis, my little buddy. No, not there. There, to be without aim was accepted since the meaning of life was in life itself: vibrant energy for no reason bursting forth for no reason as fireworks in a desert."

For a couple seconds she thought about how any common criminal or intruder to her domain would be immediately repelled from trespassing by her strange oral dissertations. Perhaps he or she would find himself discomfited to find logic and honesty in such an eccentric array and wouldn't know what to make of it: Mother Teresa of Calcutta or Marquis de Sade of Paris. Such a person would assume that she had been dropped on her head as an infant in a most dramatic way not knowing the reality that, in early girlhood, she had been flattened by a tank.

"The skies clothed the babies of these ingenuous savages just as it did their naked mothers and fathers. As I said before, no clothes and no shame for them for they were kind and their consciences were pure. They spoke the truth as they perceived it at the moment they spoke it and no one resented each other because they understood that each was just trying to assemble ideas together the way prisoners in a dungeon used anything as platforms that would edge them closer to the window." At this point she did not understand her own writing so she adlibbed entirely. "A given baby had the world as his own. He did not cry in the night like a baby in need of a night light since all the books created from previous centuriesE all those mysterious words in all the pages from the books created from previous centuries and shipped to AtlantisE all those mysterious words in all the pages from the books of 'truth' since the beginning of time (books seen as irreverently reverent, and maliciously deceiving fables) were burnt each night in his world; and this did add a small twinkle in his eyes. Yet it was Mother Earth who cradled him, after his abandonment at birth and nourished him-

- " Composed pell-mell and visibly entangled in nonsense, she felt that the latter part of her myth was ruined in sententiousness and knew that she was no longer believing that their words had any truth whatsoever. That being the case, she stopped babbling. When she saw that the baby was asleep she put him in the crib, disrobed, took a shower, and got dressed. She turned on the television but realizing it was Sunday and that church programming had usurped her exercise regimen she felt disappointed. Not knowing what to do with the day, she looked out of the window for a period of minutes that seemed like hours. A car came through the trailer park lot mixing the water with dirt. One nearby puddle looked like chocolate milk. She thought to herself that she needed to warm some baby formula. Instead, she sat down in her director's chair, stared out into nothingness, and listened to tapping that seemed more like rain. Her thoughts rambled on: "800,000 African children die from dysentery each year and yet the news is about the continuing air strikes against Iraq as if American victory were something other than a foregone conclusion." At least, the bully that it was, America was a democracy and Gabriele, as hard as she tried, could not keep herself from feeling a bit fortunate to live there. She found it somewhat comforting that the murky morality of such engagements was debated by senators and talk show hosts. Protecting Kuwait or securing the free flow of oil seemed an easy riddle to figure out. Prior to the war, what American had ever known of the existence of Kuwait outside of geography teachers? Her idea was not so novel. It was the same type of thought of commonplace dissenters but, after examining the idea, it was also that of her own. This was her last thought as she fell asleep.

She dreamed that her son was the neighbor woman, Rita (who thought of herself as Lily), with blonde hair and glasses, and that a nuclear bomb had gone off somewhere nearby Ithaca--maybe Salem for the strangers on the street, bewildered and whispering to themselves, kept mentioning the name of that city. The city of Ithaca was filled with rumors that the event had occurred and the rumors were loud in an atmosphere where everything else was silent and seemed to take on a texture of emptiness. The rumors seemed tactile and to have a visible substance that was ochre but thick as a heavy fog. Although they were no louder than whispers, these whispers were cries of bewilderment albeit softer than agony since they could not be fully articulated for lack of any definite knowledge.

"They have shut us off from knowing," said one young woman desperately.

"Sure," said a man with an Appalachian draw. "The damn people up there higher than God! They don't want us to know what has happened for fear that we'll fear others are comun'... maybe make some phone calls!"

"Are we to believe this craziness we are hearing? We live in civilized times. This can not be," said another female voice. Her accent was of a New Jerseyite.

A red headed woman, next to Gabriele on a street corner, said to a grayish woman that looked like a cat, "If the president is with them on this it is true." The words in the typical New York accent for some reason seemed the most tangible element of the dream, greater than its visionary components, and the most worthy truth. Gabriele backed away from the cat, and wished for death rather than to bear this horror where not even the surety of the death of thousands or millions could be known, whether or not the people of Ithaca would eventually be radiated,

or whether or not there was indeed a conspiracy to keep them ignorant that more missiles were coming. "Let others die but not me; let other cities perish but not ours" was a dominant thought in everyone's head. It was so loud and everyone could hear it no matter how hard they pretended otherwise. She loathed that wretched instinct of self-interest that was innate in a being to make it survive, prosper, and propagate dynastically. She thought to herself that survival of the fittest truly played out in all things and selfishness was its impetus. The meek, when not uneducated and famished, were so sensitive to injustice and disparity that they became neurotic and disturbed. The truly meek were too gentle and reticent to muster the selfishness to bring forth offspring, and they inherited nothing outside of their own coffins. She also loathed that small portion of her sociable will, which stooped to what they were saying, now, with complete conviction in the streets. She heard one elderly man in particular. He was like an older version of someone in her past but the dream, which was a reality of its own, did not directly make that correlation. "Come on now. Let's not panic. It's been hot in Salem with no wind. Maybe the radiation will just stay there. What little breeze there is probably is just in the upper stratosphere. My son's a weatherman, you know." The elderly man in thick glasses pointed out Gabriele's Lily shaped son as his own. "He says that not feeling a breeze means no breeze at all except way up there in the stratosphere. The radiation is below that. If it moves slightly it will go to New York City. It will never come this way. You can count on it so let's not panic." It was a hope for self-preservation. It was a hope of the deaths of millions of people rather than themselves who resided in Ithaca. She saw the cat woman crying and a man petting her back. He was comforting her compassionately; but like one who does not wish to spend resources on exploratory surgery to find out whether or not the lymphatic cancer had spread in an aging pet, the man turned away from the woman. Gabriele could see him pursuing his own private minutes of self-pity and rage deep in lost, silent eyes.

Then the cat rubbed itself against her face and she awakened, recalling that the elderly man in the dream was a distorted version of the lover who had made her into this child's mother. She had not been meek when she went to Houston to pursue a graduate degree. She had hungered after the assistant professor because he had been as inaccessible as Antarctica. She had successfully obtained him and this was due to the fact that people loved those of a strong will who seemed immortal in inexhaustible energy, swinging their machetes beyond diffidence and forging paths and realities boldly. This sort of energy being erotic to them, they were attracted, mesmerized, and orphic to the id?e fixe, which was nothing other than everlasting youthful vigor. The assistant professor, yearning for immortality, had coupled with her. It had been a successful wish and a successful coupling because from it she had gotten pregnant. With her sleeve, she wiped her face that sparkled in greasy sweat, and then gently cradled the cat to her face. The cat scratched her and leaped away to where it once again hid itself behind the books.

Gabriele's cheek bled but still she did not kill the cat. She didn't know the reason her hands, pulsating in rushes of vengeful energy, did not catch it and crush it in her fingertips. At that moment she did not know her reasons for anything. She tried to stop the bleeding with the back of her hand, for the bib near her feet was unusable since it was fuming in vomit. As she looked at the swab of blood that was there on her hand she felt a void careen into her (or herself careening into the void), heard a parents' declaration to depart

from her, and again felt the impact of being rolled on by a tank. She imagined the cat deliberately paralyzing itself in the actions of the prey it had often witnessed. She imagined it praying to the earth for a delay of its execution and subsequent decomposition by having the earth force compassion on Gabriele, the executioner. She imagined it praying to the earth that magically brought it into life to shrink its size into something so much smaller than a cat in order to be at all. She did not know why it happened. She just did not kill the cat but instead watched it masquerade itself as dead. Gabriele picked up the cat by the neck and the four eyes met. The cat did not swipe. It concentrated on cowardly prayers and of remaining limp. Gabriele tossed this other "criatura." It landed on top of a book on Freud on the lowest part of her bookshelf.

Chapter Nine

The reasons for the specific elements of a myth (the cryptic reason why a given culture might have chosen a serpent god or the son of god over the sun god) are ineffable, and all attempted explanations of a myth are mythical. Scholars of myths compare religions to find that spiritual element that links and validates the human search (that search to find that which is everlasting within the brevity of a human's lifespan); and historians of recorded cultures thread together implication, meaning, and motive from a few tangible and often random happenings.

The myth of Aten came from the Eighteenth Dynasty of Ancient Egypt. For over 1500 years Ancient Egypt practiced polytheism with each town having its own god. Usually such gods were animal gods as was the case with the cat-goddess, Bast of Bubastis, but many of the towns found that once they attached the word "Re," the commonest name for the sun god, it enhanced the denotation so that local gods became more ubiquitous and more deserving of reverence. In the case of the falcon god, Re-Harakhti, a name change was given to It (the great It) that contained more overt connotations. Not only was the word, "Re" put before the regular name of the falcon-god, but engravings depicted It with the sun god above It's head.

The pharaoh, Akhenaten, in his quest for the one sun god, Aten, disliked focusing all of his energies toward military ventures that would have decimated the bellicose Nubian-like creatures and stray Hittites that fell onto his shores like waves. He knew that he could decimate them if continual efforts were applied the way one wipes away a group of ants again and again. He hadn't even considered that it would wipe out his nation's treasury not to mention his own personal coffers. He didn't want to give himself to anti-terrorist strategies and 24 hour a day campaigns that would have sustained his empire but buried him in lonely problematic calculations, hypotheses about the thinking of some elusive enemy, and general logic (not that the President Bushes used any of the above). He was reluctant to part from continual dreaminess and to end the world of the child that saw magic in a waving leaf on a branch of a tree. He didn't want tedium that was as long as the sentences of this prose. The only military ventures he envisioned for himself were preemptive and bloody executions of the more vocally intransigent non-believers who would diminish the ubiquitousness of his own god and challenge his animistic thinking of nature as being linked to man by their harping on animal gods. For his eternal link to the sun was more essential and part of himself than any of his arms or legs.

And so, reluctant to part from dreaminess, he built a new capital city for Egypt that he devoted to the worship of Aten. The city, Amarna, was created to be Aten's sacrosanct home. As for the crusades to extirpate all memory of any gods other than Aten through the destruction of temples and relieves (particularly the temples and reliefs of gods that had a "Re" attached to their names), none of it would have been so bloody had the believers allowed him to clean away their chiseled nonsense the way one would the crayon happy markings of children on the walls of the family home.

Gabriele's motives for creating a non-melodic lullaby about a god that had been extinct for thousands of years were even a little unclear unto her. Perhaps the reasons for the avant-garde lullaby could have come from that one afternoon when she was four. On that day she had become less interested in nursing a wounded bird and so began to play with her tiny plastic toy soldiers beside her mother who was clipping wet shirts and military trousers on the clothesline.

The noon sun was slapping both their faces the way the heat from an oven evaporates the grease put on two baked potatoes. Gabriele, bothered by the heat, turned away from the soldiers and then took a glance at the sun. She turned toward her mother and mentioned some eagerness for Christmas. Her mother turned toward Gabriele with stoic facial expressions and then crassly spoke in German that Gabriele should stop thinking about Christmas since it was a long way off. The mother snapped the clothes on the line with more forceful pinches and then asked her daughter if she didn't think she was a bit old to pursue such nonsense as Christmas. Gabriele said that she didn't understand and so her mother unhesitatingly told her that there was no such thing as Santa Claus. Gabriele saw her mother smile sadly. She sensed a kindness in this smashing of ignorance and innocence the way she had seen Aunt Peggy smash a horse fly on one of her uncle's stallions.

"In a way, I am glad you brought this up," continued Gabriele's mother in German. "There are some things that will be changing soon." A cloud ran by the sun and in its shadow Gabriele glanced up at a frothy blob that looked like the form of an old man in ancient garb. At the age of four she could not recognize the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus sculpted into the cloud or a cloud shaped or sculpted into Heraclitus. "There is some early news I should tell you. I really should but it is a little hard to get it out. You are such a baby, you are, but now you are a bit wiser, eh? You know the situation with Santa. Life is going to be full of sobering face slappings like that. I am very glad that you are clogging your tears like a good girl. I'm proud of that fact. I was a little worried that you would be bawling like stupid little thing. Crying about such things like this would be bad, bad behavior when there are so many bigger things one shouldn't cry about either." The girl couldn't help having watery eyes even though she did not release the tears and soon mucus began to run from her nostrils. She wiped it onto the back of her hand. "Heavens, Gabriele, that's nasty. Remember to not get into the cookie jar without scrubbing those hands of yours thoroughly. Well, now, you are wiser for knowing the situation with Santa so I can tell you things, eh? You have a wiser and smarter brain than any other 4 year old who has ever walked the planet, don't you think so? Now I can tell you things because there won't be any damage, eh? Oh, why won't my mouth work right at getting this out?" Gabriele stood stiff. Questions were piercing into her as if she were target practice but she stood stiffly not feeling a thing except the demise of Santa Claus. "Christmas is so lovely with everyone being together, don't you think

so? Still that doesn't always happen, eh? When this doesn't happen there is no weeping. In this case, there will just be smiles on the kitten's face, eh? I'm sorry but we will not all be together this Christmas. We are parting our ways. Your father and I will be experiencing something new and you will be experiencing a different thing that is something new. In experiencing something new, you've got to be bold and take one's stance with a smile on the kitten's face. Some things are the way they are. No wishing will bring Santa Claus into existence and wishing won't stop new things from happening. You will soon go live with your Aunt Peggy. Your father and I are going back to Germany. He is going to be stationed there again. Your father is a great American patriot and has been asked to return to our motherland of Germany on important duties. You like your father's sister so much. Am I right? Your aunt Peggy: we are lucky to have her. Really, we are. Strange lady though; but with all those horses, maybe she'll take you for a ride sometime. Horses have ponies. They could give you one. You never know. She will have a tutor to help you to read and do math and will let you play sports in her yard under the supervision of an athletic trainer. The yard is large and fenced in nice. You know that. You will be happy there. The house is near a Catholic school. You will go there each day with those monkeys of hers. Much better than being here and there with us; and with this plan, you get two mommies instead of just one. That makes you better than the stupid little rascals your age."

If the little girl within Gabriele had been born a boy and that boy hadn't slipped away from the influence of the mother toward a male role model, she would have been branded a homosexual by one impact of the brain onto another. It would have been a gradual but ineluctable branding within a few critical years. But these few minutes of a girl's life at the clothesline with her mother made her into a misogynist, a stoic and an atheist. From this time at the clothesline she learned that everything was a myth or prevarication and the only kind of reality that existed was her own self and the natural forces that beamed onto her. Romanticizing the sun that burnt her face and could end up giving her skin cancer was better than the self-defeating flames of hate that might have been a force inside her consuming what could have been her. This silly, and barely believed myth gave grace to her infrequent social interactions and regulated her sleep patterns.

Chapter Ten

(1989: Houston)

Turning away from the cooked bacon strips dripping grease on their paper towel bedding, he walked to the bathroom. He hoped that she would come into the kitchen while he was away. He hoped that she would swig her juice in one gulp and quickly eat her share of the bacon and toast; and once finished, that she would quickly go out with the garbage of the early morning that would soon be picked up by the sanitation workers whom people crudely referred to as garbage men. He hoped that this could be done while he was in the bathroom and while his new bacon began to sizzle in the skillet. She knew this as much as one knew anything. She believed that it came to her intuitively without the use of her faulty senses that were capable of adulterating reality; or, if sensed, that it entered her consciousness ineffably similar to the passing dog that recognizes the pheromone spray of a much earlier dog. She did not mind. Non-romantic conclusions were non-confining. They were spring breeze

declaring the end of winter. This was a beginning and an ending of a relationship within the space of 6 or 7 hours and she did not mind that at all. All relationships were the beginning of an end and the quicker expedited the better off she thought she would be.

She was in the bedroom dressing herself in a very faint light of early morning and she could not see him return from the bathroom to cook the last of his bacon where the strips shrank phallically in the heat. But from the smell she, of course, knew that was happening and she could imagine that he was analyzing their experience together in front of his skillet, and sinking into a void. She could guess this because he, like all humans, was incapable of reliving the frenzy through a precise memory of it; and he was now trying to find some sensibility in his voracious, self-consuming frenzy. She wanted to laugh out loud the way she had laughed out when they were in bed together and she seeing his body, less real in the darkness, become wholly stiff before her. Yes, she thought then scoffingly, he was a holy stiff. Now, kitchen-bound, he was no doubt using logic to create a sententious wallowing where the act was more hallowed in the past. She presumed that he was thinking back on his experiences with his wife and comparing this one without "love" to the separated wife's loving caresses. She thought about the way he looked ten minutes earlier scrambling around for his clothes that were by his bed in almost arthritic movements. Even as she slipped on her skirt, she still felt the same repulsion and indifference toward him because of this action. Certainly no friendship could ensue from this intimacy with the young assistant professor. It was always a bit disappointing for her, really, that physical intimacies were so gluttonously selfish and fully incompatible for caring relationships. She knew that reality every time she engaged in such activities and yet she somewhat inaccurately told herself that with each new sexual experience she acted like an innocent girl in her first sexual foray. Following a mirage, she told herself, was just an inane pitfall to being human, and only a fool was disappointed in human vulnerabilities-as slight as she told herself hers were.

She hadn't run over him with a car to create those arthritic movements in the bedroom nor had she cast some spell on him although she was loosely affiliated with bewitching organizations like Wicca despite their ecclesiastic and congregational ambiance. His pathetic reaction was strange although undoubtedly provoked. Sure, in bed together she had guffawed at his ridiculous post-sexual statement that he could not leave his wife as if women could not have sex with handsome men for pleasure. She apologized to him immediately afterward for this egregious chortling. After all, he wasn't so mistaken. Most women were there to mate with a man for the purpose of perpetuating their selfish genes by breeding. Most could not sense themselves beyond that feeling, that rush of love, that dopamine addiction that was cajoling them to breed. In fact, she had to admit that she had never met a woman who was not like that; but then, unbeknown to him, she never categorized herself as a woman. She was a female with nothing womanly inside of her. To her knowledge, there was no pathetic lonely neediness or "womanity" that brewed within her. Hearing her guffaw in bed an hour earlier and her bashful apology afterward, he probably did not think about anything in particular except how best to create an amicable departure. But then, still in bed, she made an analogy of sex to stale potato chips, which upon occasion she did not mind eating for the salt that was contained there. This faux paus must have made him feel as if he had had intercourse with a cannibal for soon there was that arthritic rustling with his clothes. The corollary of seeing him look for his clothes

feebly was the igniting of her "miso-him-ony" (a word that she coined gabrielishly).

She went into the kitchen and to her satisfaction she found the man transformed into bacon. Anyhow, he wasn't there so she ate her breakfast snack, went to the bathroom, and then came out only to imagine that she heard him crying in the closet between the muffling of jackets, with empty hangers lightly clanging against each other. She felt a sorrow for him and took on his mental void. She saw, however, that he was outside and felt foolish. Had her senses been more astute than her cognition? It sometimes happened. From the window she saw him in the tiny park swinging alone with the full moon diluted by the rising sun.

Sex, she thought, as she watched his body hit the winds, was being massaged by one's own hormones, turned on by oneself, or more accurately one's sense of pleasure, and making love to fantasies of one's mind rather than the individual locked into one's body. Yet she was titillated if not inveigled by such physical pleasures that kept her imagination more bound than what she would have liked. Sensate hungers of animals and men were ineluctable but inconsequential "things" that she would not allow to be the synopsis of herself even if upon occasion she explored these appetites fully. This night was more than just diving into sensual experiences when she could no longer stay logical without slipping into a philosophical void: it had been a sociological experiment of seducing the opposite sex in a gay bar called "Heaven" more from compassionate and empathic dialogue than sexual ploys; it had been because of the humidity of Houston; it had been...she was not sure what it was. She, having gone with some of her gay friends to "Heaven," had become one of those "fag hags" that such non-lesbian gay bar-going women are often called. Ostensibly, the night had been so different and so speciously amusing but really any nightclub was the same: that same loneliness and that same sense that appetites were fueling a human form like a smart bomb that was out of control. She scorned having had sympathy for him. She rebuked herself for having sympathy for situations that did not exist, which was so much worse. To think that he had been in a closet crying was worse than insane for one who was so proud of her logical skills, and so believing that she could stare down the eyes of wild leopards and not shirk from the eyes of lepers. Sorrow for him, she told herself, was a brief misfiring of neurons in an awkward situation that brought on a second of a brief hallucination and an emotional barricade that she now had to scurry around.

Gabriele ate a piece of cold toast abandoned near the bacon. She did not delude herself: he had prepared this meal (such as it was) to minimize his feelings that he had used her, although really she had used him. She was hungry so she ate. The fact that it was cold showed his hostility toward her. She knew this but ate the toast with a smirk on her face. A minute later, she took out some snuff from her purse and a cold beer from the refrigerator and then went onto the porch. Outside, the wind was still bringing the coolness of winter nights that the sun beat down with the days. She drank and watched him. She felt repulsion for her one-night stand and wanted to get into her car, which would move her to her apartment, exclusive to herself and her logic. The impulse to play, however, was too much; so after mildly draining the tobacco-saliva from her mouth into the beer can, she crossed Dunlavy street to join him on the swing set.

"Y-e-s!" said Gabriele in a tone of affected romanticism of the trivial, kicking the air beneath her as his swing lost momentum. She giggled like a schoolgirl. She reduced her swinging gradually to cessation careful to not just stop because he had done so. After her feet were dragging and cutting into the dirt, he pulled out a cigarette to hang in his face.

"I fixed some bacon," he said indifferently after she was equally stagnant and inert.

"So you did," she responded less zealously.

He didn't say anything but she could read it all the same. He didn't say, "I'm sorry, but could you go?" He didn't say, "We enjoyed each other's company, I think." He didn't say, "I've got a relationship, more or less, with my wife although she doesn't know my other side." He didn't say, "I thought being with you might make me feel more desire for women, be more romantic, and get her back into my life again. I hope you don't think I've used you." He did not say that predominant thought that was in his eyes, "I'm sorry, but could you go, please?" There would have been a pleading "please" in it if he had been able to "find the backbone" to articulate his request. There was none of that "stuff" said among nearly all men from one generation to the next with a few extra contemporary novelties that saved men from being completely trite. She liked wordless empathy. It could be shut off at any second like tap water."

"Relationships: they are plural, complicated, and opposing for you, it seems." Gabriele said this with her hand under her chin as if her lover were an interview for a dissertation. "Don't be so worried." She smiled. "My fear of you hunting me down has more merit than any fears you might have of me." She chuckled at herself. Her mind repeated his laconic words: "I fixed you some bacon." They began to echo in her mind. "What is this?" she thought. "Does he want me to think this breakfast of his is my reward for this bit of a roll in the hay?" She snickered to avoid piercing him with dilating eyes of hate. Then she smiled at her former professor. It was a contrived smile and although she hated artifice, in a world of getting one's needs met one needed to behave insincerely.

"Complicated and opposing, are they? Okay, if you want to look at it that way," he retorted. "Well, you can't exactly say that you weren't in Heaven, can you?"

"Si' estaba alli tambien. Eso es innegable"("Yes, I was there also. This fact is indisputable"). She spoke to his dark Brazilian skin. She spoke to all of his Morris codes and secret languages that she understood all and had contempt for everything that he was. She wanted to speak to her former psychology professor as a cheerful therapist but such nascent words when she tried to formulate them in her mouth became dying winds over the rubble reef of her tongue and the sea of her saliva. Still she smiled although a supercilious undertone tried to gain beastly dominion. "The sport of seduction was all I had in mind, Mr., and then you went ahead and gave me more. You cooked some bacon and toast. I thank you." When his face again fell, as she wanted it to fall, she raised herself from the swing. The tree limbs seemed to wave goodbye to him. Then they bent as she walked away from him; and as she, on reflex, glanced back, they ricocheted and then folded back like a curtain which had material composed of the darkness of the limbs and

the sketchy sunlight. She could not see him, and she appreciated this fact. The vinyl and its coolness, within the car, made her upper body shiver--how she sank into it and felt soothed. She thought of the waves of the Gulf, at Galveston Bay, pulling at her legs with cool and non-scathing talons. Although she was attracted to the Gulf of Mexico, and felt befriended by an identity of its vastness synonymous to her own, at this moment she preferred how she felt from the vinyl, which was limited and all encompassing. It snuggled around the back of her throbbing head and body.

The accelerator, firm and responsive to pressure, was freedom that the social instinct (what little she had) and society at large robbed from her. It moved to the embodiment of her will, propelling her from anything she chose to disregard. She turned onto Westheimer Street. She had gone as far as the thirteen-thousand block once, a year ago, after enrolling at Rice University to pursue her graduate studies. Someone had told her that Westheimer finally turned into a farm road, but back then she decided to let her experience testify otherwise by choosing to not go that far.

She drove on and on and soon she could see the roof of a church. In an hour, she thought, there would be the culmination of activity from the followers (the sheep) and the fully arrayed morning. Inside the cathedral of Santa Anna, which she was now approaching, a priest would soon begin to prepare himself for an early mass after the golden curved roof began to reflect the sunlight in a seductive glare. The marble walls would seem steady to these followers as if prayers said within these corridors would cause one to be as steady and seemingly everlasting as those very walls. The church would shelter the convictions of the myth reinforcers who actively promoted their religion so that anxieties of injustice, the vulnerability of the human form, the madness of a violent world and violent thoughts and feelings from within, and the issue of mortality could be eased. In the face of challenges from other ideologies, Christians protected their God and religion with defensive armament of an anxiety-ridden people. It wasn't so hard to keep an individual-caring God inculpable of genocide, typhoons, and plagues. In modern times, those issues occurred in underdeveloped foreign countries among heathen populations. But car accidents, cancer, high mortgage payments, a fire gutting a family home, and stock market decline made the firm arms of a loving god into a tenuous thing. It shook the marble walls of the church. Further, made insecure by the believability of alternative religions with scriptures or some dogmatic premises that were also claimed as infallible, the Buddhist and the Moslem were threats for an American Christian no less than the witch. She wondered why she did not hate religion more than what she did. She asked herself why she did not circle around the block for an hour and then grind a soul or two to the pavement. Now that she was thinking such peculiar things she continued with them. She assumed that driving through a crowd of people was a lot like bowling only the pins weren't stationary. Actually, she thought, it did sound more of a sport than bowling ever did. However, the thought of doing such things out of the context of her playful inner world was so repugnant to her that it struck a chill down her spine. Only an unequivocal nervous breakdown would cause her to obey the savage and crazed thoughts that ran amuck in one's head. Like any German dam, such energy was a trickling stream next to the mammoth structure that contained and regulated it. She not only was her own effective dam and continually building upon it, but she constructed worlds of ideas there. From the mammoth height of intellectualism, her turbid passionate waters seemed

almost puny. German people, she thought, did not camouflage their barbarity in "goodness." Early in history, except for notable flare-ups, Germans were aware of their barbaric impulses so, like Nietzsche, they coldly refined all emotions into philosophic rationales.

The idea of wanting to preserve oneself in the spirit made her face cringe. She had often felt this way throughout her life, and it seemed so alien to her that those people who could not create their own sense of truth regardless of man's basic purpose (which was never known), desperately sought immortality.

Myths, themselves, would give half-rational women and men artificially solved philosophical truths that would ease their minds into their jobs, their families, their adultery, their small capitalistic ventures with large levels of greed, and their soap opera, small-life concerns; but she could not conceptualize why their myths had the element of self-preservation. She did not care to preserve herself. Just in dying, and letting microorganisms rot her body away, she would give her energy back to the world that would radiate it again elsewhere in another form. If she had a child, she thought, she or he would not be allowed to be subject to this Christianity, which had the plagiarism of Ancient Egyptian Literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh, Plato, Confucius, and God knows what as scripture. Still, there was no escape from the West for fresher lies. The whole world was western now. All that was possible was to abscond from it as much as possible.

Friendship, as that with her roommate, Betty, would be plugged up in smiles and feigned promises to write. A day earlier she was folding, sealing away, and throwing away material things and now it would be states of mind. It was very exciting-more than even a racket ball game with Betty whose African American skin, muscular physique, and strong competitive strife got her equated as the sister of many famous sports legends. This bantering was a subject for mutual scowling since both wanted "female" sports to be "on an equal footing" and for races and genders to not be stereotyped to certain activities. With a thesis accepted, the fourth largest city in America was to be nothing but a folded map forgotten in the outside pocket of one's suitcase. What would she do now that her graduate studies had ended? She did not know. She had gained the knowledge by which to do nothing with complete confidence and so taking it into a PHD level seemed redundant. As much as a human could be free, she was now free.

She wondered if the homosexuals at the bar last night were free. She had enjoyed the men in colorful briefs-some who had danced on wooden platforms covering two juxtaposed pool tables to be more into the crowd. When someone of her own sex had introduced herself with lust in her eyes, Gabriele had wanted to sprint a quick exit through the wall but, instead of cowardice, gave her a quick kiss on one of her cheeks and declared, in her giggling, that this would be as far as she would go in that type of liaison. At the same time she wondered a little whether that woman felt more free by subconsciously choosing the type of sex she wanted to copulate and then following the dictates of her own hormones instead of having hormones dictated by social mores.

She was almost at her apartment when she consciously noticed Betty's cigarette butts in her car ashtray. She chastised such vile and unaesthetic habits, but really it was her own maudlin oozing that she despised. Needing some time alone to sink into herself, she decided to

procrastinate packing and her last meeting with Betty by going to Allen Parkway. She parked her car in a lot nearby and told herself it was time for her one-person celebration and to ensure that the past would not be left in abeyance suffocating her in sentimental mush. She wanted people of the fading present to depart from her like releasing a deep breath. She sat in an obscure area of the Buffalo Bayou away from the bike trail and a herd of morning bicyclists approaching the fountain. She sat in the grass and allowed her body to be prey to fire ants, which, like a goddess, she would then smash with her fingertips or gently remove to blades of grass. She meditated on the theme of chance that was so intricate in the fabric of all things. She picked clover and dismembered their leaves, gladdened that the little girl flattened out as she had been by the tank, still floated like a ghost in the ethereal parts of her imagination. She told herself that she would be an empty shell of an adult to be bereft of her.

She again thought of the go-go boys dancing both on stage and on pool tables. They had been such titillation but as different as they were, she doubted that they were free. By their freedoms, they were imploding into their own hungers just as she was imploding in memories of last night that she couldn't quite shake. She remembered how with each beer her mind lost the paralysis of logic and she began to be more sociable and pay less attention to the flickering icon, on the wall, that was shaped like a wine glass; the queer associations of social butterflies known as transvestites; the mirror which gave a blurred version of this other part of humanity; and of course the dancers, who were rather boring after a few minutes of seeing the ends of their briefs sag from being paid for non-sexual tricks. Except for glances at the surreal mosaic fragments of commercials and video music that played on television sets, which were on the far corners of the walls, she sometimes stared at men throughout the night with a specific intention of wanting to copulate with one or all of them, but enjoying the aspect of feeling sensual regardless. It was there that she met her professor. He was someone who, according to her friends, often came to the bar, and yet he looked lost. The seduction was easy. She asked if he wanted to go with her, and he said that he did. Nothing was simpler and more exempt from life's energy consuming, cat and mouse games. She thought about the butts in her ashtray. She wasn't sure the reason. Maybe the thought of the smoke filled bar triggered this memory. Betty should have cleaned out those cigarette butts, she thought. What an ugly reminder of herself. She looked at the grass all around her and then at the traffic speeding by. The creation was sublime and chaotic. She pondered how simplistic human logic was: the eyes taking in the light, the image of the object refracted on the retina, the mental image playing in the brain, recent memories regarding that object, and an abstract idea. She didn't want to think of anything. She just wanted to watch the early morning sunrise over the bayou.

Chapter Eleven

Jiffypop popcorn leaping over the heat of the stove's burner, the expanding of the aluminum foil cover into a crown, and his sister, Jung-Jun (that girl sister as dead and yet phantomesque as the murdered adult) tacit and waiting anxiously to be the first to pierce into the crown to obtain its edible jewels -the early days of her teaching him how to catch a baseball, how to tie his tie before they went off to Sunday schoolE He woke up from some forgotten but unsettling dream with a few thoughts of her trickling into his consciousness. His thoughts

were uninvited and he tried to shake them off like a wet dog. As much as they were the past, they materialized through distant, sealed corridors to haunt him. Anything could be remembered. One thought slapped into another in a restrained domino effect in the primitive human psyche. Human will was like meat skewered and cooked on the rotisserie.

He had only recently moved to Seoul. Desperate for work, English had delivered and cursed him once again; although this time he had become a clerk in a convenience store in the American military sector of Itaewon. He had a room in the back area. It was really an extra stock room. The owner had been so insistent in the interview that any employee he chose would need to live in the back area as an extra security precaution. Sang Huin didn't have the inordinate money required to obtain an apartment since in Korea deposits on apartments were like the purchases of condominiums and so, not wanting to live in a yongwam, he had agreed. So upon waking this night, he did not immediately recognize where he was. Waking in darkness and wondering where he was at, it was Gabriele who dominated over his thoughts of Jung-Jun.

Gabriele's mind was sticky in malaise. The child that she had had not grounded her. It's crying was without rhyme or reason. It spouted out vehement, hellish, and non-stoppable roars like a locomotive. The malaise was hot and sticky. It was as if all of his insatiable needs were like a vomit-smelling glue and it was in her hair, on her face, and in her clothes. She could not escape. Her intellectualism was being stunted to this exclusive task of being an infant's caretaker. "I will surely snap like a twig on a crisp winter morning if I do not leave this trailer," she thought to herself although she did not completely believe it since solitude did not have much of an effect on her. In this moment of weakness where she did feel the need to depart from all the responsibilities and the cacophony that was her son, she looked at him disconcertedly. He was no more family than the one she had come out of. "I am like this lone soul that is forever seeking, although not expecting, the one true friend that wants nothing from me other than to be with meE that person who will love me for just that." She further thought, "I shouldn't have had this accident of conceiving a childE this mistake of giving birth to one. However, here he is. I can't exactly return him." Sang Huin recollected where he was. He got up and opened his door. He saw the aisles of groceries. Living here, he thought, was like living in a storage area or a gigantic pantry. He sighed. He grabbed some milk and a package of Oreo cookies that he would have to pay for later. Then he sat on his bed and took notes on what he had been thinking concerning Gabriele.

But it was his sister who haunted him more. As teenagers, they would jog together at the high school track and in school she looked so beautiful wearing a skirt and her hair in a bun. She was experimenting with makeup at the age of 14. She never did like it, dabbing it timidly over her beautiful face. She didn't need it any more in her late twenties. With their mother she would continue to talk in that mysterious language of Korean (Hanguk-mal) that he did not understand. It was their secret language. It was their girlish society that he had been excluded from. As a family they functioned fine. However, he and his father never had connected personally when they were apart from the others. The man had always absconded from him. He had been aloof. Both of his parents were so aloof and so aged during the 14 months of Jun-Jung's disappearance and seemingly elderly at the discovery of the

skeletal remains and the ensuing trial.

Gabriele felt as if she were at an amusement park and that her own little world were nothing but a house of mirrors. Each subsequent mirror (despite her youth) cast an impression of more furrowed wrinkles on her forehead, seemed to expand the appearance of bags under her eyes, and made her hair look increasingly gray. Life was nothing but a bottle, a diaper, burping, feeding, and washing. The robotic movements he demanded her to do to take care of him went on perpetually. His crying went on perpetually.

Like with other late evenings that week, at 11:30 p.m. Saeng Seob and his seeing-eye dog took the 40-minute subway ride over to meet him, who would be waiting there in the terminal. Saeng Seob resented him some for quaking and thwarting the direction of his passionate river that most men felt, rode, and defined themselves from. Still, he kept the resentment mute. Being corrupted was a marginal thing when confronted daily with oceans of loneliness. Consciousness needed an object and he needed a consciousness that wasn't always disconcerted, diffident, and being thrust about like a lost, lonely man sucked up in the waves. When he finished dabbling in some work for his cousin at the university it was good to go someplace where he was wanted-someplace away from the campus where friendship gave him identity that an indifferent cousin cajoled or coerced into helping him failed to do. Sang Huin had the need to impress him with the material that he had written from the previous day or two. For Saeng Seob, listening had become a means of inveigling those who needed to feel that someone cared to hear them-a lifebuoy that he could embrace around himself when encountering the waves. Sang Huin was not frightened away by his dead orbs and so Saeng Seob let swimming, eating together, listening to the recitation, giving Sang Huin brief tutorials in Korean, and this peculiar sleeping together become the activities that bonded them. Each needed to chisel his name on the other one's brain in a city of ten million strangers. In a world of 6 billion people, each one needed a special lure, and for him it was listening intensely to others. He saw himself as a demure epicure with no published writing and nothing outwardly erudite to show for it. He in his reserve believed that in a world of nonsense spoken by barbarians little outside of human culture had a positive worth except for friendship, and if he needed to listen all night to someone he cared for, he would do just that.

In the back of the convenience store it was hard for him to critique Sang Huin's prose. After all, it was a foreign language being read to him but despite its blur to his mind it dazzled him in new vocabulary that he would look up in his dictionary later. The role of boyfriend to Saeng Seob was peculiar but the human gourmandized touch above all ambrosia. It was a special sensory input to the reticular formation of the brain. Touch gave a consciousness of relationship and belonging that were the highest goals of all such humans, hominids, and primates creeping their way to godhood. He hadn't felt particularly inclined to be homosexual and yet that had little meaning when one needed touch and friendship. Being blind made touch even more of an instrument of knowing something although all grabbed around in darkness.

The next morning was Sang Huin's bit of a weekend and so Saeng Seob feigned sickness in a phone call to his cousin. The cousin was indifferent and if he questioned the logic of calling in sick while being absent from the home that both of them shared, he did not mention it. So Saeng Seob and Sang Huin went out to experience the changing of

the guard ceremony at Toksugum Palace: the soldiers in their colorful ancient garb and round black brimmed hats, the horns, the drums and the changing staffs. At first they went to Lawson's convenience store and bought some kim bop (a Korean version of sushi), potato chips, and cola. They took the food to a stack of lumber that had been piled to the area opposite of the ticket counter and, for some minutes, plopped themselves on top of it and witnessed what their senses allotted. Later, they went to the amusement park, Lotte World. For each ride they stood in line over half an hour. Once, as they were going into the bathroom, Sang Huin kissed Seong Seob hurriedly before more men entered. Saeng Seob disliked the intrusive act that brought the acknowledgement of his aberration if not perversion into the light of day but the hot mouth was full of molecules and passing of molecules in a kiss was an intoxicating thing that took one away from the mundane aspects of reality. Further, he knew that the only wrong was in judging one Epicurean quest over that of another. It was an inconsequential thing.

Chapter Twelve

Gabriele smashed a corpulent ant into her second composition when neither flicking it away with her fingertips nor blowing it off her paper was successful. She was writing a second story to put her son to sleep after finding the first composition ridiculous. From this action the insect was nothing but a brownish green blotch on her new work. "Thai Tiger," she rewrote after scratching out the earlier paragraph that had the blotch in it, "waved goodbye to his mother and father from the window of the plane. He was both sad and happy because he was leaving one thing he loved and going to another. The plane went into the clouds and came down in Sri Lanka. Tamil Tiger was waiting for him. Tamil Tiger's mother took Tamil Tiger and Thai Tiger to her home in downtown Colombo. What is Colombo like, asked Thai Tiger from the backseat of the car where he sat with Tamil Tiger. It is full of wars, said Tamil Tiger. What are wars, asked Thai Tiger. Let's change the subject, retorted Tamil Tiger."

Gabriele paused from her writing and remembered her time in a Moslem country. For three months, when she was almost 6, she was in Turkey. She remembered that day when her mother suddenly came to Kansas for her. It had been nearly a year since she had seen her and she felt a mixture of fear, surprise, and happiness at the thought of having the fragmented pieces of her life reassembled. She did not know if this interruption of her adaptation to her aunt, uncle, and cousins had some permanency. She was already speculating that there was no permanency-only being banged in the buttocks with bumper cars or being run over by tanks. She was only told that they would be going on a trip to the other side of the world. The potential of seeing something outside of Kansas made her very happy. Like any child, the discovery of flight was a marvel and she stared out of the window as much as she could. It was a subject of curiosity that the clouds she had always looked up to (a good many in the shape of the philosopher, Heraclitus) had really been nothing but footstools with wooly sheepskins on them all along. It was quite a surprise and shook her hypothesis that her mother was mistaken in saying that there wasn't a Santa Claus. She had formulated this hypothesis erroneously by the evidence of some irregular clouds that seemed as if they were Santa's frothy sugar castles.

In Istanbul she became reacquainted with her father again. Like in olden times when she was four, he began to take her on trips to the

beach to pick up seashells or shop for groceries. Once they were shopping for some vegetables in a tight labyrinth of a crowded and dusty outdoor market when suddenly they heard the sound of that Moslem call to worship (a hybrid sound like of an instrument and a human voice) but the call was at the irregular time of 3:00 on a Friday afternoon. Pandemonium was in the streets, but everyone was going in the same direction so actually Istanbul was less helter-skelter than usual. Pushed with the herds, she and her father walked 5 blocks to an ornate mosque. She wanted to know what was "going on" so her father put her on his shoulders and told her that a special Turkish custom of a beheading was to begin shortly. "Beheading?" she asked. "Yes," he said with a wry and troubled smile. "To be without a head like the headless horseman although I suppose a less animated one." For a moment she was so pleased and excited that she would witness such a splendor until she saw a man with a bag over his face dragged up against his will onto the marble stairs leading to the temple and a third man with a huge scythe in his hands. A second later she witnessed the burly third man swing, with all his round, bulging, muscular might in one fail swoop and the head part from the shoulders which the second man placed in a basket. There was surprisingly little blood at first. Then the arteries disgorged their content while the body fidgeted a few times on the holy marble.

She suddenly knew that adults were monsters and that they ran amuck in the world inimical to human decency. In deep pain of one fragmented and grieving for this man and the human race, she nonetheless controlled her urge to cry. She assessed her situation. If indeed she were in a land of adult monsters, outwardly she had to acclimate to their mores and yet do the best she could, while growing up, to refrain from becoming a monster herself. If one couldn't withdraw from a situation, she felt more than thought, a girl must play the game. If she were to leak out her pain by blubbering, they would hate her and she would be perceived as foolish and weak. Crying would never help. It would only get her into trouble. She asked herself how best to achieve this ostensible aim and she told herself that she should be inquisitive. She calmly asked why the beheading had occurred, the reason for the timing of the occurrence, the exact nature of the crime, if beheadings were permitted in America, and the final resting place for a 2 part individual. The questions made her father, a USAF officer for NATO, and her mother, a USAF soldier's housewife, so happy. The next day as her mother was with curlers in her hair and her head in tact and under the dryer at the beauty parlor, the young mother pointed out her daughter and boasted about all the questions she had posed regarding the beheading the previous night. They boasted about her often; however, two more months passed and the clarity of the ephemeral nature of the reunion with her parents became clear. After her summer holiday was over and their honeymoon reunion with their child had ended, Gabriele was sent back all alone in a jet to New York City and then a second connecting flight that would lead her back to her aunt in Kansas.

Chapter Thirteen

It is 2008 and he, sometimes Adagio and sometimes Nathaniel or various nicknames, still doesn't even have a consistent label for himself. Not even a consistent name has stuck on him all these 18 years; and the half hour that he has sat in the library there is that same mental numbness of all other previous half hours. It is numbness as empty as a pit in the mouth from an extracted tooth. He knows that

most men wander around the world untouched, unknown, not touching, and not known or knowing. He knows that such men use girlfriends to prop themselves up in order to feel fortified outwardly in 6 billion mostly "nobodies" within a universe of continual flux. He knows the selfish jaundice of both men and women in a relationship and how with any length of time it inflicts the relationship with the disease that is an extension of the two. He has been there and done that. He had one steady girlfriend but the relationship was hard to maintain when swirling colorful treats in many edible shapes, smells, and voices of varying feminine nectar fell through the orifices of his senses. It does not bother him to be no one special. It does not bother him to be the same as "regular guys" although most of them have consistent names, nicknames, or aliases they do not cower from. They make up the masses; and the masses are a brute force to which he is one of the billions. When a thing or a way of being exists in large numbers, he supposes, it is bound to be right. At a large table in front of an open book, with fingertips he grazes an area of skin above his upper lip. The facial stubble, when he rubs it, gives him extra reinforcement in his vain embellishment of masculinity. It is a vain reinforcement that the litter of pornography he perused like a philomath in his car a few minutes before entering the library did not do. Even the insouciance that he artificially concocted there with the puff of a cigarette while waiting for the rain to soften enough to drive did not make him more conscious of his male vigor than a brief feel of facial stubble. There is little beyond sexual energy to define him. No fields, no disciplines, have awakened an internal voice. Not yet, not ever, he thinks. He is a man without a voice and such a man is most conscious of the primordial emotions of hating those who bar his pleasure and love toward those who facilitate it. Adagio-it was a somewhat forgotten word, which once popped into his head for the creation of an email address. The word has inadvertently been a perfect epitome of his slow mental activity for books. Slow in that respect, academics with their words and numbers in infinity have stood out like the awkward anachronisms of hieroglyphs chiseled into stone. It would seem ironic that someone who perceives books to be as lifeless as stones should be in a library watching the pages of a book occasionally turn under the draft of the ceiling fan when not under the directive of his own will. The book is of 20th century American art and contains a few examples of his mother's work. Only pleasures from pictures have had some vague calling or tugging; but then it has been pictures that have composed so much of his existence.

He had detoured from the interstate and came into the town to buy a sandwich and cola at a convenience store, which fostered the purchase of the newest issues of Playboy and Hustler as well. He is downtown because the heavy diluting of rain in this small town necessitated him to pull over to the side of the road and park his car. He is in the library because it was a two-block run from where he parked his car. The continual pounding of rain caused him to have to go to the bathroom sooner than what he would have done otherwise, for he is in all respects a follower of nature's suggestions. The bathroom was his impetus for entering the library. In the process of staring up at the fan to focus a second of hate toward it he sees a woman straightening her body after rising off the seat. She is at a table around 50 feet from that of his own. Her table is near a small wall of books. He regrets that he has not seen her legs slide on the shiny wood of the chair or her thighs rising up to him although imagined action can be continually repeated and he continually repeats it. Bound in black stockings, the legs go to the front desk where some hands scan titles of her videos.

"It seems nobody checks out books any longer. We've had to restrict the kids use of the internet upstairs. They'll do nothing but chat the whole day if nobody catches them and then before they leave they check out videos to take back home."

"Well, guess I should feel honored to be thought of as a kid when I'm nearly 42. I am really in a hurry so could you pleaseE "

"All right."

For a minute if not longer there is a momentary lapse in the present before he becomes conscious of it again. Fueled on adrenalin and hunger, he finds himself walking behind her in the rain. He imagines himself catching up and offering his umbrella to her but she has one of her own and so he timidly tracks her from a distance. He imagines her dropping the keys to her car but the fates also do not allow him this prop. He sees her get in but imagines her already seated with the door shut but unable to start the car. This does not happen either. He is unable to monitor himself. Like a child he distances himself from his actions. He is feeling the movements of someone else's body. Will has been frozen in time. There is a cold frozen constancy in his consciousness of the present moment. He finds himself knocking on the window. She rolls it down. He does not know what to say. She hasn't dropped one of her videos in the rain. He is as if naked and without a gift or prop with which to make a confidence. He stares at her mature beauty.

"Yes?" she asks.

"Looks like the air in one of your tires is low-this one on the driver's side."

"Oh. That shouldn't be the case. I filled them up yesterday. Do you..." She hesitates. "Do you think I need to come out and look?" Her words are circumspect. They are of one who does not trust his intentions. If only she could have said this with confidence, he thinks. He means that then he could have gotten the opportunity to have her outside. He could have pushed her under the car and accosted her with his body.

"No, maybe you'll get back home okay. I think you will. I just noticed it looked down a little."

She smiles. "Maybe because I am sitting here. Don't you think so? - Or maybe not." Her tone reflects more confidence in him and she treats his ideas with deference. She defers all mechanical judgments to men whom she supposes to have such genetic predispositions.

"It's low," he says, "but I think you'll get back fine. In the morning you can put air in it."

"Thanks so much. Okay." She pushes the button to roll up the window. He wants to stop its progression. He wants to put his hands in what is left of the closing hole and break out the window. He wants to shove himself on top of her, slap her down onto the passenger seat, and have his pleasure. As strong as that urge is, he is too socialized and can't break in. He retreats to his car. He subconsciously pushes in the lever of his umbrella and carries it, compacted, within his hands

despite being drenched by rain. He feels the tightening of his sinuses. He is getting ill but he isn't aware of this. He passes a music store. He notices that his shoestring, to the left, is dragging onto the wet pavement like broken strings of a guitar. Passing an alley he envisions her there to be grasped like a guitar's case; yanking the instrument from its case; and letting his tongue strum. He feels incontinent and he notices his erection. He imagines her without ablution, naked to smell, touch, sight, and taste. He gets into his car, ties his shoe, pulls a handkerchief out of the glove compartment, and wipes the sweat and rain from his forehead and face. For a moment he rests his aching forehead against the rim of the steering wheel.

Chapter Fourteen

(1989: Houston)

Back from Allen Parkway, Gabriele pulled into the driveway of the house she and Betty rented. She drove beside three black girls at an adjacent property who were tilting back a large stone. As Gabriele opened her car door, she wondered what was underneath that had gotten their attention. It had to be a salamander, a gecko, or a swarm of large fire ants. A two-part skeleton of a midget in a partially underground ossuary wasn't in the realm of possibility; but whatever existed there, it caused their squeamish giggling. She felt a little squeamish, herself, at the thought of children grotesquely disgorging into her senses. What made it worse was the fact that they were there doing this when she was in such a need of finally reaching her home-her sanctuary. She thought about the Turk that had been decapitated twenty-three years earlier, although it seemed only days ago. Back then she had been as young as the youngest of the three girls whom she was now looking at.

She remembered how one of those bedeviled executioners let the head roll out of the bag, took it by the hair, and displayed it to the crowd before returning it to its basket—a basket that looked to the very young Gabriele as if it should be used for apples. Even so long ago she tacitly condemned the adult monsters that enjoyed the macabre and applauded such savagery in the name of justice. Still her monstrous father, her teacher, had inadvertently led her into that large life-changing enlightenment that was always arrived at from a corridor through the darkest abyss. Partially from being pushed along with the crowd and partially from human curiosity, he had shown her the loss of innocence through the realization that society, that lovely refinement of conveniences and kind neighboring policemen, was a horror. Even when so young, she intuitively guessed that Turkey was just an outward display of a refined and obscure savagery that had to be in all adult institutions regardless of what they were or the nations they were in. She didn't exactly think it but she felt it all the same. With tears that she could never shed and by grief, full empathy, and comradeship for this unknown individual, she had walked into the full darkness of enlightenment. The sentiments for the slain man would remain dormant and mute in her thoughts all the rest of her life but the enlightenment, the darkness, would be more active in its behavioral influence.

Twenty-three years ago she imagined all children as the good and the innocent as she believed herself to be back then. That was before she went to school and learned what egocentric sadists they really were. For them, the masses, enjoyed the ruthlessness of the name callers whose

arrows and vitriol of "Four eyes! Four eyes!" and "Piggy! Piggy!" toward two of her classmates was inexorable. How deeply ingrained was the hunter and the competitor in every child. She could see it in the sports they played together. She could see it in the spelling bees. She could see it in the name-calling, which was an aversion toward anybody who was different. Differences might be deleterious to the concept of the tribe. It was the corollary of the need to survive that existed atavistically and came about instinctually as a response passed on from the youngest of the earliest Homo sapiens. It was they who, as sexually reproductive adults, passed on the knowledge of their inner children. Gabriele was so fortified that attempts at name-calling directed toward her personally did not even scathe her. But when the name callers and all their tacit accomplices shot their arrows and threw buckets of vitriol at the fat girl and the girl with glasses, her wrath was also implacable. She would beat up the worst of these tiny savages. Innocent expressions and gauche interactions of ostensibly pure children belied what the offspring of these adult monsters were really like; and as if misogyny and mis-himony were not enough, such incidents caused both mis-girlony and mis-boyany. Normally such an abnormality of four misses would constitute the misanthropy of serial or spree killers but Gabriele did not feel much misanthropy.

Her ideas, she knew, were as rare as a Tennessee Coneflower or a Black Outhouse Hollyhock-both of which bordered on extinction. They were as ineffable as the very universe she resided in and as pessimistic as Hobbes' social contract theory (although to her who often liked dressing up in black, black was not pessimistic being the color of intrigue and enlightenment). She believed that Hobbes was somewhat wrong in thinking that humans suppressed their own savagery through the common necessity of not wanting to be murdered in their beds. The contract wasn't as simple as that alone. The adult Gabriele thought that through society small doses of competitive cunning could be exuded in basic business competition and politics for the whole duration of one's long life. The common workers left out of both, if given a high enough salary, would not be anarchists or proletariat revolutionaries if they had enough money to go to action packed movies or sports stadiums, buy whores once in a while, or other benign conduits of savagery. In short, she believed that society came about for the purpose of giving its members a long lifetime of small doses of savagery instead of a few episodes of gluttonous devouring that could cause one to be murdered rather easily. She wasn't sure of the specifics. She hadn't thought it worthy of her time to think them out in an obscure philosophical treatise. Besides, figuring out why the dog bit the bone wouldn't stop the biting.

"What are you doing, girls?" Gabriele smiled at them and walked toward the stone.

"Wer' gonna killem, Lady," said the eldest girl.

"What per se are you hoping to rob of a life?"

"Lady'speakin' Shakespeare," said the eldest.

"Wer' gonna open these lizzardheads like coconuts and pull out the brains and give'em to you, Lady, so that you can have breakfast," elucidated the second one.

They laughed and Gabriele smiled widely, fully amused by their non-feminine creative play. "My ladies, methinks thou art so nice, but

unfortunately I've already had breakfast."

"Lady'speakin Shakespeare again," said the first one.

"Oh, that Lady," scowled the second one playfully.

"Yeah, it's the Shakespeare language," continued the first, "But I'm good at figerin'out Morse code so I can do this. There's more English in Shakespeare than in Morse code. She's meanin' she already had breakfast but I don't think that matters none. It ain't an issue."

"Yeah-ain't anissue-- any o'that," mimicked the second one.

"You can put it in your 'frigerator," said the oldest

"Pootit in your 'frigerator" said the third and smallest of the girls. The two eldest girls laughed at her intrusion into the conversation. Everybody began to laugh including Gabriele.

"No," Gabriele said, "The refrigerator is full." She was quickly becoming serious. She saw sharp little stones in the hands of the eldest one. Even a child was a brutal force or, at any rate, immolated in play the brutality of life on the planet. She sighed and took away their instruments of war. She wanted to scold them but there was no way to scold all humanity of the past, present, and future. Only a crazed individual would not be cognizant of their limitations.

"Damned if she done takenway the lizzardknife," said the second one in disbelief. To the luck of all concerned Gabriele didn't hear them and wasn't even aware that one of them tried to spit at her from behind as she was walking toward the house. She climbed up the stairs to where she and Betty were living.

She hoped that Betty would not be there. She needed some time alone to be in that harmony within and to probe the endless fathoms of her probity and intelligence without the intrusions of the outside world. Even in childhood, Gabriele thought, she had projected an aloof quality of a stereotypical German. A sotto voce current in her brain called "conscience" when in fact it was nothing but a less dominant or minority opinion that was disgruntled at being such chastised her for her "bitchiness" (an indifference that both barked and bit). Still, she told herself, it did not matter. How was a self an extension of others? When she was born did she bring them into existence, and when she died would the human race cease to exist? People came and went as they should and friendship was merely for those of feeble ideas needing to be reinforced by the herd. For her whose ideas were such steady companions and was real within herself without needing to be reflected in her associations with others what need had she of the Betties of the world. She had never met a German whose example confuted the stereotype. She remembered the few times that her father took her to a beach along the East Coast and the myriad times when he took her to the beaches in Turkey. She always wandered to one side of the beach, culling certain miscellaneous seashells to examine as her father sojourned away from her with pensive and hard expressions, sunk in his own mind. The expressions told her that he savored the idea of being alone in his own cold, watery depth. Despite the fact that he had taken her to the execution, she loved him most as far as people were concerned.

She turned her key in the doorknob and opened her part of the

house. She thought, "The human mind when opened up has, at its crypt, humanity." Particularly for herself she loathed the idea of being a social creature. She often thought of her roommate each day of each semester, the homeless grass chewing Filipino whom a woman at the Laundromat nicknamed the botanist, professors, her family, and acquaintances: they all made up her reality. She did forget about Betty during vacations and she forgot about her aunt, uncle, and cousins except during the vacations but she couldn't quite escape thinking about them altogether. Overall, she didn't have much sentiment toward anyone, and they could easily be shaken and faded from her memory once she was away.

Betty was usually an early riser, but not hearing any noise in the kitchen or living room, Gabriele at first assumed she was sleeping. She checked all the rooms but they were empty except in sound, where a small television remained turned on. A newscaster was discussing the economic powers of the East with reference to the new economic experiments in the Soviet Union and China. "The whole f-- world is West," thought Gabriele. She felt that democracy was as much an experiment as communism: an experiment on how free to be greedy things could get without entirely destroying the ecology that was the base of it all whereas the original communism of Trotsky was an experiment on how equal life could get and still be bearable in its world of frightened and impoverished clones. It all missed the mark as far as she was concerned. If each and every person was not granted food, shelter, and a profession by which to feel worthy (if indeed there were worthy professions, a question that she posed to herself) all of these socioeconomic systems were nothing to her but debauchery. She contemplated the fate of the homeless Filipino: wasn't she quite the hypocrite to say that the world was wretched to not offer him assistance that would pull him from the streets and away from feeling disoriented and hearing voices in his own head when she didn't care to bring him into her apartment. Still, she didn't want him any more than she would want a tick, a cockroach, or a bedbug. If he wanted to come into her apartment and be Betty's lover, after the last bag was put into her car, that was another thing altogether.

The living room had the smell of light and stagnant smoke of Betty's cigars. Betty, she thought, must have recently gone to another final examination. It was best that way. With her gone Gabriele would not have to coerce some giggling and mild sighs as she packed her racket ball paddle with other items. There would be pleasant but vague and generalized memories of their racket ball entertainment together but, to be sociable, she would have to affect some maudlin sentiments of loss. She would need to feign loss particularly about them living together as if it had made them conjoined spiritually although obviously not Siamese twins. She would have to use the width of her arms to symbolize an embrace (a real embrace would have been impossible when a sexual embrace with a man was bad enough). She quickly entered the bathroom to take a shower that might wash away any odor of the man she had slept with; packed more of her things; saluted the new communism in her heart; snickered inside at the thought that Japan had out-capitalized the West the way it tried to out-imperialize the imperialists; turned off the television, and left with the remaining two boxes. She swerved off the drive, veering somewhat near the girls in her eagerness to leave.

"What's wrong with you, woman?" yelled the eldest one.

"What's wrong with you, nigga" yelled the little black girl full of energy. The girl did not know the full pejorative nature of the word

nor the fact that Gabriele, being white, could not be a Negro unless one were to label her such for the black clothing she often wore. The other two stood with legs arched and bulging hominid-like--the eldest with right arm erect and out from her body and the hand half-clenched into a fist. Gabriele saw this from the mirror. She hadn't driven that close to the girls so she thought their reaction was unjustified. The fact that she thought they looked like hominoids had nothing to do with their skin color nor their nonstandard use of language but her own aversion toward children and adults based upon the sensitivities she had as a young child and the fact that these girls were pelting the top of her car with clods. She returned to the drive. "Hey!" she yelled from the window. "Your mother's insurance is gonna pay for any damage. You are lucky that I'm not opening my car door because if I were to get you I would -" she had to stop herself. Whatever she said under these circumstances could only put violence and hatred into their callow minds, exacerbating their nature as hers, so prone to its aggressive flares. She could only make it worse than what it would be if these children were merely left to glower and ponder in silence as she was now doing. And yet there was little delectation in self-restraint. A fully sociable being was one who liked to provoke responses positive or negative like billiard balls banging against each other. One felt alive based upon the vibrations gained from being knocked around; and as eremitic and misanthropic as she was, Gabriele was a girl who liked her fun. She saw the clods of dirt in their hands and the dirt on the windshield. She slowly got out of the door, which caused them to back away a few steps. She didn't look at them but instead walked around her car. Seeing that no damage had occurred, she then returned to the driver's seat. She decided to leave the matter alone so she spit a cannon ball of chewing tobacco toward the girls and ventured onward. The cannon ball was the penalty phase. After all, she did not want them to think that they could pelt motorists with impunity. Still she imagined the sullied tribulation that she must have caused the younger one. She could feel the devastating humiliation that perhaps they all felt at a wad of snuff coming at them like a projectile. She hoped that they would not interpret it as racial hatred. She felt the horror behind what she had done and yet there was nothing she could do. If she were to stop the car and return to them to apologize they would probably pelt her and the car both with stones. She disliked egocentric children. She even disliked the refugee children whom she worked with part-time until two days ago although she camouflaged it in professionalism. She knew that if only human beings were able to pierce their protective bubbles they would find that one genuine love within, that innate tender need to be liked, cared about, and have one's human worth confirmed and an identification of this sentiment in other sentient beings. Still the world was what it was and she told herself that if she were to return she would be stoned or clodded based upon their whims.

In this odd corner behind the skyscrapers and away from the Houston Symphony, the Meneil Collection with its engravings of Aten and Ptah, the Rothko Chapel, the Astrodome, the Miller Theatre in Herman Park, the University of St. Thomas, the University of Houston, and her Rice University, nothing touched her sense of imagination so much as the ghettos strewn around them. She admired the simple life burrowed away from the congested avarice of the city's center. She felt compassion for the poorest of the poor who had to be in bleak circumstances but she could not do anything in her two years in Houston but take photographs of the infamy of the free enterprise system and continue with her job working with refugees. She didn't do all that much. She sat with the

Ugandans and the Kenyans on the porches of refugee houses and with them looked onto the skyscrapers at the approach of dusk. Driving in her car, she could remember the Vietnamese families clogging the sinks of the refugee houses with rice; the sight and smell of the blood of rotting vegetables in the refrigerators of those houses; the fire ants that stung her around the refugee houses; mowing the yards when she couldn't budge the refugees to do it; the disputes over whose food was in the refrigerators or how much clothing she was supposed to supply them with, and how the Ugandans tended to accumulate trash without ever emptying it. She remembered Senor Sanchez. Making a detour back into the city from the interstate, she decided to go to the refugee houses and say "goodbye" even though a couple days ago she had chosen not to tell the refugees that she was leaving in her usual obdurate opposition to sentiment. She could imagine herself telling Senor Sanchez about her immediate departure and him saying, "Heaven forbid, you are really leaving us now that you have a Master's in psychology from a great university?." She would say, "Yes, I always leave when I get Master's degrees. This one from a great university equalizes a not so great one in criminology at Emporia University." "Do you have two Master's degrees?" "Yes," she would say, "I collect them." "What will you do with your knowledge?" he would ask. "Be a better person for it and that is all. I'll sit on my butt in the future." "Oh, very good," he would say. "Maybe you can put Fidel Castro on your lap while you sit and get him to purr like a kitten." "Oh, what an excellent idea," she would say.

Senor Sanchez came from Havana. On that first day of their meeting she gave him clothes from the Welcome Center, which he took. She put food in the refrigerator and yet he would rarely eat it. "Necesito volver a Miami, orita! Esta lugar"-and there he rambled off in passionate Cuban speed which she did not understand. They sat on the porch to the Welcome Center. Gabriele handed him a pen and paper but his calligraphy was not legible. "Orita? Que significa "orita?" she asked. He snapped his fingers fiercely and then rambled incommunicably. Her eyes became stiff and large in her detest of his irascibility. Sanchez would always whistle for her attention. Then he would laugh at her hating eyes; whistle again; look up in the air, and flap his arms in an attempt to have her get him something. Partial or complete hunger strikes, she told him in Spanish would not hasten his trip back to Miami but only make his stay intolerable for everyone.

"But you buy shit for us to eat!" he stormed one time.

"I'd have trouble getting it down too," she admitted. "Suit yourself. If you die defiantly you will be my personal hero but the carcass will stay in Houston. We don't ship carcasses to Miami," she said. He was her personal favorite.

The Cubans told her one time that the U.S. was responsible for putting Fidel Castro into power since the Cuban masses needed to support any man whose rhetoric condemned American investments and the American control of their economy; and her response was, "Well, which is it-if you hate the guy so much it seems ridiculous to use such an argument even though it does have some truth. I know if I were to engage him he would be a pussycat purring on my lap and you guys could make any political cartoon on him you pleased." The Africans once said that the military cost of their civil wars were the result of Western colonial boundaries fusing incompatible tribes into nations, keeping Africa from being able to feed herself; and her response was, "Well, which is it--

If you hate the idea of imperialism why are we speaking in English now; and why is your government trying to lure in foreign investment?" When the older Vietnamese individuals mentioned the war she listened to their stories intensely through a rough translation. She listened to life's horror and the ensuing trauma. That was all she could do. The past and the future did not exist but traumas of the past went on perpetually. Once she had to translate Thuc's "New House Rules for Immigrants" to the Latinos as they sat before her on metal seats. They were lectured that the food given to them should be put in boxes and set in the refrigerators so that they would know that the food was being distributed equally and without a cause for bickering. Thuc nodded her Vietnamese face at Gabriele's ostensible translations when really Gabriele was only giving a synopsis of what was being said with commentary disparaging of the YMCA treatment of its refugees and a system that was generally f--

There might have been poetic significance in having done this mundane job: having taken the refugee children to the zoo with seventy year old Jesus and the fifty year old Sanchez; having said the names of the animals in English and the girls giving the Vietnamese equivalent; having taken them to the social security office to get them cards with designated numbers; having taken the Cambodian boy into the clothes room of the Welcome Center to try on pants of various sizes but when he would not put them on and take them off with an adult sense of speed, having performed the unzipping and zipping herself; having taken the little Cuban girl to the Vietnamese doctor when she had a fever although the doctor only gave Gabriele the suggestion of Gatorade and crackers; and having often heard the little Laotian girl imitating Gabriele's growls through the tattered screen of a window although Gabriele's growls toward the girl were real ones. Still, all in all, she thought in the car, it had been a waste of time to have prostituted herself to such an agency. She liked these refugees for various reasons but one less altruistic reason was that she didn't have any other people whom she liked and thus she needed to like them. She chastised her maudlin disposition and returned to the interstate.

Chapter Fifteen

After washing her wounds and cursing the cat, she again picked it up by the neck. But this time she threw it outside into a light surface of snow that had fallen an hour earlier. Frothy top layers sometimes drifted about like desert sands in the occasional strong gusts. They went here and there as directionless as her mind that, in one respect, had become detached from traditional roles and responsibilities, and in another had sunk into the mire of motherhood. Inside closed doors, she was resistant against the cat's cries. Empathy, she told herself, was not in her vocabulary. But when the cat, named Mouse, could no longer be heard, she stood outside on the steps and called for it until it at last appeared from under the trailer. She warmed a bottle in one large pan and a bit of milk for the cat in a saucepan. She had never warmed milk for the cat before; but she decided that if she was doing it for one she might as well do it for the other particularly with the advent of the furriest one being subjected to the cold. When both animals were fed she watched the television but its senseless action and its fictitious and ludicrous sentimentalism were putting her into a numb and depressed apathy. It was deflating her of all energy to the point where she couldn't follow the characters or plot since the figures were now helter-skelter in the meaninglessness that was rife in her own mind.

To escape a stagnating and a somewhat discombobulating loss of herself, she grabbed her sketchbook and drew the exact likeness of her child with little time and effort. The book, like a photograph album, was filled with her sketches in chronological order: stoic and erect poses of her parents based more on childhood memories than some brief reunions when she was a teen-ager; a 13 year old friend in her bicycle club; the faces of drunken high school classmates when she was bar-hopping and ignoring most mandates of her aunt and uncle; some of a trip to Germany with her aunt; college friends; and yet some of unknown Antarctica, a dreamy non-asthmatic land of ice mountains and valleys. In such a place dreamed about and sketched from her asthmatic youth onward neither rivers of flowing pollutants nor mountainous landfills existed. Within its solitary and pristine nature, there would be no tacit or overt pressures to get a job and become someone. In Antarctica an exceptionally aware person would not have to go through the degradation of being compelled to reinforce the rules and procedures of a business or organization in order to have the income derived from a job. No professional, entrepreneurial, or common slaves would exist here.

In this place, which she fabricated as being no less habitable than Greenland, there would at least be a small ecosystem of fish and seaweed for food, and societies of walruses, seals, and penguins which she could watch and record their social interaction. Such a record would be exclusively for the one-person audience of Gabriele. That being the case, the purpose of an article to which author and reader were one person without the prospect of extending further seemed a futile waste of time; and yet if meaning in a record of the habits of species could only be gained by sharing this information with others or if the whole essence of meaning existed in edifying others and by shared experiences this would be the source of another research paper which she would conduct in Antarctica.

Daydreams gave movement and stimulation to housewives standing in line at supermarkets and provided an escape for mothers of infants who sat alone as inert and purposeless as rocks until becoming instruments to be used by their babies. To find the source of his discomfort and ease it was in a child's mind a woman's only role; and this particular one also felt that his mother could also be manipulated by slight smiles and the temporary end of tantrums. And in a sense she was manipulated to toss him in the air, albeit only in the physical gesture itself for only fools read expressions of love in these smiles and the cessation of screams. Gabriele accommodated him beyond what was necessary for his welfare only because of the horrendous nature of his cries if she didn't do so. Throughout these months of care giving she did not have any other world beyond the child. She tried to keep herself from being flattened by the perfunctory role of bathing, feeding him, and changing his diapers by telling herself that motherhood would pull her into the swathes of human experience and its interconnectedness, that it would be a novel learning experience on coexistence, that it might be a means of duplicating the ideas of respected child development theorists so as to corroborate or discredit them, and that he could be the specimen of an experiment on how the instincts and proclivities of a male child might be altered into more ethical variations although she wasn't quite able to isolate the exact nature of the experiment and its parameters. But really these ideas did little to counter this pauper's version of ennui that fogged over her perceptions. What sustained her were her daydreams

and art. Once she drew a surreal image of her baby in a business suit with an attaché case in his hand. It was a partially adult caricature of a being standing proudly alone on an ice mountain. She drew its contumely as master of itself in all of its avarice, ability to facilitate its own pleasures. It was a fragmented child glued back together as an enraged whole and she accentuated this by drawing myriad cracks within its porcelain skin. . When she finished the sketch she knew that charcoal was an ineffective tool for the ideas and the color that rushed inside of her. Still, the sketchbook was compact as an album, and a bit of paper and charcoal were affordable.

Closing the sketchbook on a mental catharsis, she did pushups and situps beside her director's chair and then aerobics to the televised instructors who glowed in a little box in front of her. It all helped to extract her from malaise. She really needed the physical exertion of games like racket ball, and in a very self-centered way Betty began to permeate her thoughts. The idea of her friendship became more palatable to reminisce over. Then she fell asleep with the ideas of Antarctica in her mind. When she woke, her thoughts were disconcerted and there was a forlorn neediness sticky as the baby's vomit. She needed a break from solitude and an exit away from the obligations of motherhood that tyrannized over her. For the first time in her months of doing this she needed an adult presence in her life and she yearned for the appearance of this Rita/Lily person who lived somewhat nearby and was adult in the sense that she could be spoken to. Lily (she was mostly that and preferred this label although she was really Rita) was supposed to have come earlier and Gabriele wondered where this Rita/Lily person was. She heard the baby crying. Maybe too much light in the trailer was irritating his eyes. A silver light from the glare of the snow with its power to make objects (even the baby) seem blindingly unreal was bleeding throughout the whole trailer. It captivated her and made her think that the baby and its needs were nothing short of a dream. She stared out of the window to confirm that an outside world did indeed exist. She saw a neighbor's car pull out of a rocky driveway and one young boy unsuccessfully trying to pull his brother on a sled in the superficial layer of snow and left over hail. Too many weeds were blocking their progress. Too many diapers were blocking her own.

She packed some baby food and disposable diapers in a bag. Imitating the witch's dogma of the sanctity of the earth, for a few months after Nathaniel's birth she had been adamant that she wouldn't use disposable diapers even though she had yearned for their ease. Back then she saw mothers with money and impunity buying boxes of them at the supermarket and she loathed these vile mothers who degraded the environment. Once, however, when she had a migraine headache while experiencing some asthma problems and he was suffering from diarrhea she had trudged over to the store with him in her arms and bought a box of diapers. From that point forward it became part of her habits. To not do so now would only inconvenience her. Not even if thousands of mothers went back to cloth diapers and their plastic over-panty counterparts would such thoughtfulness save the environment. It would merely postpone the inevitable. A slight postponement could not be achieved by one alone and, even if it could, she didn't see that it would merit her discomfort.

Giving up on the idea of Rita coming to her home, she fixed a tuna sandwich for herself and ate. Then she undressed the two of them; and they sank into a soothing bubble bath. Gabriele made soap castles for her son, and smacked top stories off of them, which caused his eyes to

become wider with curiosity and his mouth to become circular in the wonder of all things new. She slowly sang a choral movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, emphasizing the accent of each German vowel and syllable exaggeratedly. She internally debated the merit of giving her child mendacities as she told him German nursery rhymes and lightly washed his small body. She supposed that the sparked imagination that could deliver him from being a somber, adult zombie, alive only in insatiable hungers, was important enough that she didn't have to think of such lies as bad. Besides, if reality and goodness were perceived differently by each individual, she didn't want to rush toward an indictment even if she would be a most willing judge in rendering a verdict in the Gabriele-made indictment of the past 7000 to 10,000 years of civilization.

Drying herself and the baby in front of the window she put her fingers into the crevices of the plastic blind. She pressed down on one rectangular piece of this thing called a blind and wondered what piece, if any, her blind life had in this thing called society. She looked at the outside world. From the relatively quiet trailer park, it was hard to imagine how much all the inhabitants of Ithaca spun around in life. As futile as it was to spin, she thought, humans were not meant for thought. They were creatures meant to expend energy and to overtake their world. Maybe this was needed for the evolution of a higher species than man to exist on the planet. Sexual reproduction was not thought but illusion and frenzy, which brought forth offspring. It was overtaking women. A human (women included although she found them a bit more repulsive than the average human) was mostly all energy conquering the planet, making it subordinate to human will. If care was not given toward the environment and humans overtook the planet too forcefully, the world would expunge them from the list of species. Any caretaker of a child needed to spin from time to time too and Gabriele needed to do this to fight off sensory deprivation. She pulled up the blind. Naked, she was in a pillar of light the way the so-called prophet, Joseph Smith had been-only, being atheist, her pillar was only silver. She knew that a personification of the sun was absurd, as was all religion, which she had dabbled in knowing about years earlier; and yet she did not want to believe that this was all there was. Television, movies, billboards, and music all recorded that the rich, and happy people who played in this survival of the fittest game so successfully did so by following their desires with confidence and unapologetic insouciance. These most capable people monopolized over the world's resources leaving the vast majority of humans destitute, hopeless, burdened by hard labor for sustenance, and in some cases famished. They chased around like mad men trying to buy up the planet. Some of the mad men did so while repudiating their own mortality. Others acknowledged their mortality and so they told themselves they would gormandize while the feast was on the table. There had to be more than this.

She dressed him and herself warmly and when she was outside she realized that she had overdone it. The temperature was already above freezing and the traces of snow were evaporating tracelessly, later to be sucked up into a Heraclitus shaped cloud. The odd weather, which was becoming less odd annually, concerned her especially after the United Nations report that the world temperature would rise two degrees over the next three decades. She knew, however, that there wasn't "a damned thing" she could do about it. She supposed that she might be able to stand in front of Cornell University with placards advocating that human beings go back to being the hunters and gatherers from whence they came. She could stand there like a madwoman denouncing the past 7000-10,000

years. Nothing would come out of it but 12 hours of sitting in a jailhouse and then paying a fine.

After waiting over forty minutes for the rare and irregularly timed buses to come by within this small city, she got on a bus with her baby pouched onto her back. A seat near a young man with a plain face who was thumping his foot to the music of his portable radio was the only one left. She took it. She was grateful to have it. Having to balance herself and a baby to the movements of a bus was something she had mastered like a sport but it wasn't a preferable hobby. Adagio liked the bounces but she doubted that he would care to bounce off of a window. After the door of the bus was shut and the vehicle was beginning to roll without any sudden speed it was rapped by a hand. The driver stopped the bus and folded the door again. A woman around 20 years old entered. She smiled and greeted Gabriele with diffident childishness after shouting her name triumphantly to the back of the bus and by a wave of her hand. Then as the vehicle picked up speed her expressions became more diffident and she stumbled to the back of the bus. "What do I do?" she said. "I don't see anywhere to sit."

"You'll have to stand," said Gabriele.

"What do I do?"

"Hold onto the railing," she scoffed.

Lily grabbed it and began to dangle there like a leaf on a tree. "I guess you forgot me," she said timidly.

"No, you said that you would come in the morning. I thought maybe you had decided against coming." Her expressions were hard. It wasn't her idea to get this Rita/Lily person to come with her but she didn't own the services so she couldn't tell her to not come. "Really, you know, it isn't for everyone, Lily"

"Rita," she said.

Gabriele could never empirically detect the existence of a second personality that the girl purportedly had, and as such she could not believe that one personality came out in manic stages and the other during depression. When the Rita/Lily person called herself Rita and when she called herself Lily she was both timid and fragile, and tended to lie or imitate language like a parrot within her stages of depression. When she called herself Rita and when she called herself Lily she was even a little timid and fragile within contumacious manic fun. A month earlier she had contradicted herself by saying that she had not been sexually abused when she was young and that the patriarchal abuse she was "always talking about" was infrequent sexual abuse experienced as a teenager. The abuser was also amorphous: at one time a stepfather and another time a biological father. Gabriele again thought, "Once didn't she claim that her mother and father would soon be experiencing their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary? And yet there is a stepfather? What an interesting little liar." These contradictions were performed consistently by both of the "personalities." Furthermore, she talked of enjoyable times that she experienced with her parents. These times seemed to be ongoing. At any rate she spoke of them happily instead of looking onto happy but deceased memories sadly. It didn't appear that emotional trauma or abuse was bedizened as sexual abuse in a display to get others to empathize with her tattered past.

It didn't seem that she was fabricating a happy family life scenario like someone extirpating weeds to plant flowers. That would be trauma-induced schizophrenia that would not be attributed to a manic-depressive who was being prescribed lithium. She claimed to have had a hysterectomy although neither childhood molestation nor cancer was claimed as the culprit. Gabriele thought that having advised Rita to go to a gynecologist once a year for a checkup might have brought on this comment. Maybe the Rita/Lily person fabricated information to keep a conversation ongoing. Maybe she needed continual conversation because it blocked out the moods that were a catalyst for divergent and erroneous perspectives and ideas. Gabriele's conjecture was that the split personality was nothing but the Rita/Lily person's own way of justifying why she had shifts in moods.

If she were sexually traumatized, it didn't come across with any more poignancy than her reactions toward not knowing what to do when she could not find anywhere to sit on the bus. She only became taciturn if she felt that too many questions and too much scrutiny were being paid toward her statements. None of the pieces added up. Gabriele thought that she did not know this person at all. She thought that she did not know any person at anytime in her life really. A person was never quite known. All one had were one's concoctions of plausible scenarios about the person's history and how he or she might behave from empirical personal experiences or what was witnessed when with others. It wasn't the person. The fact that one never knew anything didn't bother her. It was more of a mystery to walk around the planet in a loose blindfold.

"It isn't for everyone," Gabriele repeated.

"I want to go," said Rita. Will they tie me up until I make a vow of secrecy by signing my allegiance in blood? Something like that was on TV."

"Hmm," said Gabriele. "One takes chances in this life for sure. Still, I'm afraid it's more mundane-boring-- than that. You need to keep away from that TV set, don't you think."

She giggled as if manic. "No spells?"

"No spells," said Gabriele, "and vegetarian recipes afterward. It is really quite boring."

"It is just like any church?"

Gabriele thought of the Wicca services. They always reminded her of Catholic masses but without the Eucharist. However, they tapped into a mystery of spiritual forces without putting a human face on the creator or creation that was continually reinventing itself with each new generation of flora and fauna. She knew the guilt and fear of pouring oneself from the container of traditions he or she was raised with. Most people needed to change containers to get any perspective on how all of these beliefs were equal expressions of a wish for more than one's silly temporal domain. Still, someone who was definitely insecure and probably needed to project herself as crazy did not seem like someone suited for an experience at Wicca. In Gabriele's judgment, Rita/Lily was not in need of changing containers but rather, someone in need of finding the liquid to put into a given container.

"Sort of," said Gabriele.

"They believe in God, don't they?"

"Heavens, you wondered whether they were devil worshipers a minute ago. Some might believe in God and gods. I can't speak for anyone else, but I don't."

"And the devil?"

"No. No, I've been certain of that since I was 4 years old. People cause their own evil."

"Why don't you believe in God?"

"The reason for not believing. The why," she spoke out loud although the thoughts were really ones she meant to keep inside. She thought on this issue. "Well, if my life is good-and I guess it is. I'm healthy, well-educated, have food in my stomach and a roof over my head."

"And AdagioE your baby, Nathaniel"

"Him too," she sighed. "And my friendliness with you." It was often a stretch to even say "friendliness" in association to the Rita/Lily person but she did not know what else to call their association. "Well, if I am a happy solipsistic person I might well believe in God and appreciate my dizzying blessings but in doing this I'd be guilty of saying that this god cared about me but didn't care for those he allowed to starve or be eaten by a cannibal or forced into a predicament of having to jump out of a burning building-whatever. I suppose he could care about some of us and not others, but wouldn't that lower him to human levels? If I really believed in God, then this is the only god there is; and yet to be such a god it is quite obvious that he or she is no different than you or meE and I don't know about you, but I certainly can't create the Earth and the universe no matter how hard I try, and believe me I try." The baby began to scream. It pierced all the air of the bus. "I'll be lucky if I make it to 90 and don't have to wear diapers. There is a chance he, she, or it exists as a being that is not sympathetic about me or anyone else. If he is this, he is so large and so eternal, with no sense of human time, that a human life and its brief series of short-lived motions on one obscure planet would be inconsequential. If so, he doesn't think about me any more than you think about that last second you picked your nose. Yes, I'm watching." The Rita/Lily giggled manically despite her depression. "Also, he isn't one I can grasp so there isn't much sense in considering him. I'm just a fire ant stinging anything that threatens me, cognizant of nothing least of all the man that is there to squash me because of my sting. An ant might know about being threatened but he knows nothing about the being that threatens him. So it is with us and such a God." She could tell that the Rita/Lily person was not understanding much of the conversation but her eyes seemed to register that she was in a godless universe for fear had dilated her pupils.

Gabriele thought about this subject or quasi-subject of philosophy. She wasn't even a philosopher and yet in a minute and a half she had formulated a treatise and had proven it as much as was possible. She hadn't exactly proven that there wasn't a god. She assumed that would take an additional three minutes. But she had proven that it was not a worthwhile pursuit for humans to undertake. Smoking marijuana from

morning until wee hours of the night seemed a more constructive use of one's faculties. She wondered how it was that Socrates could lose himself for hours in a question that perplexed him when really all he needed was just a few minutes.

"What did you eat today, Rita?"

"Lily."

"Whatever."

"I ate well."

"What?"

"OhE " Lily said in a contemplative pose. A minute passed. Then, taking pride in thinking of an answer that would satisfy Gabriele she said, "I did have an appleE and I did have some peanut butter. That was good. Nutritious."

"Maybe it would be better if you went home to get something to eat. I don't think you'd understand the implications of the ceremony anyhow."

"We areE we are still going, aren't we toE "

"The baby and I are going there," Gabriele interrupted, hoping to stop Lily from saying the word "witch" on a public bus and relegating her life to strange stares. "Maybe I'm wrong about God. I'm sure I am. What you can do for me right now in my ignorance is to go home and think of different ways to discover him like smelling a fragrant flower or putting coins into the Salvation Army tin cans. If you were to hear someone preaching at you for two hours you would be two hours from telling me all those ways to find God." Rita/Lily agreed and began to get off of the bus. Gabriele got up and yelled toward her. "Wait a second. Remember, you have to stand on the other side of the road to go home." Rita/Lily smiled. Someone cared about her. Indeed there was a god.

Gabriele went to the service, which was held at the house of the new High Priestess. However, being there, she found that the paternal yearning to perform chants to Mother Earth and Father Sky a bit too much for her taste. Tarot, crystals to ward off negative energy, the black attire, the candles, the chants, and those god awful vegetarian recipes seemed outrageous. The only dogma her contumacious mind could obey were her own ideas. Feeling at odds with the day, she went home earlier than she had expected.

Chapter Sixteen

"He enjoys the pleasure. He is the man. The pleasure becomes the man. She is wedged there in the sharp gravel of the alley littered with her videos. It is good that she is there with the earth also digging in carbon to carbon. Face juxtaposed to the trashcans, and mouth gagged with his strong hand that she fears (hands that could twist a head and break a neck, and those that in younger days and as a smaller size, had in fact snapped off the heads of crawdads) she is paralyzed. She is obsequious to him, the man. Who would dispute the naturalness of a woman being there for a man's pleasures? Who would dispute the docile

make of a woman to be ravaged? He thinks that even with married couples the relationship is probably conceived by desperate thrusts in a hole-thrusts of pleasure; thrusts against being denizen to one's isolated sphere; thrusts against maternal domination when one was a boy; thrusts to have some form of intimacy not related to the misinterpretations of language; thrusts against loneliness; thrusts like the hands of a thrill seeking, dice rolling gambler who enjoys the uncertainty on whether or not a conception would take place; thrusts as copulative sports; thrusts to relieve tension; and thrusts of aggression against the abstraction of nature that could efface the memory of a man at any moment in sudden death. If family matters like the intimacies of a man and his wife are restrained expressions of a man's subconscious wishes, who could say that he is unnatural? Rape, not just sex, is what he knows a man to really long for. It is as Genghis Khan believed: 'To kill the villagers, rape their women, burn their villages, and run off with their horses--this is the good life.'

Sang Huin crumbled up the sheet of paper. Words were trapping him in their clutter. He tried to use their thrust to be because they were all there was; and yet as he tried to steer himself in them they were often nothing but bumper cars obstructing his every move or regular cars piling onto each other in a crash. He wanted to raze these walls of wrecked cars. Nathaniel would not know of Genghis Khan. Besides, interesting as the thoughts might be, they weren't applicable to Nathaniel unless he were to rewrite one of the earlier chapters. How could he be raping the woman when he, Sang Huin, had written him in his car, repressing his savage impulses like a good social creature? Also if he, Sang Huin, were to interpolate such ideas, he told himself, he would be like all those other writers who took pride in writing their salacious pieces. From the point of instigating pain on the giver of life and the bloody cut of the umbilical cord soon came the knowledge of mortality in the death of pets and vicissitudes and the ephemeral nature of all things in childhood friendships thwarted by the mutability of its members. Its hormonal promptings to socialize more for meat to satisfy hungers, the voracious appetite for human flesh, fornications to maximize its pleasures and gain its intimacies, its ambitions toward money, power and status within this ticking of limited time, the deaths of family members, its own gauche stumbling attempts at family as an auxiliary and then an outright replacement for the deterioration of this first family, and it (equally so in so-called saints and laymen) was graphic. It was salacious. It was violent. It was the desperation of one in mortality who wanted something for his short time on the planet. And of art, what was it actually? It was not so much a reflection of the self in still waters as a reflection of something deeper sensed in the rhythms of the falling rain and the movements of fictional others in plotless lives plodding along as his was. As another graphic creation appealing to the hedonistic pleasure receptors of the brain he would have more readers if the violence were to extremes. Still, did he really want to write something that others might imitate unwisely? He laughed. This was a frivolous concern when he knew that nothing he might write would be publishable.

And yet macabre as it was, he wanted to know the reason for his sister's death through his creations. He still wanted to know what had brought her to that park, if it had been her boss who had done this to her or a serial killer, and the motivation. One could read profiles of serial killers on the Internet. He had done so; but even if a serial killer had done this not all of them were the same. He did not want a generalization full of inaccuracies. He wanted to know the real person

and what had caused him to act as he did. He wanted to know of deep repentance, and deep psychological travail on the part of the man-whoever this man was. Earlier he had been so certain that the accused had perpetrated the act but then a jury had acquitted this person or quasi-person and as time went on he did not know anything.

He went back to the making of kimchee maundoo. The flour had already been made into dough that he had cut into pieces. Now he inserted the cooked pork and the kimchee and pinched the dough of these cabbage dumplings into shape. He boiled a little bit of hot water in his rice cooker and set them in there to steam. He felt so restless. He wanted to be raptured from lonely nights that followed hard work in this convenience store or for Seong Seob to call. Every time he now called his friend's cellular telephone number there was no answer. Seong Seob had a program that would instantaneously change letters into sound every time the computer dialed into a server but every time he e-mailed him there was no response. "So little did one know a person," he thought. Three days had gone by and he did not know of any altercation that could have caused this absconding. His mind was vertiginous. There was nothing worse than an inexplicable rupture of a friendship, he thought to himself; and yet he knew that this was not so. North Korean children were starving to death in a faltering totalitarian regime and here he was playing in his personal life, and in so doing, getting hurt. There were a lot worse things but a lot of good too. There was good everywhere. It was in the atoms themselves: in the steam rising above the rice cooker or the feel of the hot pipes under the floor, which warmed his bare feet in the cold room. Man might miss the mark of kindness but sometimes man tried for kindness since kindness was in the atoms although self-preservation was in the selfish genes. This good was readily visible in simple pleasures when one was sagacious enough to appreciate them like a child. But Seong Seob would not leave his mind. What could have happened? Was this friend hit by a car? After all, he was blind. Sung Huin did not know any of his friends or relatives, so there was no one to call. Did this friend become busy? Did Seong Seob decide that the relationship was not for him? Had he, Sung Huin, personally said anything at all to cause this? He reexamined their last conversations. The only thing he could remember was that he mentioned to Seong Seob his own need to make more friends, but that wasn't meant to negate the friendship that he had. He didn't know. He turned on the television to obstruct his thoughts.

"Oh, no," thought Sang Huin. His customers had talked about buildings on fire in New York. He had been so busy all night that their words and horrified expressions hadn't penetrated him. Moslems (the speculation was Al Queida) had flown two jets into the World Trade Center in Manhattan. The American military channel was showing CNN coverage of people jumping out of hundred story windows. Their bodies were flailing against the winds as if they were having second thoughts. He sat down on the edge of his bed. The quandaries of his personal life vanished and he became numb. He kept saying to himself, "Oh, my. This is the empirical evidence that there is no god." Solipsistic for a second, he then thought, "It is as if God is proving to me that he doesn't exist-that I am right in what I recorded in the Gabriele and Lily chapter." The incident itself shouldn't have been altogether shocking. America was an arrogant country. It thought that it was the godly power that was allowed to prosper while God subjected heathen people to dire circumstances. America felt it was entitled to bully all nations and befriend Israel beyond human decency to keep the Christian constituents, brethren of Israel, happy. Its political engagements were

for its own economic and military hegemony instead of fairness and the greater good. It would be understandable, he thought, how the Moslems might think of this as a reckoning of justice. In ways it was no surprise. The real surprise was that there was no large palm of God out there hovering like a cloud capturing these falling people within it. What was incredible was that the power that would make a universe couldn't capture a few humans into its clouds like nets. Numb, he knew without thinking of himself that this numbness would continue on for many weeks and, to less extreme levels, for months and years. It was an eternal sting. When he did look at his manuscript again to expound upon it he thought, "Gabriele, sitting in the living room and waiting for a customer, jotted down some notes about how to live godly in a godless universe. However, at present her time to really write it was being usurped by Adagio." Then he deleted it.

Chapter Seventeen

Out of the bus, she trudged back home in early evening through the marshland of the melted snow that was refreezing treacherously. Then she detoured a block west from the trailer park to the apartment complex where Rita/Lily resided. Gabriele heard popular music playing in Lily's apartment. She knocked.

"Uh...just a second," said Lily. Gabriele heard the movement of papers and magazines being suddenly assorted and things being scooted.

"Who is it?"

"It's me. I don't give a flying f-- what your apartment looks like!"

"G-a-b-r-i-e-l-e!" Lily said the name like music. "Please wait a minute, please," she said with childish delicacy.

For a few minutes Gabriele waited and listened to the rustling. During a minute of that time she was interested because the rustling was the rustling of a mind, and the mind was interesting indeed. "I'm leaving, Lily. In the bus you dropped one of your gloves from a pocket in your coat. I'm leaving it right here." The radio music suddenly changed to classical music with a National Public Radio DJ. Gabriele waited a couple more minutes. "Goodbye," said Gabriele.

"Oh. I'll come over and get them." Gabriele did not know what that meant. She heard the unlocking of the door bedizen with many bolts. The door opened. Gabriele handed her the glove without eye contact and turned away. "I'm working," she said coldly.

"Thanks so much. Thank you, Gabriele...well I could fix you some coffee if you'd come in...well, I'll -- " Gabriele was already walking away and did not, by choice, register the rest except for that redundant word, "please." The word was projected in such a melancholic and extinguished tone that it caused her German heart to thaw for human suffering. After descending a couple flights of stairs she paused, thought, and then returned to the apartment. She knocked on the door and Lily opened it while trembling and in tears.

"Are you okay?" asked Gabriele.

"I'm nutty. Don't hate me. Please don't hate me."

"I don't."

"Everybody turns away from me. Why wouldn't they? I wash the same plate over and over again for an hour. I just want to not be hated. I just need a friend. I'm so scared like I'm falling in a dark pit and no one cares about me." Gabriele knew. The dark pit was the anxiety of cognizant man who knew of imminent death. It was an anxiety exuding into the bleeding of loneliness and only interaction with others repressed that anxiety. That was for normal people. For those others who did not fit easily into normality or categories of abnormality and who could not capture or claim the illusion of self the loneliness was all the more inexorable.

"I haven't turned away," said Gabriele. Lily hugged her clingingly. Gabriele, not knowing how to really touch her, patted her on the back. She felt as if her body were being traversed by a colony of ants; and yet as repugnant as it felt being hugged in such a way, she kept this feeling enclosed deep in her inner self for the purpose of going beyond it and perhaps illustrating some sense of human kindness. "When you do obsessive acts it isn't exactly nutty. You are trying to seek order in past trauma. It's okay. It will be okay."

Gabriele let her sob on her back until the catharsis was complete. She then looked at her once again and a restoration of manic energy was taking place. Still bleak and baggy from tears, Rita/Lily began to smile. Gabriele thought about how vulnerable the human condition was. Rita/Lily was an extreme case but the vulnerability was ubiquitous in the species. She knew that it stretched in a diminutive way even into her self. "And you know something," said Gabriele. "You are probably the only person in New York State to have germless plates. Yours also have an extra coating of soap on them to kill any forthcoming germs that might land upon them. That's good especially with Saddam Hussein on the loose. Visitors won't mind eating with you at all." Lily released her grasp of Gabriele's figure and laughed manically.

"Sit down, sit down my good friend," said Lily. "Let me hold the baby." Gabriele released him from the pouch and held him. "No, I've got him." She sat down. She did not trust her friendly acquaintance holding the baby. Also, she disliked those eyes, which were like those of her aunt: eyes of needing to be a mommy. A responsibility toward any child was to raise him or her to be a good and independent creature. Motherhood wasn't for gaining a purpose in life nor for having adoring beings who would bring one a lifetime of "love" as well as a crutch to get through life's lonely void. Real love, if it were possible, should not be self-serving. No sooner had she thought this than Rita/Lily said, "I wish I had a baby."

"Believe me, they aren't toys. If they were toys I would have returned this one months ago and gotten my money back. They are needy human beings. They are a lot of thankless hard work and believe me you don't want one. If you think you are nutty now, a baby would make shambles out of your biochemistry and throw you off the deep end if being in love with a man didn't do it. Besides, this one is too temperamental."

"He looks angry now, doesn't he? I've never seen an angry baby before."

"HuhE good observation. I've been thinking the same thing. I had never seen an angry baby until I had this one. He was yelling so horribly in the WICCA service that I had to gag him with a pacifier. He keeps spitting out this thing like a missile. Who can blame him? I often do the same thing myself." She knew that in reality a baby couldn't be angry for to have anger one needed a self. Since self was the product of thought and thought was the product of language her creature could not be angry per se. He was feeling discomfort. That was true. But there wasn't a possibility of Adagio thinking of himself as a bona fide individual that was distinct from other selves nor was it possible for him to hate outside forces for the indignities they caused him (although it was she who changed the diapers so she wasn't sure what indignities there could be). Still, it was indisputable that he appeared to be angry.

She thought of her Aunt Peggy revolving pathetically around all the self-centered members of her family like the Viking orbiter. Peggy had even orbited around Gabriele's parents gregariously. Gabriele had been excluded from that whole bunch. With the exception of Peggy to some limited degree, she had been banished to the companionship of her books and to learn of greatness away from their commotion. In childhood and adolescence she kept the invisible pacifier in her mouth. Then she went away and when she rarely returned on brief visits she was as obdurate as a Nazi. Her rebellion had not been a disgorging of the pacifier, like Nathaniel, but a subtle insurrection that would not cause Peggy's tears. She was partial to calculated and unemotional reactions. They were less theatrical. Their performances had more reality and substance. Also, such planned and subtle rebellions never brought emotional counterattacks to make one feel guilty. Now that she was a Mommy herself, orbiting her life around her own beloved, they could not accuse her of abandoning family. Photographs of Nathaniel sent in the mail once every few weeks seemed to be enough to get them off her back.

"Hello, little Nathaniel. Maybe he understands us and knows we are talking about him. Do you think so? Do you think that could be making him angry?"

"Be careful. He's got a tooth now. You don't want him to bite you. Did you eat anything nutritious earlier?"

"Of course."

"No Ramen noodles this time?"

"No. A salad-a wonderful nutritious salad and some nice nutritious lithium. Like you're always saying, I need to keep away from chocolate andE what do you call themE oh, yeah, carbohydrates. And there are those bad cholesterols too. You are smart. Like you say, you keep me from bouncing off of the walls. That's what you always tell me. 'Sit down and don't bounce off of the walls, kid. I've already got one bouncing baby. I don't need a second.'" She gagged her mouth with her hand and then disgorged her laughter.

"Okay, okay. No more mocking of me," said Gabriele with a bashful smile.

"Yes, I did what you told me to do, Gabriele. I had a salad." Her voice leapt like a spark of electricity on a coil. "I followed your

directions. I always follow your directions. You are my good friend-my best friend. I always want to follow your directions." Suddenly it dragged in a moment of unpleasant thoughts. "But when I ate it I was first thinking about you. I was thinking that maybe you didn't like me. I mean, you sent me away. You didn't want me to go with you." Gabriele frowned. She felt bored and she didn't want to rehash this petty incident. She wanted to go back home. "You've got good reasons. It doesn't matter. And since I came back I've been thinking about all the different things you can see God in. Do you remember? You told me to do that for you. I'm still working on it."

"Gee, thanks," said Gabriele indifferently. "Well, gotta go."

"Please wait. Here's what I want to tell you. You'll like hearing this." She knew that to some degree she needed to interest Gabriele in order to have her compassion. She feigned a smile but from her manic energy it changed and became real. Anecdotes were ready to disgorge from her mouth. "When I was eating the nutritious salad I started to feel lonely. You know how lonely I can get with my head thumpin' at thinking what my grandfather did to me all drunk and pressing against me like he often did -- so I tried to call Gary-you know the guy in the orange trailer -- but there was no answer. I wanted to tell him I was sorry about everything that happened this morning -- Oh, you do not know what happened this morning. You've gotta hear what happened this morning! I wanted to say I was sorry but I wasn't sorry, you know, because what happened was so funny and it was just like a blessing because I prayed for it, you know. I prayed for this type of a thing and then it happened. You don't know what happened this morning-Oh, you've got to hear it. Do you want to hear everything?" She began an ongoing laughter as she narrated her anecdote, pausing in certain moments to release her manic chortles. "He came by this morning-you should have seen him-'Rita, my darling,' he said-and I said, 'Rita's not home. Lily is here so maybe you should come back when Rita returns.' 'When will she return?' 'Next year,' I told him. I told him next year. I guess I was playing with himE what do you sayE flirting -- I don't know. Maybe it was a little naughty, but men like that sort of thing, don't you think so Gabriele? I said, 'She's starting up a cosmetic company in Africa.' He said, 'Oh, that's too long to wait. I like both of you. You're both Italian sweeties.' So then I invited him in. He kicked off his shoes, rubbing his feet together like he was trying to make fire, wiggling toes on the footstool. Those feet were so cute in his white socks so dirty on the soles of his feet. I guess that sounds strange, doesn't it -- thinking a man's dirty socks were beautiful, but they were. I think so. Maybe I'm crazy, but I was thinking so then-his dirty souls. Do you think so, Gabriele. Then he said something like, "Before long, I'm gonna actually believe there's a second girl. You've got that influence over me, you know. Africa?" he laughed like someone who doesn't believe something somebody says. I told him that I guessed that they needed cosmetics in Africa. He said that he was sure they did. "Which country," he asked. "Timbuktu," I said. "Is that so?," he said. He was playing with me. "Too bad I never get to see both of you at the same time. Nothing better for a man than boobsy twins." I fixed him breakfast and when we were eating some pancakes --- actually black round things because I burnt them but he ate them like they were still pancakes -- he was lookin' at my boobs. 'What big boobs you have,' he said. 'Each one jiggles independently like two girls talking and dancing at a disco. They seem to be talking to me.' 'Don't look at them. It makes me nervous,' I said. 'How can I not?' he said. 'Look at my face when you talk. Not down there or I'll think you are a dirty

boy' 'I am,' he said. I said to him that he was like the soles of his feet. "You are like the soles of your feet. You have dirty souls.' Then he persuaded me to take off my shirt so that he could hear them better. He wanted to pull off my bra but I wouldn't allow him to do it - - not at the kitchen table, not anywhere ever. He said that we could be more private in the bedroom and I said no. 'Come on, sweetie,' he said. I did want to kiss him-I've done that beforeE just that, a little. I didn't want to get caught kissing or being without a shirt and near a man. And he kept on saying, 'Come on, sweetie.'" So I went back there with him but only after he agreed that we would just kiss. Anyhow, in the bedroom he stripped into his underpants. I was so scared and I kept telling him, 'No, No, I don't want that. We can just kiss' but his fingers kept going up there and down there but never around me in a nice way. Then we heard the door open and I knew it was one of the Semi-independent counselors so I had to hide him in the closet. The counselor stayed for over an hour and when I opened up the closet there he was with a round wet patch on his underwear. He'd peed his underwear. I laughed and pointed at his hole."

"I hope you told him that with a hole he was now the woman," Gabriele interjected. Rita began laughing so hard that she choked on her saliva. "You know, all of us have to be cautious -- not just with men and sex (both of which are confusing and should be off limits TO YOU) but everything and everybody. You have to realize that in everything people use each other even though it isn't altogether bad. Think of it this way: if they don't use each other they would have no use of them. You just need to define if that person's use in yourself is your use in him, her, them, whatever. If they are the same, a relationship can ensue. That's my idea."

"Oh, you're so smart. I wish I was smart like that. Do you need to use me?" asked Rita/Lily with hopeful childish innocence.

Gabriele could not think of a use for her. Simple compassion had plagued her here. She wanted to be home "Sure," she lied. "Something like that. Of course you are one of my few friendly people." She looked at her watch. "My customer will come in another hour, Lilian." Names shifted like tectonic plates. "I really should leave and put Adagio to bed." She knew that Rita was still wondering to herself why Gabriele did not teach her these German shoulder massage and acupuncture techniques so that she could have her own customers. She knew that Rita yearned for a vocation and a bit of pocket money. Rita/Lily's thoughts could be read easily from her eyes. She was so ingenuous and without guile or calculation except when men made her nervous. It was for this that Gabriele actually liked her.

Rita picked up the pacifier that had just flown out of the screaming child and handed it to Gabriele. "I'll make some hot coffee before you and Baby Nathaniel go out into the cold."

"Oh, all right," said Gabriele. She was not capitulating to outside pressure but only to the sense that she could not entirely part from the discomfort of compassion, which was the only good trait of man outside his creativity and intelligence. Compassion was half rational. The rest of its composition was that other version of love, the highest of all primordial feelings. Compassion, according to Gabriele, "flared up at the damnedest of times," and as inconvenient as it was to have it, she knew better than to forsake it. She had her distasteful coffee in a soapy cup, and once it was drunk she was pleased that by her

compassionate act she had made herself into a better creature; but she knew that enough was enough. She needed to treat herself to compassion by "getting out of Dodge".

In the trailer she took a shower to prepare herself for relieving a customer; finished her session with him; laughed uncontrollably at his angry grievance over the fact that in zipping up his pants with one hand and reaching the other hand over to play with the little boy's fingers, the baby had bit him; and then she had another shower. In the second shower she kept remembering his words, "You'd better put that kid in a cage if you want any men to step over here. I'd better get me a tetanus shot." Her own laughter was so inordinate that it soon gave her a headache. After swallowing some aspirin, she began her other job. She preferred making a living on weekends to the rest of the week since it was so much shorter. Outside a little physical prostitution, on weekends she would freelance her "bull shit sketches"(her "mental prostitution") that went with the little "asinine" sentiments that Hallmark Greeting Cards sent to her; and then the week's work would be, for the most part, over. At least she terminated the workweek after Sunday. She loathed "prostituting" herself "to assholes" but the way she looked at it, everything was a form of prostitution from the time that one washed and blow-dried her hair that was cut in such a way that was aesthetically pleasing to "Western farts controlling economic institutions" to rolls that bound human thoughts in its limited pages, the social interaction one engaged in to stay sane, and the tricks one did to get one's little bowl of Alpo dog food. It was her belief that physical prostitution was less of a deleterious moral injustice to oneself than any other kind. Done with a condom, its physical discomfort was also fairly safe and brief. Done enough times with strangers one did not care for, it serendipitously shaped her into a regular Buddha reducing her desires and appetites.

She cut the list of maudlin mottoes into myriad strips; put paper clips around each strip, and then attached each one around a tarot card. She lit the four or five candles that were on the kitchen table; shuffled the deck; drank four cans of beer quickly; and then mumbled a bitching mumble about having to prostitute herself. With her visual perception more mobile and her brain in a buzz, she unevenly laid out the whole of this partial motto-mottled deck in a larger than Celtic layout beginning with the cards patterned out as a cross; meditated on each motto; and then drew her designs. The first motto that she encountered was "Happy Birthday To A Grandson Who Has A Wonderful Personality, Good Looks And A Fine Character. I Guess There Are Some Things That Are Just Hereditary." Suddenly an image flashed through her mind and she began to draw. For a moment she was completely stunned by what she was drawing, and completely incredulous that this was coming from her mind.

As she became aware of bearing this unique, full, and outrageous creation so effortlessly, she fell into hysterical laughter at the sketch of an old woman in a party hat, who smiles on sweetly as her grandson, abandoning all of the packages surrounding him, lifts her skirt curiously. But then for the non-pornographic version she made a young man with a girlfriend bound hand-in-hand and a second hand reaching out to his grandmother who stands near the birthday cake. By drawing this second version she was providing Hallmark with sentimental froth for those who did not see that humans were replaceable in one's own life and that the whole of a life, itself, was more froth splashed up in the washing of time. On a deeper albeit subliminal level she was

stating that one could go forward in time and still retain childish affections. She knew it was not so. Only minds like Parmenides and Plato (a mind that she had) could conceptualize changeless eternity within the entity. Such unique individuals did not need to reminisce about the past. She never kept a photograph album apart from her corpus of sketches. She didn't want to be one of the masses. They were like school children trying to find their loose-leaf homework that had been taken from their hands by the winds and scattered behind them.

After she picked up the twentieth Tarot card to begin another preliminary sketch, she became aware of the fact that the flickering candles were making her extremely tired. She knew that being tired all the time was more from the monotony of being a single parent and had little to do with a full night of prostitution that she hadn't even yet begun to complete. For a moment she blamed a woman's susceptibility to become a mother for her blasphemous existence but it had been her choice to remain pregnant and it was her choice to raise this being whom she could have easily given away for adoption. Likewise, it was her choice to not seek employment. She had striven for isolation; but she hadn't done it with absolute perfection. She had given birth to a child and driven him into her shadows although she might have done it all alone. She knew that she had that capacity. Human society was for her a boring fair ground with the same quick-thrill rides and the same clones in freak shows. The war of the "Kuwaiti theatre" and Saddam Hussein were freak shows that Americans entertained themselves with from their television shows. These freak shows bored and sickened her and yet she listened to war broadcasts from her radio with the gluttony of other news junkies. She liked radio. She could imagine news more accurately without the visual images.

Apart from what important minds could vaguely construe to be permanent truth, human society was bereft of ontological meaning; the West was on a collision path with the environment and Islamic extremists; more and more societies possessed weapons of mass destruction that had the potential force that was beyond her imagination to conceive; and all societies were full of lies and manipulating fables disguised as truths—their own Moseses parting their own Red Seas. To be God's appointed bully of world events and His proponent of capitalism and democratic tyranny was the American myth. She often asked herself how she could even take on a janitorial job and sweep away the dirt of a capitalistic institution. How could she do functions that would keep it nice and operative looking? How could she empty its trash, and change its burnt out light bulbs when that institution was one of a billion which would bring about the destruction of the environment, the vitiation of curiosity and innovation among pampered capitalists, and often exploited third world workers. How could she contribute to society when she did not believe in it?

The telephone rang. "Hello, Lily"

"Rita speaking. How did you know it was me?"

"I'm a supersensory," said Gabriele.

"What is that?"

"I'm a psychic-witch, Rita."

"Really? Witching allows you to know who is on the phone?"

"I'm just joking."

"Oh. Am I disturbing you?"

"No, actually I was wanting something to keep me from falling asleep. What can I do for you?"

"Gary called. He wants to see me tonight"

"It is nearly 10. You aren't supposed to have visitors after 10. Isn't that what those group home counselors of yours tell you?"

"He wants me to go to the convenience store and talk to him. He wants to meet me now. I told him I was in another call and that I'd call him at the number on his pay phone booth. I don't know what to say to him."

"I think you want to see him, don't you?"

"I want and I don't want."

"So you want to stop wanting to see him."

"Right. What do I do?"

"I don't know. He'll only look as he does for a short period of years. If you really want to not want a man picture him in what will be his permanent state-the broken skeleton of another hundred and fifty years. That always works for me."

"Oh, thank you, Gabriele."

"Sure, Lily --- Rita/Lily. Bye now." She hung up the telephone and turned on the radio to keep herself awake. As she was listening to the classical music of Gabrieli's Canzoni and her own internal voice gabrieleishly, she left the table and began to warm the bottle containing the baby's formula. She fixed herself a large salad. She ate it and a piece of cold leftover pizza while feeding the baby the bottle of milk. As she was doing this she heard the news announcement of Saddam Hussein deliberately flooding the gulf with oil and igniting some of the Kuwaiti oil fields. Her mind was filled with the painful images of a whole ecosystem made into black and tarred corpses. She put her hand over her mouth and ran into the bathroom. She felt like vomiting and attempted to do so but nothing came up. It was nothing but heartburn from the pizza. She sat down and stayed emotionless in her director's chair until the heartburn subsided. And once it had she fell asleep.

She dreamt of her Aunt Peggy. In the dream Peggy and Gabriele stepped inside a grocery store. Both were wearing oxygen masks. All the visible items of the store that were on the shelves were locked away behind glass. All of the cashiers, grocery stockmen, and other personnel were dead at their stations. Gabriele was around the age of five. She hid her face in Peggy's dragging skirt.

"That's no way for a young lady to act," said Peggy as she reached over to the shelves, and conducting pantomime, bent her hand as if it were grasping an item, and then put it into a non-existent cart. She was trying to save money by purchasing invisible items. Stinginess was what

had made them rich all of these years. "What is wrong with you?" condemned the aunt. Gabriele pulled away from her, once again realizing that only in reticent and hardened expressions would her inner sensitivities be fortified from the real world. Looking at her aunt's hardened expressions toward death that abounded everywhere she realized that she should not expect anything new and kind in the state of Kansas. After all, humans were adaptive animals. The world was survival of the fittest, and man surviving within the perils of his environment. Why should society be structured differently? Why should being in Kansas under the auspices of an aunt be different? She glanced down at the corpses at her feet unflinchingly and then over to where Peggy was supposedly picking up vegetables and fruit. She could see decapitated Turkish heads locked away behind glass. They were on the refrigerated shelf where the cantaloupes should have been. The more she looked at the Turkish heads the less impact they made upon her. They were no different than any other form of food.

"They are always locking up the cantaloupe. I don't know why they do that," complained the aunt. They moved toward where the pastry section should have been.

The aunt used gestures as if she were putting a large cake into an invisible cart. "They don't seem to have a chocolate cake with vanilla icing. It is vanilla and vanilla or chocolate and chocolate. Now, you remember that no one is to eat any of this cake until the dinner guests have not only arrived but have finished eating their dinner and any business conversation is completed. Some important people have scheduled a meeting with your uncle so they'll be at your birthday party. To wine and dine them, as our family should, is very little to do when they can help bring more business to your uncle. Don't pout over your friends not being allowed to come. Your uncle wouldn't have much luck with business if children were tearing through the place. No pouting about the fact that we can't find a chocolate cake with vanilla icing either. Cakes like this don't have any taste so I can't see how you'd know the difference if it hadn't been for you shopping with me now."

After they walked around the store using gestures of picking up items, they walked up to the cash register. Gabriele thought, "They're dead!" but she remained taciturn. Peggy put the invisible items on the belt of the counter that remained still. Peggy tilted up her chin toward nothing and smiled affectedly as if she were responding to a nonexistent cashier. "I'm very well. Thank you," said Peggy. Then her face tilted back toward the invisible items and the smile deadened. Gabriele felt the slapping of her back. Peggy put her mouth toward Gabriele's ear. She whispered, "Stand up straight. I don't want you to look like one of them" (meaning the cashier that was supposedly ringing up the purchases although her corpse was obviously rotting on the floor with maggots swarming in and out of it.

"Give me that candy bar," scolded Peggy. Gabriele looked at her right hand. It was curled with the fingers almost touching as if she had a candy bar in her hand. "You thought you would put a smart one on me. Hide it behind the laundry soap when I'm not looking. Nothing gets by me."

On their way home through the empty streets they quickly arrived at their neighborhood when suddenly Peggy honked on a horn and slammed

on the brakes-ding-dong. A young Korean boy and his sister were on the road. Ding-dong. The girl had run in front of the car in an attempt to get the ball that her brother had overthrown. It was too late. The car slammed against her body. Peggy Peggy Ding-dong Peggy Ding-dong.

Gabriele woke to the sound of the doorbell. At first her mind tried to grasp a concrete image that could go with the sound. Then she knew it, and the cause of it. "Shit!" she said out loud. Now did she once again have to prostitute herself in the physical domain with some stranger at the door? She didn't want to work. People worked for money and they worked to escape the void. They abhorred the void that they would fall into if engaged in inaction. There were times that doing nothing did nothing for her either. There were days when she was a little lost in her lack of valid employment. But more times than not being completely paralyzed on what she needed to do or would like to do with her day was advantageous. Doing nothing but sitting in her living room staring up at the walls and letting the void overtake her made her all the wiser. She seemed to be unlike the rest of humanity who had to desperately see someone or go somewhere to escape slipping into themselves.

She did not want to see her clients any more than she wanted to return to work as a staff psychologist in a high security prison on the outskirts of Ithaca-a good job that she had taken upon graduating from Rice University and had brought her here. Eight months doing that had been enough. Eight weeks in a following job as an assistant director of a girl's home babysitting "women creatures" who, gaining their freedom at the age of 18 perpetuate the "classless undergrowth of society" had been worse than the prisoners. Girls and prisoners were often like comparing rotten apples and rotten oranges. There were times when she thought that the prisoners had been worse. Their sexual man-on-the-make innuendos had often frustrated parole assessments. In contrast, eight weekends with her clients (give or take a weekend) was a lesser prostitution. By the fifth ringing of the doorbell she decided to answer it so that it would stop ringing.

Two of them stood there: men. She knew she had an appointment with one client, but here were two of them. She gave a seductive smile and then informed them that she would only allow one of them at a time into her domain. The other would have to wait in the vehicle until his buddy came out. As one of them came in she thought to herself that she was really performing an important social function. Being a prison psychologist or a girl's group home supervisor had been paperwork jobs. The positions had not helped anyone. Here, at a discount since she was not beautiful, she relieved men of aggressive tendencies and stress. They were less likely to beat up on their wives or open fire in a McDonald's Restaurant as a consequence. She even argued to herself that by her service she was a bit like the Buddha who claimed that one should take the middle of the road. To her, that was the Buddha's tacit endorsement that a little bit of prostitution was needed to sustain oneself physically although it should never be taken to excesses.

Chapter Eighteen

Within the relationship he had not even been tempted to wander in the labyrinths of dark hallways of bathhouses in the hope of stumbling across that perfect form. There had been less discontent even if the

passionate response had been the same. The suicidal risk-taker drawn to darkness, that relinquishing to the self-consumption of shadows, had been somewhat tamed. But now with this partner gone Sang Huin's mind was slipping back into decadence. Meandering and not feeling that the ground one walked on was the least bit stable, desperate yearnings prompted him to find pleasure and hope in appetites that swelled as obsessions, burst, and were quickly gone no different than the instinctual promptings that were within the dumbest of animals. He hadn't yet gone back to his desperate habits of bathhouses and the R-rated petting in the gay movie theatres of conservative Soul but he could still sense himself slipping away.

To have the monogamous prototype of a gay couple for others to emulate there needed to be something giving it at least the suggestion or illusion of stable ground. And yet there was no higher entity to suggest such a bonding. There were no symbolic marriage certificates suggesting that society and the creator of the universe gave their implicit endorsement of such mergers to which logic would say that they would be no more preoccupied with than a man the mating habits of a rat in a city park. Also, within this alternative channel of one's sexual energy there were no children to rear, not that children remained such forever. Instead, for one who was gay there were only appetites and one's erratic but less illusionary emotional responses as the substance of a relationship. These were one's only sense of being in a gay relationship and as such they were the only compasses to find one's way around. In some ways it was worse than a bathhouse labyrinth of complete darkness for being in a relationship of this nature was not walking around lost and trying to find the perfect form. It was being disgorged in passionate love for another human being and only this--this spray of molecules, which lasted as long as the spray. That is not to say that heterosexual couples did not experience the sense that these foundations of relationships, family, and reality could never be shaken. They too were sentient beings. They too knew that they were constructing homes in the San Andreas Fault Line. The shaking was quite palpable but what could they do other than pretend that what they were creating was forever? They too felt the rumblings of the separating earth that they stood on. Had it not been signatures on tenuous pieces of paper and the responsibilities of children who again would not be such forever more of them, thought Sang Huin, would feel as he did. What he was experiencing, he told himself, was the exemplification of the human condition itself and so he comforted himself that he was not strange.

One evening on his free day when the cello would not play for him anything other than just notes and Gabriele was nothing but words of clutter like the dirty socks he seemed to strew across his room, he tried to avoid the callings of desperation and the wish to escape his lonely malaise by changing a few florescent light bulbs that had been flickering in the convenience store. He was changing the second bulb on the ladder, absconding from his temptations to go to a sauna, when he heard a flurry of tapping as if the limbs of a tree were knocking against a window. It was a tapping or a light knocking. He got down from the ladder and followed it into his room. He opened the door and there was Saeng Seob. Sang Huin's bereaved mind had already buried him as one more corpse of friendship that had amassed in a huge burial hill since early childhood. He did not know what to say.

"Can I come in?" asked Seong Seob.

"You came all the way here by yourself?" asked Sang Huin.

"I'm blind but I'm not ignorant of how to tell a taxi driver an address," said Saeng Seob.

"Sure, come in," said Sang Huin indifferently. He paused. "Where have you been? I didn't know what happened to you. I didn't know if you were hurt. I didn't have a telephone number to call anyone and ask about you. I didn't-"

"I was busy," said Saeng Seob.

Sang Huin thought about leaving this idea alone. He thought about just letting such a topic of discourse die there without comment. The wisp of air and the positioning of the tongue to begin, "So, what do you want with me" was at the roof of his mouth.

"Maybe we should move in together," said Saeng Seob.

"Here?" asked Sang Huin.

"I don't know. Somewhere."

"My job here means that I have to live here alone."

"You have a college education from America. You shouldn't be wasting yourself working at a convenience store. Go back to what you were doing before. I can get you private lessons. It is Seoul. There is gold in them there hills."

Sang Huin laughed. He felt at home within this American Hillbilly colloquialism. "All right," he said; and so this was what they did. They stayed together that night and then looked for an apartment the next morning. And then a year passed in living together: Seong Seob finding jobs for him as one might find errands for schoolboys. There wasn't gold in the hills but there was plenty of silver and paper to come into such wealthy homes bringing to families and sometimes their businesses pure American English in the mouth of a Korean. And each morning, exuded from the little time not consumed in a personal life, a quasi-professional life, sleep, and various bodily mandates, he worked on Gabriele. He found it interesting that their two worlds were now converging in the respect that she was taking care of a baby at the time of the first Gulf War with Iraq and he seemed to be living at the inception of the second one that had even more of a chance of exploding into something quite large and horrid within the presence or ghost of Osama Bin Laden.

One day they went to visit a boy of one of those families, who also had the name of Seong Seob. He was suffering at Soul's Yonsei University Hospital. The boy's mother, who was in the hallway, grabbed Sang Huin's hand and enthusiastically took him into the room. The boy's legs and feet were in casts and elevated. His face, bored and withdrawn, brightened slightly as he said his first English word of the visit: "Toy." Sang Huin laughed as he walked further into the room presenting the board game to the boy. The hospital room looked almost the same as an American hospital room except that there were four beds; no curtain partitions; and cushioned benches next to each bed.

There were not many differences between American and Korean lifestyles from what he could see. Korea was like living in the Ozarks

with high hills everywhere. He had lived in both Missouri and Texas depending on the needs of his father's work. They had homes in both places. Both countries seemed to be arrogant and fortified within their cultural expressions. One certainly could never part a Korean from his kimchee. Here women strapped babies behind their backs but even in a rural town like Umsong many carried cellular telephones in their purses. Pagers were only slowly becoming obsolete. Koreans' love of making their country into a high tech Mecca was only secondary to their continued devotion to their obsolete pagers. When a college student's pager vibrated with activity he or she would still run into a coffee shop to call his or her friend on the table phones and wait for that person there. There were video pangs (VCR rooms); table tennis rooms; noripangs (Karaoke singing rooms); outdoor vendors and restaurants; crippled singing beggars and vendors who crawled down pedestrian streets like worms as they pushed their carts that blared traditional music from small speakers, and sang into microphones; more mom and pop stores on each block than one could count; and tight department stores with small supermarkets underneath.

One could find in Chongju a McDonalds with an Internet caf? underneath, Pizza Hut, and Baskin-Robbins Ice cream shops. One could always find M&M chocolate candies and shirts displaying American university logos. One could find American and Hong Kong movies, which intrigued Koreans with their violence. Koreans lived under the insecurities of North Korea and their students always found a subject for protest but the country did not foment and fray in violence.

Sang Huin did not know why he was thinking this. He had always hated Chongju and Umsong in particular. And yet rural scenes (like the traveling markets in Umsong) were sort of sweet and real. The only vestige rural traditions in Seoul were the traditional weddings at the Korean Folk Village and traditional dancers no longer on the street corners but contained in a theatre.

He thought about once when he and Yang Kwam were shopping for clothes in Itaewon Dong of Seoul on that same street where he worked at a convenience store. It was raining and cold and his sickness was getting worse. Yang Kwam was wearing a shirt with the American flag on it. Dizzy and disoriented, Sang Huin had followed that American flag in subways, underground transfer corridors, exits, and sidewalks. He was acting the same way now only he wasn't sick. He was following Seong Seob into a relationship blindly to have concrete experiences and happiness that could only be obtained in shared experiences.

Sang Huin (Shawn most of the time to Seong Seob) grabbed his blind friend by the arm and awkwardly yanked him nudgingly to the child's bed. It was a cocky American gesture with the sotto voce of one insinuating by touch an inhibition to touch at all. The tepid force of this gesture was, in part, of someone who had been abandoned inexplicably before. Seong Seob had felt Shawn's awkward half-hearted attachment and reticence for a year now. He couldn't blame him since he realized his part in bringing it about. He had thought that living together would smooth over everything and felt dismayed that a year later Sang Huin still touched and spoke to him with the uncertainty of the two belonging to each other. And yet in bed it was compensated by desperate and passionate thumping which was the best kind of love making there was. Seong Seob needed to feel that another person hungered for him for this was the contract. This was the binding of love. It was a covenant with this relationship-being that virtually all people deemed as higher than

themselves. It was a belonging that all humans sought.

Sang Huin's mind questioned the legitimacy of human feelings and the meaning of others' presence in his life, which without exception seemed so fleeting. His mind was in a torture chamber of its own making. He yearned for harder realities outside of one's experiences and yet finding none he did not retreat to the limits of his feelings and the input he got from his senses. Headstrong, he believed that there had to be something that he was missing and so he went on searching like a madman batted about in erratic thoughts.

"I wonder when he will leave again," he thought. "I wonder what little thing will be too much for him and cause him to hide like a coward never to return again. Will I get a hateful text message on my cellular telephone? Will this be how it will go awry? It's bound to go bad. Everything changes. How can a relationship change to be closer than what it started out initially?" Although the present often stood free without a guard, within the infliction of memory it roamed no further than the prison gate that its imagination conjured up from past ruins.

And yet the ruminator that this "Shawn" was, he was still the product of his culture that was not too keen on ruminations. One's culture was prevalent in every thought even within an introvert like himself. Culture was a cookie cutter pressing out shape in the amorphous dough of one's thoughts. It was the re-legitimization of Marx. It was as Aristotle stated ambiguously as form shaping matter. It was the American in him that had cajoled and coerced Seong Seob to the hospital against his will according to the characteristics of his nationality even if it had been done diffidently.

"I sarem i irum Seong Seob imnida. I sarem i Seong Seob imnida." He paused and turned to the older Seong Seob. "Go ahead. You've been introduced. You both are each other. Ask him how he is. I can't speak Korean as you well know every minute of everyday." The older Seong Seob laughed and then began to flutter within the native language that animated him most. Sang Huin watched as the three creatures (his friend, the mother, and her son who was also named Seong Seob) expressed their color and movement in Hanguk-mal. He felt as if he were in a flower market instead of a hospital. Flowers encompassed the boy in all directions. Sang Huin remembered being sick himself and hearing the cryptic language that his mother and sister spoken around him. That cryptic language was now there in the confines of the walls of this hospital room and unable to escape it he felt as if he were a minority within it. It was the ethereal language that had soared his family above and away from his terrestrial boundaries.

Sang Huin thought about that time at the English winter camp when he first met this now hospitalized boy, Seong Seob. Everything proceeded fine for a few days and then one night Seong Seob scathed his knees in play and suddenly pulled off his pants in front of the school children and staff. The boy exposed his vulnerabilities. He showed the flimsy mortal creature of man for what he was. Horror and tempestuous hatred toward the mincing of one's boyhood innocence was in his animated eyes and it mixed into his cries of despair. Five seconds earlier he had been running and wrestling with the other boys and then with a little pain and the rolling of a small stream of blood came the memories of being run over by a truck and all of its ensuing surgeries.

Saeng Seob had not wanted to come; and even in the hospital room he and the dog wanted to stay aloof. Despite his more gregarious tendencies and his smile so wide to compensate for the lack of expression in his sunglass-confined orbs, Seong Seob and his dog stood away from the railing of the bed. The dog perceived its master's nasocomial fears but instead of looking at the atmosphere as something that might alert its senses, its face, every few moments, made movements toward the door not much different than the master. It had led the way through outpatient units of hospitals before. It knew its master's aversion to places of suffering and could sense the gloom that pervaded all rooms and corridors in a hospital. The surgeries on Seong Seob's eyes had been performed when he was a boy to no avail. The dog had escorted the master from the ages of 12 to 15 on subsequent visits that procured nothing but the dread of hospitals.

The fear of hospitals seemed to be a fear of death. Even a cockroach was afraid of death and so to be afraid of such a thing, thought Sang Huin, was natural. And yet death itself was natural. It might well be liberation instead of annihilation. It seemed absurd to prejudge such a natural occurrence that living creatures knew nothing about. It might be as beautiful as all the flowers that surrounded the bed of the boy, Seong Seob, who was playing with the board game that he had unwrapped and opened from the box. What did a cockroach know? For it perceived nothing outside of its own physical survival. What did a dog know? For it perceived hospitals as containers of human suffering instead of deliverance from illness?

Sang Huin understood that Seong Seob was pursuing a relationship that was more than a bit at odds with the world in even the most libertine culture. He also acknowledged that Saeng Seob was visiting a suffering boy whom he wanted to run away from. Sang Huin could not do much of anything to fill in the crevices of time and in awkward moments of not knowing what to say he just stood there uncomfortably but with a degree of appreciation for Seong Seob. Sang Huin had empathy as deep as the gods.

Chapter Nineteen

Had it not been for her youth that allowed her to engage in prostitution, she would have been at the welfare office every month. Each month she would have spent a day slowly making her way through the queue to that ultimate goal of staring through a translucent partition and into the faces of intake workers. Necessity would have compelled her, each time, to submit her documentation of a driver's license, social security card, and statement of approval through a hole within the glassy wall. As a reticent and less than proud potential recipient of food stamps and Aid for Dependent Children, she would have silently deposited her artifacts depicting the reality of her existence and watched these worker bees document her documentation and re-scrutinize what had already been scrutinized and approved.

Monthly she would have been in a situation of needing to minimize her imperturbable haughtiness so as to give cordial answers to questions without being a formidable foe. She would have been in a situation of needing to be sociable enough to give gentle but feigned smiles that might have a hope of expediting the process of gaining benefits. In front of the intake personnel her eye contact would have needed to be constant but not so much so that it would have intimidated them. Poised

and courteous, but with the intelligence of her eyes aimed like lasers for the incineration of the layers of their hearts, she would have wanted them to quail without realizing that she was the culpable one causing them to quail.

Had she gone into the welfare office each month she would have needed to check her haughty disposition above all else since the uneducated chattering clients, the wait, and the lowly workers abounded and it all was such an indignity. Her tacit repugnance of the apparatchik would not have been something that she could have restrained fully. She would have needed to let bits of it ooze out gradually and undetectably or the intake workers could have forced her to go back to the IM worker's office and explain why she hadn't gone on very many job interviews and why someone with a Master's degree from Rice University would need assistance at all. She would have hated them not for any petty personal grievance (she didn't "give a flying f--" what they thought of her) but for reasons totally outside herself: if it weren't for derelicts and freeloaders, these welfare workers would have been unemployed so it was outrageous of them to be condescending if not outright hateful to the monthly recipients; and if it were not for such do-nothings, breeders of illegitimate children, iconoclasts, and antisocialites (all which summarized her in such a unique blend) these client-intake workers would not have known the difference between being indolent and being industrious. Not having anyone to compare themselves to, they might have lived their lives in ignorance as to the meaning of such concepts, or worse, found their own paper producing jobs as the lowest tier of the caste.

Had it not been for prostitution, she would have been leeching onto public assistance as a menace to herself and society at large. Each month Gabriele Sangfroid's hard expressions would have probably intimidated the intake workers more than the useful amount and she might have found herself forced to wait all morning and afternoon on an income maintenance worker whose only wish would be to avoid dealing with such a mad woman. Then in late afternoon a supervisor might have called her name and she would have needed to encounter hateful stares for being a flagrant mutineer of the American work ethic. There might have been the undulating of the tongue reminding her that she was a Master's degree holder. Such a supervisor, or a brave IM worker, would have shot missiles of time consuming bureaucracy and lack of kindness at her and Gabriele's laser eyes would have needed to shoot them down gently, cordially, and politely. "I understand that someone with a Master's Degree from Rice University could be gainfully employed. I realize that there are professional jobs available to me. Right now I'm poor and I have a baby. I'm searching for the right job that will allow me to continue to devote as much care for him that I can do. You know the way it is with mothers. It is hard to find that employer who is sensitive to the fact that one is a mother." Something like that might have been what she would have communicated. It would have been coordinated with the usual amount of artful guile and smiles to get her through life.

She knew a little about the Department of Social Services from firsthand experience with them when she first moved to Ithaca. It was in a day in December as cold and merciless as February when she went there. Nathaniel or Adagio was a newborn at that time. Back then, resigned to the fact that she needed assistance so that she might continue with her contemplation of life, she went into the New York Department of Social Services with him in a bassinet. She discovered how her laser beams went through bullet proof glass separating the intake workers from the

waiting area and seemed to set fire to the cubicles housing the IM workers.

In her first hour there she considered this agency a demeaning place in all respects and that she shouldn't be partaking of services here; and yet her feelings were muted by logic. and Gabriele was, after all, a very logical person. She told herself that being here with illiterate, drug dependent, and lethargic characters was not all that different than her work as a staff psychologist in parole assessment at the state prison. Encountering client abuse or being in the thickets as one of the worms were just two equally uncomfortable situations. It was really nothing more than a substitution of one form of abhorrence for that of another. Examined further, she couldn't see any difference between being a freeloader and a worker apart from the worker's obsession to think that his manner of wasting time was respectable. Since they were the same apart from the means by which they chose to fritter away their existence--the bums wanting to spend their time getting something and the workers in producing it--she couldn't see any sense in feeling more abhorrence from being behind the glass than in front of it. Besides, this experience here also provided her with a new perspective of what life was like to be one of the besmirched masses on the opposite side of the fort. Knowing multiple perspectives made her contemplate the entity like Parmenides and contemplating the entity brought her more in the realm of truth.

Looking onto it now, she did not think that these clients of hers were any more or less degrading than collecting food stamps or in having worked as a counselor in social services. It had only been the need for money that made her deign to any of this prostitution.

She owed a lot to the male need to be touched, to dive into the high of an orgasm, and to have innate aggression exorcised by thrusts within a subservient woman. It was a good profession that took little time and no mental prostitution thereby allowing her to contemplate God when the kid wasn't crying for bottles, changed diapers, and swift rides in her arms. It was also useful for society since men needed to be exorcised of aggression. After all, an excess of testosterone had kept the planet in a type of marginal nightmare. It certainly did not need to be plunged into it further by a lack of prostitutes. Before she ever worked again as a psychologist avowing the criminality of criminals or giving nice little labels on Lilys, she would go back to the bad girl group home. Before she returned to the click-of-the-heels logic of girls, she would become a janitor, a supermarket cashier, or a digger for bottles in trashcans. And to keep away from all of it she would continue with the present line of work as long as Adagio wasn't traumatized by strange men drifting in and out of a trailer. A child needed the illusion of stability more than anyone else; but bills also had to be paid.

And so time ran on like a shell-shocked soldier. Already the boy was four years old and precocious regarding one thing: the emotional state of perplexity. Strangers continued to come into his mother's domain and like always he watched these unknown men come in and mysteriously pat him on the head in passing. Many of her men felt a twinge of awkwardness as if they had to go through a premature and impotent little sentinel to get to her. He was not sagacious enough to understand that. He just wanted them to stay to talk with him instead of always passing on to her. Ostensibly she looked more pleased to see them than she did him. He noticed this, but little did he know that after

having changed diapers for three years and having given him baths, she was as disinterested in the male anatomy as a female could be; and so not wanting sex, love, or godly companionship from them, all they had to give her was money.

He was her human subject: and she wanted to keep all primitive and barbaric impulses of pop-culture and unoriginal dogmatic religious premises from influencing his brain. She did this partly from the wish to make him into a good person and partly from a scientific curiosity about what would happen if she mixed strange chemicals together. She was very curious about the outcome of child rearing; but more, there was fun in the manipulation and fun in the unknown of what he would become each year.

She trashed her television set into the back of a closet and in his bedroom she began daily puppet shows of a simplified self-made Hamlet or King Lear adaptation and she would have him dance to the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven in unique movements she called the sangfroid. She grew pumpkin gardens and allowed him to feel the weight of the largest ones against his small frame just as she had done for the past two years. Now, for him, they had become gigantic balls that he couldn't pick up to bounce or the wheels of tanks. They were no longer the objects of wonder they had been a year earlier. She knew this inevitable truth but she didn't mind it terribly. Losing the wonder of small things in ones adventure to know bigger truths was the act of growing up and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She knew: the loss of wonder came upon a child's innocence like a Turkish beheading. She hoed around the 10 feet patch of garden and imagined the texture of one pumpkin she had detached for him recording itself onto his psyche as he rolled on it and scooted it around. She grew flowers so that molecules of smell and sight could make sketchy replicas of flowers in his brain. She wanted benign if not benevolent influences to make him special. "There will be no battery operated cars for this boy," she often told herself, for they would lead to a preoccupation with movement, and from movement to targets. She did not want to nurture the hunter within him. Instead she wanted to make him into a god for being alone in the celestial realm was lonely business. The materialistic, hedonistic, shallow specimen of movement had to go.

And yet they were not sedentary Buddha statuettes sitting on shelves and so she often took him to an outdoor pool or a heated indoor pool depending on the season. In earlier years, splashing in a baby pool large enough that he could not easily see an end to its greatness achieved the same aim as the oceans her father had taken her to. Within a large body of water one could always find Parmenides' entity and Aristotle's Prime Mover as one pursued that innate human need for physical movement. The realization that he was distressed about older boys going into the large pool when he wasn't permitted to do so caused her to lead him into deeper waters. He floated on a swimming board and sometimes on her palm under his chest as she treaded water beside him and allowed him to experience the tide when the whales of human bodies plunged in toward them

They also found mother and son bonding activities when lugging plastic containers into an environmentally friendly grocery store. From her example she wanted to nudge onto him a respect of Mother Earth, or at least a reluctance to be reckless with her. She wanted him to gain the habit of being the least environmentally destructive that was humanly possible. One of the bins had animal crackers and she would fill

a small plastic container with these dead carcasses. She abhorred the drug of sugar and its impact on him but then she did not like enduring the choleric displays of a drug addict who was being blocked from getting his fix. He always craved for them like oxygen and there was little one could do with cookie or animal cracker cravings but succumb to them in the hope of getting some peace of mind. Always following the grocery expedition she would take him to the zoo and feed him the cracker carcasses only after he matched the animal cracker replicas to the beasts they were approaching and could say the names of the zoo animals in English, German, and Spanish. He couldn't sputter out the Latin so she had to give up on pushing that language into his head since she couldn't pull it out of his mouth. They spent Sunday mornings listening to church bells chime from their seats in a Laundromat. Around 10:30 the adjacent diner opened for business and from a window in one of the walls they would place orders for French Cream Cheese sandwiches. They were the oddest creatures in the Laundromat, dancing the sangfroid to a cassette recording of Evard Grieg's Peer Gynt with bread and cream cheese gushing in their mouths as they waited for their laundry to dry.

One day they went downtown to pay utility bills and afterwards they walked around the campus of Cornell University. At a bookstore she became intrigued by a biography of Alfred Adler and for a couple minutes she became fully immersed in the reading. During this time he bypassed her despite the fact that she had been trying to keep him tracked in the corners of her eyes. Imagining ethereal voices calling to him, he veered out the door and went to follow the Sun god that was descending into the crevices of buildings. The display was, for him, an obvious invitation of hide and seek. Pursuing the joy of the present moment, his imagination interwove him in the tangle of one's sense of direction and the deception of nature whose beauty belied its true disinterest in man since it had no intention of obeying any mortal calls. Each building became a whole forest, which overwhelmed him in vastness and darkness.

For over an hour she ran around like a mad woman frantically asking strangers if they had seen a child. She felt like Achilles chasing the tortoise and she scolded herself for not having put him on an arm leash the way she had when he was three. When at last she saw him staring down at a gas lamp god reflected into the waters of a lifeless fountain she at first wanted to pull down his pants and give him a beating with her hard, powerful palm but she was taken off guard by his emotional embrace and by her own unusual reactionary embrace of him. She held onto him tightly even though she had never wanted to hold onto anything. A lucid and excoriating speech was in her parched mouth but she could not say it. She only said the idea in her mind: "A bad man could have taken you. Don't you know that you can't run away from me?" A tear even slid down a cheek. She was a needy creature enmeshed in another being, vulnerable and susceptible to his actions. It was an uncomfortable state that she had never wanted.

At last she said, "You little scoundrel."

"Yes," he said. "I am your little scoundrel," and she laughed. It was as if he had read Nathaniel Hawthorne and he had cast himself into the part of Pearl.

That night she had dreams of Achilles chasing a tortoise and of different geometric shapes that were before her soon eluding her. She woke up the next morning in a cranky mood. Everything seemed to be aloof and impalpable. She burnt the pancakes like Rita Lily and called

him to breakfast indifferently. His wishes that the orange juice be put into his new Mickey Mouse mug were fulfilled. It was just the dumping of one liquid content into another container. She did this without saying a word. She ate with him but she was hardened to his complaints about the taste of the meal. She was frowning and despondent the whole time.

Chapter Twenty

There was a triangular pack or trinity of stray dogs listlessly wiping snouts in whatever might possibly be edible as they interweaved around pedestrians' feet. Even the sniffing of its members was listless. A foot kicked one dog and there was a high-pitched breathless squeal that was scarcely audible. The dog pushed its weight and movement toward its right side the way a boy might sink into genuflection when the wind is knocked out of him and then it slunk off the sidewalk. Motionless for a moment while still standing, it then opted for movement although it could only stagger. It was not alone. A smaller dog from the trinity followed disconcertedly. It too veered in a right curve to the mirage of a refuge on the edge of the road as if it were the mean between two risky states. One hobbling and trying to yelp from a bit of a second wind and the other accustomed to follow that which had secured its sustenance at previous times, they walked together for a minute before being flattened by a truck and swallowed into the pot hole mouth of the pavement. The road, from its swallow, bloated and curved up like a hill before its true form materialized. Ostensibly, it was a road on an emerging hill but really it was the mutant growth of a head and a face. Out of nowhere it inexplicably gained animation and being. It was with life and without purpose. It was naked existence. The road would swallow much more again and again, get bigger, replicate more of itself, and die. "Mutations of the carbon of the planet are everywhere! I see it now: species are cells mutating over time; planets are clusters of cells; the galaxies are mere organs; and the universe is an organism. Individuals play their parts, thinking themselves autonomous as does any nucleus of a cell, but it isn't true." These were her thoughts as she opened her eyes.

Gabriele woke up from a startled Heraclitus-flux of a nightmare the way she had the previous night. Like then, the only pressing logic contained within such a strange dream was a geometric leitmotif that was an insensible riddle. It occurred to her how the subconscious was composed exclusively of chaotic winds and not what she had at one time thought of as a cryptic but sensible Nubian code for the astute transcriber. It was nothing but vehement typhoon spirals with all sensory input and significant long and short-term memories blowing erratically inside of them. It was a wonder that civilization existed at all. Humans were great wonders unto themselves to be able to carry such a stir with a degree of poise. It was amazing that over so many millenniums Homo sapiens found some degree of cooperation to exist. It was a wonder that Homo sapiens were able to develop dimensions of themselves outside the frenzy that was trying to suck them back into it. Rational ideas and decisions might well be influenced by the stir, but still to get through the day thinking one's benign little ideas, evaluating and rejecting most truculent impulses, and trying to make sense of issues beyond ones instincts, hungers, fears, and anxieties was an absolute miracle. It was the greatest poise and magnanimity to forfeit the compulsions of one's stir of night and to develop some semblance of civilized society, benign and sensible. How strange, she

thought, that the subconscious was not universally declared as empirical as a fingerprint, DNA evidence, or a signature on a sheet of paper showing one's intent. Any startled awakening from a dream was the tangible proof of her claim that the subconscious was not merely theoretical.

On her pillow she leaned toward the end table with the idea of picking up an alarm clock to look at the time when she saw a handkerchief belonging to one of her anonymous clients laying beside it. He had dropped it out of a pocket when putting on his pants hours earlier and she remembered that she had found it after he had gone away. She could see the large initials embroidered on it. It was no doubt the embroidery of his special little lady. The initials were MF. Was M for Michael? she asked unto herself, that high authority that answered all of her questions. "Maybe it is," her higher authority said, "But I wouldn't be able to decipher what F means unless the first initial stands for Mother." She laughed out loud but she put the end of the pillow up to her mouth to keep it muted. She did not want to wake up the boy. So content within herself like a child, she could entertain herself so easily.

She was sure that this internal voice was most illuminating in intellectual luminaries but it was not unlike what Rita Lily had. It existed even in the most idiotic of people. Was a split personality a real concept? She had her doubts. There were many erratic whims in any human being. It was only by divorcing oneself from certain whims that one might assimilate two or more spurious personalities, which would only come about from being abused in extreme torturous cruelty. What was thought as split personalities existed, she theorized, to reduce one's interaction with others whom have brought him or her horrific trauma.

She thought about this MF. He had been polite to her and there weren't too many like this. He had been the one massaging her. He had wanted her own pleasure as much as his own. There weren't many like this either. He had even succeeded in making her tingle and have orgasms. Even now, so many hours later, just the thought of him made her tingle. She sniped at herself for entertaining this absurd tingle that women often have long after the sexual stimulation is over. "I am a female," she told herself, "but I'm no lowly woman." She picked up the clock. It was 3:00 in the morning. She told herself that if a client was giving her spurious romantic notions she needed to distance herself. She needed a break from physical prostitution.

Before Hallmark removed her from their list of freelance artists for accidentally mailing in one of her profane sketches, she had had this as another form of income. Now the clients were all there was. The income was sufficient to pay the bills and, more importantly, she was able to afford canvas and a wide array of paints each month. This type of prostitution was in many ways treating her well. It was instrumental in giving a burgeoning artist canvas and contemplation but she had to admit that the boy was becoming jealous of her time with these men and she was losing professional objectivity. She decided that she should not go into work for a day or two. She needed to not work in her bed but instead to go on vacation outside of it.

In the morning as she was burning French toast for the boy she told him that they would go to the beach. After breakfast they made a straw hat and wire and tissue paper sunglasses for Mouse to match the ones she

had once crafted for the boy months earlier. Then she put leashes around both of them. They got into her old brown Ford and drove to the Entity.

"Why's Rita/Lily not coming?"

"Well, I didn't invite her."

"How come?"

"Well, with the two of you and the two of her that would be two too many. Wouldn't you agree?"

He giggled as the jawbreaker moved from one part of his cheek to the other.

"Do you really think that thing in your mouth tastes good?"

"Same as a sucker," he said. "Do you want?" He pulled it out of his mouth. The jawbreaker was coruscating with saliva. It was like a gleaming moon.

"Gee, thanks, but I'm on a diet. That is just too lovely but it would be all the more so back in your mouth."

"Okay."

When they arrived she attached mouse to a stick stake that she wedged deep into the sand. Anywhere her boy wanted to roam he took her with him because the two were shackled to each other. Running around with the feel of wet sand plastering into the crevices of his toes in its grounded rock and mud texture she could again see that sense of awe and wonder that he had had when he was three. They began to twirl each other around and the two of them fell down like dizzy drunks. As she sat up she noticed that her son was staring directly at the sun.

"Adagio, don't look at the sun like that."

"Why?" He turned to her. He was still wearing his tissue paper and wire sunglasses just like the cat.

"Why? Because you don't want to be blind!"

"How can it blind me. It is the sun."

"Does it feel good to look at it directly?"

"No, not really"

"Well, gee, the proof is in the pudding. If it hurts to look up at it directly that is a prime indication to not do it."

"Huh?" he asked.

"Don't be so asinine. Don't look at it directly," she scolded.

"It wants us to see it," he responded.

"Not directly! Maybe metaphorically," she said. "Why do you think that God put stupid animals like Mouse on four legs? Have you ever

thought about this issue? Well, I have and let me tell you the reason. If God hadn't forced dumb creatures like that to keep their front limbs as feet they would be looking up at the sun and all of them would be blind. Put simply, Mouse can't look up at the sun because God forced him to stand on four legs; and with a person, he is usually brighter than a mouse. He is usually a little smarter than an animal so God encourages him to buy sunglasses, suntan lotion, and to look down toward one's own business: earthly matters like what you need to wear, the food you need to fill your belly with, the story you are going to read, so on and so forth." Each dour day of having to give the reasons behind things to keep this little guy in one piece was exasperating and she felt that she was falling into the mire of a never-ending story.

She wondered whether, in part, the religious stories (later to be cut down into the book sized collections of scripture) had happened for the same reason.

"Ambulatory two legged individuals need to have less of an ethereal concentration. That's my take on it."

"Huh?" he asked. He looked down at the sand, pulled up his glasses onto his head, and said, "Let's make a house for the sun. Maybe it will get little and stay in there and we can stare at it through the windows."

"Sounds good to me," said Gabriele. "You can do that while I set up house." She got up and pulled him toward the area where Mouse was pacing in parched emptiness nervously. She laid out a large rug near the staked cat, erected an umbrella, and took out suntan lotion, a book, Coka Cola, a CD player, and chewing tobacco from her large bag. She put on a hat that made her look like an Asian rice farmer. Then she began to listen to Paganini's Caprices. Meanwhile her son chose an area for the construction site. She wondered why he had chosen one plot of sand over another plot. Sure, he was on a leash and so he did not have a wide area to choose from; but a bigger question was why anyone would choose to sit in one chair over another one in an audience where the seats were not assigned. When one wasn't mandated to a table by one of those restaurant hosts, why would a given customer choose one table over that of another? That was a mystery. Did the mind fool a person into believing one spot was better than another one so that action could be implemented without lots of hesitation? She hadn't ever thought about this point before. Her son brought to her many thoughts. "That is one good reason to keep him around," she kidded to herself.

"The sand won't stick."

"Well put enough water on it to make it sticky and not so much to make it runny. Same as cement. You really should begin the foundation of your castle closer to the water-only not so close that the waves get to it. That way you don't have to use so much bottled water."

"Well, then I need more rope," he said.

"Okay." She unraveled some of the rope from the leash that was wound on her arm. She allotted to him more freedom for his imaginary worlds.

"I want a house. Not a castle. I want it to have a bed and its own room. The closet will be in--"

He droned on and on. In some respects his little ideas were charming but she had to turn off a great deal that he said to stay sane. "Castle, house, house, castle--who gives a flying f--" permeated through her brain tissue. She loved this egocentric being that had pulled out of her body and she did not consider him too boring. She watched him work against the odds of crumbling sand and an avalanche of shoddy construction, sculpting out some edifice that he attributed as having meaning and a link to a civilized creator. She watched this little individual who was a microcosm of all the worker ants sculpting their tunnels of dirt that would ultimately collapse. None of them thought of the ultimate corollary that human life and endeavors would go back to nothingness and the entity that brought it all about. She felt compassion for him, for all of them, like a goddess looking on her pathetic children. To some degree, she was pleased that he emulated her myth of the sun. Within moderation it was a good and humane fabrication. The creation of her version of the creator was a meaningful and benevolent lie of universal brotherhood and it seemed to her that the ultimate goal of motherhood was to nurture humane behavior even if one had to lie upon occasion.

To escape a violent world daydreams, liquor, and hallucinogens were always warranted. To counter innate violent inclinations there needed to be a benevolent god to emulate--one that was palpable and touched everyone and one to whom there weren't stories or rules to be brainwashed in to gain membership. She did not know. There were no guidebooks for rearing children. One ad-libbed the best that one could do. It was a daily chore and one where there weren't any vacations that would allow objective contemplation of past mistakes.

She put away her book, *Why I am not a Christian*, by Bertrand Russell. The book needed to be perused deeply but she couldn't do that because she needed to keep a part of one eye on the boy and a part of the other eye on the cat. She went over to help him with his futile task. Within an hour they had constructed an elaborate castle. Fulfilling his intentions, this peeping Tom became fixated on looking through the windows of the Sun house in the hope of seeing an anthropomorphic sun god shrinking himself into its corridors. Finding nothing but prolonged darkness, he returned to staring up at the clouds and the bright intensity that was the sun.

She wanted to kick the sun castle. She wanted to destroy it, to blast it away, and to bring it back to its initial matter. She even contemplated a more debase act. She thought about unleashing Mouse and tossing it onto the roof of the castle when Nathaniel was not looking--however, she rationalized that a mother who blamed her actions on a cat would be more despicable than a worm. This idea of framing culpability on the cat swiftly left her consciousness to decompose back into whatever neurotransmitter combinations and neurological circuitry had come together to formulate it. She felt irritated at herself for ever reinventing Aten and for being Akhenaten forcing one more damnable myth into the world. After all, this one, for its merits, could ruin a boy's eyesight.

Her desire to kick the sun god house had been, in part, from the very desire to cling to it. She wanted to keep Nathaniel in a state preserved from society's lies, guile, opportunism, greed, and barbarity. She also wanted this private and personal experience with him that no one had shared since Aten's extinction in Egypt many thousands of years

earlier.

From her most selfish inclinations she wanted his companionship to avoid a loneliness that was so stagnating on her energies. Common sense told her that he was a separate person and that his young and curious being, enveloped in the freshness of experience that was part of childhood, did not exist to free her from moments when the world just looked old and musty; and yet there were times when feelings did not succumb well to common sense. More altruistically, she wanted to keep him from having to witness Turkish beheadings and other real world models that would vitiate ideals to the realization that it was every man for himself. And yet he would be entering school soon: all innocence in a bubble had to finally break.

She took him and the cat to the area where one could rent out inner tubes. After paying for one, she re-staked the cat and pushed her son onto the waters where both son and mother were assailed by the rays of the sun. "Nathaniel," she said, "No more of that looking up into the sky like a dreamy baboon. Just watch the waves whisking us around." As she felt the undulations, she forgot about the Entity and vaguely recalled that sexual exhilaration with MF. Moments of Frenzy lived with one no longer than any of the passing winds against one's face. They were pleasant sensations, boosts of fuel, giving one a positive outlook toward more tangible encounters. With the exception of the best one, they were never remembered. But, rising up and down with the waves, she was not remembering any encounter, but rather the best one.

In later days and weeks she avoided work and clients more than she should have done and took Nathaniel to Niagara Falls, tiny falls in rural Ithaca, and on little rides in amusement parks in different areas of the state. Except for the local falls, which were free, she just said, "Charge please" and handed out a credit card to venders, ticket salesmen, and hotels. She handed them her bit of plastic although she knew this action would make her, even more, into a slave of her own brothel. She wanted to take him to Lake Placid in the Adirondack Mountains too but common sense prevailed. She had second thoughts about the matter for she knew that she needed to cut back on her spending. She had done these other things with him from a gluttony to celebrate those rare whole days when mother and son were fully together because she knew that they would not be endless. In short it had been a desire to hold onto him. The poet, Lucretius, was in her head. It was he who said, "The generations of living things pass in a short time, and like runners hand on the torch of life."

He was now nearly the age of six and the near emergence of the school year agitated her progressively. The vacations could not last forever and had not lasted forever. One reality after another budged into a human's life pushing the former one into a surreal dream. For an hour, each night, she would lock herself in her room, change into a black negligee, write her fears in a journal by the light of a candle, and often find her thoughts discombobulated by the sound of his voice.

"Gabriele," he whined one night behind the door. She ignored him in the hope he would go away. She was trying to perfect the doggerel she had written in her journal the previous night. "Don't yell/for you can tell/I am myself/ to no one else/ and like an ocean that says I am,/ an ocean by the name of Pam/and an unmarried feminist named Sam,/ I am so large that you can't see all of me even if you are traveling in a Pan AM./I just slap my waves on the shore./ I behave according to my

inner nature and don't ask for more./ I am an ocean and so sometimes with my unfathomable depth it seems as if nothing touches me/ but it does you will see./ Water evaporates from me./ Sailors sail in me./ It is my glee/although I'm sometimes saddened by what is me." She rather liked the alliteration and the variations of the feet. She thought that her word choice was rather masterful although she wondered if the rhyme scheme wasn't a bit excessive.

"Gabriele. Will you play checkers with me?" he said through the door

"I'm working," she said mildly

"There's nobody in there with you."

"I'm thinking. Thinking is working."

"There's nobody in there with you. You're not working," he said loudly

"Working can be thinking. It isn't always--" She stopped herself. She was about ready to say, "It isn't always fucking."

"Mouse went to the bathroom in that fern thing and now there is shitty dirt everywhere."

"Good God. Go clean it up."

"I don't know how."

"You know how to use a broom and a dustbin. Can't you sweep it into the dustbin? You remember how!"

"It smells so really badly. If I go near it I'm gonna puke."

"I changed your diapers. It can't be worse than that. Plug your nose and try to do a little. I'm tired of being the maid around here."

"I'm not a maid too."

"It's your cat."

"It's older than me. How come it's my cat?"

"My dear, when it goes to the bathroom in areas it shouldn't it becomes your cat."

"How come?"

"Because I'd--" She stopped herself. She was ready to say, "Because if it did that and I were to own it alone I would stuff it." Instead she said, "Because it likes you better." That was a solid argument. The only thing he could ask would be why the cat liked him better; and to ask such a thing would not have been beneficial to his argument. She was eager to see if he was intelligent enough to say nothing and he was. He just paused.

"I feel lonely."

"I'll be out soon"

He jiggled the knob. "How come you got that thing locked? I wanna play checkers." His egocentric words grated on her nerves no different than barking dogs in the trailer park. "I'm gonna ride my bike over to Chuck's."

"Not this late you're not."

"You gonna play checkers or am I gonna gotta Chuck's?" Chuck was a neighbor boy from the trailer park who recently moved into a house three blocks away. At first she got up from her seat in a huff of anger to prune such insolence but she couldn't help feeling amused by it so she sat back down on her chair at the desk and smiled at the door. She wondered what happened to the mild natured child of a month ago--the child that was 5 but seemed like 4. This one seemed much older. She wondered if the formation of his first ultimatum was the emulation of an ultimatum she had given to him and could not remember or if it was from some innate incorrigible tendencies. She spent an additional half hour on the poem. She couldn't see that she was making any improvements. "Maybe it is perfect after all," she thought.

"Are you going to clean up the mess for Mommy?" she yelled. There was no answer.

She wrote a few sentences in her journal. For the first time she jokingly admitted, in its pages, the desire for MF to become a returning client. It wasn't really so much good sex that she craved as the companionship of a male friend or friendship in general. She had not exchanged perspectives of adult realities (such as so and so sending a resume through email on this advent called the Internet) nor had she engaged in racket ball competition since her friendship with Betty at Rice University. She had not had a steady boyfriend since early in her undergraduate education when she decided that men were special creatures who were uniquely loathsome in no lesser degrees than women. She felt a stagnancy of a life with little personal inside of it but her books, paintings, and the child who would be going away to school fairly soon. It was a bizarre version of stagnation in a life that by its prime purposes should not have been stagnating at all: by being a mother, she nurtured; by reading she was nurtured in the profound, and the profound was so unlike the pointless levity of socializing with living creatures; and by painting she rose into Godhood in the realm of ideas. And yet being wholly purposeful was such a solitary domain relegated to gods and not to creatures of movement who needed frivolity and interplay of ideas of the most shallow domain to feel alive. Between the need for a physical feeling that one man had bewitched upon her and that need for frivolity and friendship in the adult domain, she realized that such a recipe could very well be a toxic combination of ingredients. It was the baking of a vulnerability and she was not prone to consume vulnerabilities. Women meandered around as gadabouts while consuming their chocolaty vulnerability like bonbons but, she told herself, she was not a lowly woman.

She opened the bedroom door and walked out. She saw the fern in the living room. That one plant was intact, stagnant and alive in the purpose of its pot as she was in hers. She did not see any dirt anyplace. Even if Nathaniel had cleaned the floor it wouldn't have been done so neatly. Mouse stood there in front of her boldly. "Mouse, did you do something bad?" The cat looked at her dumbfoundedly. "Hmm, I

didn't think so," she said. So, the boy had lied to her about the cat defecating in the fern's soil. "How did he learn to lie?" she asked herself and her higher authority said that a boy did not need a model: he would use logic like a sophist. He would display his rationale like fireworks for dazzling and dazing one in darkness. He would dazzle and daze others into believing that such brevity of lights was a firm reality. Her higher authority said that using logic to one's advantage was an instinct no different than sucking and biting. Then she saw that the door was open.

"He didn't!" she said, knowing that he had. She put a bosky robe over her black negligee. In ways she was dressed as a soldier and as a witch and yet neither role seemed too germane. Mother Earth, Father sky, and her own wrath would do nothing to solve this situation. For five minutes she ran out of the trailer park and a block down the road but acting like a lunatic got her nothing but the split soul of a slipper. She swung a fist in the air and, as if she were a female version of Zeus, the lightning pierced the sky. Still, this did nothing for her. Would she act the maternal part of worrying, crying, and feeling angry and betrayed? Such a part was too ludicrous to conceive. "What if he gets lost? What if he gets hit by a car? What if he does?" she thought to herself. "I'm not linked to him forever. Even good mothers can't monitor a child's movements every second of the day. A child obeys his own self-centered little voice despite a guardian's best intentions. The world is a risky place. That's not my fault either. I've done nothing wrong." She locked all doors and windows but the window in her bedroom that she left half open. When he crawled through it like a thief hours later she gave him the spanking of his life. She was not sure if spanking was for the benefit of the child through negative reinforcement or to release the stress of a child's guardian. She couldn't see that it mattered.

Chapter Twenty One

As the first days of the school year came and went, Gabriele still vied for time through the sheer act of forgetting. Whatever apprehensions or misgivings she was experiencing about sending her child to school, they were such that she, nonchalant, would never claim them to be fears nor acknowledge any malaise about the inevitability of external influences on her son. And yet subliminal fears were pulling her away unaware like a sleeping motorist who gets towed away with the vehicle for the impounding. She simply forgot about the date for the school registration even though school buses were roaring about everywhere in the city. Hearing buses from a distance, she should have easily remembered failing to enroll him in kindergarten the previous year when he was five; but her denial was a thick opaque fog and what she didn't do last year slipped from her no differently than enrolling him into school this year. The higher authority of self remained her goddess; and it was keeping her wrapped in swaddling innocence. It was innocence consisting of a belief in the present moment that she had serendipitously fallen into the previous autumn.

During last autumn, Adagio was particularly insistent on getting her to do what Chuck's parents had done. Restive, she had to bite her lip and say nothing. Emulating or just imitating someone else, even if it were done for her son, made her feel awkward and look disconcerted if not gauche; and yet, thinking about it for a moment, she had to admit that raking leaves into piles was not a big request. She knew that it

would take some scavenging to pull together a pile or two of leaves but she decided that she could do this in her own unique way. She didn't mind simple challenges like this as long as she did not have to rake someone else's yard. She didn't want to meet neighbors for their small talk would be too unbearable. Those she had met before never used small talk as a step in the ladder toward more engaging topics. Each conversation was as if the previous ones never happened. Also these neighbors would pose personal questions to her and ask why she had so many male friends coming to the trailer at all hours. They would be pure hypocrites as if they weren't having sexual relations in their own trailers; and she would be there smiling at them but looking totally baffled as to why these superficial matters of what one did (action) instead of who one was (entity) were all that germane. She knew her relations were more innocent than theirs. Hers were for that needed substance called money but theirs were for the sleaze and pleasure of the moment; and if they were monogamous that showed an unnatural behavior indicative of psychological dependency. She could state boldly, "I think you are trying to ask what I do with these men who come to the trailer. Right? Of course, it is what you think. I'm a prostitute. Be sure to tell all your buddies." She could look them in the eyes and smile during the ensuing discussions. She would be able to declare such things and then talk affably about one neighbor's burgeoning tomatoes with superb poise but such frankness might wind up with a policeman on her doorstep, a short jail term, and a fine. She told herself that she would rake only in her own confined space clearly demarcated by a wooden fence and that such action would involve just a little imitation. She told herself that a little imitation was fine. After all, she could not claim herself to be 100 percent original. Even she imitated other people in myriad actions she never even considered from buying fashionable shoes to not running butt-naked in the streets.

The action of raking was at first a begrudging fulfillment of a simple request. Then it became merely using the scanty resources of the tiny plot surrounding the trailer to indifferently concoct what Chuck's father had done easily in the yard of that new double-wide trailer with its many and varied trees. A half-hour into the raking it refreshingly became an eagerly anticipated foray into childhood, which so many years ago had been smashed under the metal belt wheels of a metaphorical tank. With her son, she dived into piles, which she had raked for him in tandem. Inferior to the mellifluous smelling orange piles at Chuck's home (so she was told), these smaller, much greener, and dirtier mounds were a scanty mixture of dried leaves with freshly mowed weeds, sparse grass, and a couple bags of mulch. The piles were concocted but the experience of falling into them was anything but concocted. Her son, and the summons of fulfilling her role as a mother, inadvertently led her to the feel, taste, and smell of the present moment. During those times of last autumn, not yet experiencing the anxiety about necessarily having to send him off to school, she fell into the entity; and surprisingly, it wasn't something that one stared at from a beach. Mouth half open while plunging head first into the itching and asphyxiating pile of elements as dark as death, this ostensible foray into childhood belied the fact that the dive was really into the main artery of the heart of the entity. In that moment of seeing, feeling, smelling, and accidentally tasting the present moment other aspects of it were equally enlightening. She was surprised that for all her walks on various beaches, trying to make sophisticated judgments about life to match the thickets of her adult neurological connections, by comparison these had been wasted hours. Such attempts at staring at the ocean had never brought her as close to the entity as this. They didn't give her

much peace of mind. The oceans might have untangled some of her twisted logic but they always tangled her in a new set like seaweed adrift. Surprised that the entity had not been in the string of sacrosanct words one concatenated silently in the corners of the mind to catch truth the way a spider makes a web to catch its prey, she had found it to be in simple experiences gained from one's senses. What was even more surprising was that the entity could be sensed, for this empirical experience refuted the theories of Parmenides and Plato. Also, she was surprised that it was her son who, by this leaves-jumping, was leading her into a Gabrielish discovery and yet she told herself that being so surprised was rather foolish in a way. After all, how surprised should one be that the entity was grounded in simple pleasures? To be any merit at all to a life, truth had to be more than mere abstraction. And considering that insatiable and avaricious desires of adulthood for higher and more intense pleasures was a loose debris of discontentment only in the realm of the child (only of running to the feel of the wind, grass poking through the toes of the feet, the fascination of changes of division in light and shadow, and all considered in the pejorative as childish and foolish) was one on a solid form of happiness.

"Is it as simple as jumping in a bunch of leaves?" she posed to herself incredulously. But it was inevitable that with having had craven parental defectors and deserters march in and out of her nativity, having been run over by a tank, and having seen a Turkish beheading, the simple pleasures had eluded her. Violence had caused her to build her fort and look onto the world as a sentinel and sentinels were not equated with childish sentiments." She laughed in that strange Gabrielish mixture of profound and morbid levity after rising up from her second plunge into the pile and brushing off the leaf, grass, and weed concoction.

Now, with four days into the school year already passed, she was still avoiding the purchasing of groceries in the afternoons. She told herself that her artwork was more poignant when the sun was at its fullest; but really it had been from an avoidance of the yellow school buses that she would have encountered. Subconsciously she wanted to spend as much time with him as she could so she began to disregard the policy of him going to bed at 9:00. She would allow him to play games until he fell asleep on the sofa forcing her to carry him off to his bedroom. Since that autumn of a year ago she was living in the present moment through most of each day and disregarding the future as entirely as a mortal could. She repudiated any reality that went contrary to the motif of finding the entity through simple pleasures of the senses experienced in the present moment. She told herself that simple pleasures were the real and the true foundation of happiness but from them arrogant and greedy man made preposterous edifices--complete skyscrapers of selfishness and avarice that would fall down from any jet being slammed into them (any life crisis that tenuous carbon creatures of mortality were always bound to have).

[Sang Huin was seated on his bed with a laptop computer burning his skin. He realized that the World Trade Center metaphor was an anachronism for the story of Gabriele and yet it seemed to him that an omniscient and omnipresent narrator might well be 6 or 7 years ahead of the time.]

On this day, as all others, she was mixing various vegetables into a potpourri of soup that required as little culinary sense as an

undomesticated female needed to have. With vegetables being dumped in a crock-pot with a bit of water and pepper, it seemed to her that it was impossible for much to go awry. The lunch might have been monotonous but having little else from which to make a negative judgment, her son didn't complain about this point. His only experience was soup, pasta, and scrambled eggs that usually came out all right and pancakes and French toast that had a 50 percent chance of being burnt beyond recognition or going awry in the most unforeseen ways. Outside of giving objections about burnt comestibles, he was a truly ignorant savage; and concerning matters of culinary taste that was how she cared to keep him. When she asked him to wash his hands he went over to the sink and exclaimed, "Oh wow, chocolate."

"Get your hands out of that water! That's nasty looking stuff. Diarrhea looking, it seems to me."

"What's that?"

"The runs, my dear, the runs."

"The sink has the runs? It's sick?" She chuckled at his animistic thinking. Everything was alive in his judgment and, apart from some wild untoward behavior, he was a creature who was sensitive to the feelings of the whole world. She wished that she could keep him like this forever. The water pressure became inconsistent and unevenly went on and off in thrusts. "Diarrhea and constipation at the same time--hard life for the poor sink. Well, until they solve the problem here--whoever they are--use bottled water. Scrub with soap." As she stirred the soup she saw a yellow school bus drive into the trailer park and a kindergartner leaving it. Her half-day was over. "Do you know that girl?" she asked.

He looked out of the window. "No, she's new; but anyway, I don't play with them girls. They don't know how to play catch. They don't know what to do with balls of all sorts."

"How would you know that?"

"Chuck told me."

"Is that a fact? Well, you haven't seen your mother play racket ball before. It isn't exactly Olympic material but it's close. Hmm...oh, my, we got so carried away with God only knows what and it looks like we've missed the first day of classes once again. Mama Gabriele would teach you herself through all your twelve or thirteen years if she didn't have to make a living. Well, I don't know. Let's ponder this situation a bit longer." She stared at the yellow bus through her little kitchen window. She abhorred it. She stared at it with the intensity of a female version of Zeus wanting to strike it with lightning but the lightning backfired. She felt a migraine headache coming on. "Honey, do me a favor and share some of this soup with Mouse. The two of you can eat outside. Then take mouse for a walk in the trailer park. Go talk to the little Girl and see what she's up to. All alone, not knowing anybody in the trailer park, you should say hello." Her sentences were dangling modifiers; but she did not care about grammar since she had a headache. "Most people if left all alone will come to no good so go talk to her and save civilization." This idea went contrary to her life's model but she didn't care about the contradiction. She just wanted to stop the headache. "Mommy's got to

think now. Okay, scoot, scoot. Take the bottle of water with you. It will be like a picnic." She handed him the leash for the cat. When he was outside she locked the door. She felt the migraine intensifying like the footsteps of a wrathful god incrementally approaching her. She went into the bathroom and lit a joint. She watched a cloud of smoke rise into the fan that had been installed in the door. She inhaled her cannabis again and again.

"Miss Sangfroid--yes, you," said the higher authority with a sound and derision of her Aunt Peggy's voice, "look at yourself cowering in a toilet." The form was inconsistent. It subtly wavered between an appearance similar to that of Peggy from long ago and her own ideal form.

"Motherhood was giving me an excruciating headache." Gabriele chuckled at herself like a bashful girl and smiled painfully. "So I took a sabbatical where I could get one--the little girl's room. I'm sorry." She felt as if she were apologizing to her aunt for running away to Ithaca and not letting her see Nathaniel.

"You're sorry. You have your son walk the streets so you can cower in here smoking pot on the pot and you are sorry. Is that the only thing you can say?"

Gabriele chuckled at the dual meaning of the word, pot, but she was finding it more difficult to concentrate and she was beginning to feel guilty for being, or at least being perceived as being, a negligent mother. She, the philosophical dictator of herself, was unlike her hero, President Clinton. She inhaled before Puritanical scrutiny and admitted the inhalation. "Sometimes the pot works better than the pills at stopping the migraines, and sometimes as a mommy, a female needs to get high wherever and whenever she can. Please try to understand. Don't be so critical--not now. If you could speak less loudly, I'd appreciate it. I'm in pain here."

"Gabriele, such a lone soldier and yet so vulnerable," said the form gently. The form had become less blurry. The higher authority was now more distinct and Peggy was fading fast. This goddess or extraterrestrial of some kind had more of a peaceful countenance and a more self-confident temerity than before. Also, there was a halo about her head since sick people needed their mothers, gods, and saints.

"Poor, Gaby, time has run by like a shell shocked soldier, and she's accomplished nothing in her life but a bit of whoredom to keep body and spirit together. She wanted to be a revolutionary but has only followed the natural course of having gotten older."

"I became a mother. I can't call that nothing. There is some premature gray in my family but that isn't until one's late thirties--early forties. It won't happen to me. I'll have beautiful dark hair until they carry me off in a coffin--strike that, an urn for I will be cremated to go back to the elements immediately."

"Look at that once stalwart face in the mirror--is this a human face or a sponge that has sucked up too much water?" The ET's tone of voice was nurturing in spite of her words.

"I don't feel well."

"You've been overtaken by the mundane. Look out of the window at the volant clouds. Any frothy and floating substance natural or artificial will do: an ocean, trees waving in the winds, passing clouds, soap spinning around in a washer. Watching clouds in particular is instrumental to appreciate the infinite possibilities of colliding atoms in creation or the infinite possibilities of an unburdened life. Now look down at your mundane and sedentary world so bereft of possibilities, so insalubrious, so sickening. See your son on the steps. There he is with fingers of one hand down the cat's throat, and the other hand pinning it down. Hmm...now he's spoon feeding it something."

"Vegetable soup."

"Something. There's a bowl, a spoon, and something that looks like mud but okay, vegetable soup," said the ET. "Vegetables for a cat? Strange! Well, even though your son is outside, his presence is still here. It permeates everything in the trailer, doesn't it? You couldn't walk a minute from one room to the next without thinking of him: his smell, his things, and messes are everywhere. His storybooks and color books are the only things neatly on his shelf because he doesn't like them. They aren't animated."

"He's always been partial to movement just like any boy." She paused and thought. "Yeah, even when he goes out to play he is still everywhere in here--every room. It was just a few years ago, sitting on this very pot, when he was yelling, 'Mommy come wipe me' or 'Gabey, come wipe me'--something like that."

"Truly the sentimental substance of long term memories," said the higher authority indifferently.

"I half way wanted to desert him in a pasture along the highway."

"I dare say. Never part from your better instincts as they say. You have, I must tell you my dear girl, failed your ideals. The big toy car running on D batteries, the matchbox cars he crashes into walls, and that gun that shoots out big plunger shaped bullets that stick onto car windows--all of these items you have succumbed to buying for him even though initially you said that you wouldn't. Yes, he is a creature of movement. You've known this all along. And yet, choosing to ignore the fact that he goes through such tirades in favor of thinking him as a partner leading you to the entity, you have succumbed to his tantrums and tears in supermarkets and five & dime stores. You continually buy him toys that aggravate his worse propensities and all those chocolate pacifiers."

"He is exploring his world. He's trying on new versions of himself."

"He is a demanding, egocentric creature of movement far from the worlds of contemplation and you give into his extortion. He gives ultimatums and runs away from you at the drop of a hat only to be hugged later. What sort of graduate psychology classes at Rice University taught you parenting techniques like that?"

She laughed. "It is a little pathetic, I know."

"It's inane: a woman like you limiting herself to reproducing and

rearing young .You do this as though you can't find more purpose to life than this...someone like you deigning to define herself in mortal roles of birth, reproduction, and death to have someone to succeed you. Have you succumbed to being a woman, lost without a mommy role. Fool, experience your contumely now...Feel those wings that no one else has. You are innately volant if left to yourself. Cast him away. Let him fend for himself." All the time the higher authority was smiling and talking mildly like a mother reading a bedtime story.

"It isn't like that. I brought him into the world. I am responsible for him. Besides that, he has led me into--"

"Into leaves"

"Okay, into leaves; but now I have decided. There will be no school for this boy. I'll keep him here with me."

"You silly bitch!" yelled her higher authority vehemently. "I have better things to do than argue with you about things so boring and irrelevant to the scheme of things. The boy's already one year behind his peers. Being led to the entity is well and good but if the kid's your crutch you've got serious mental problems."

As if not hearing a word the higher authority was saying, Gabriele mumbled to herself, "Maybe I could avoid putting him into kindergarten again this year. Matter of fact, I'll teach him everything he needs to know throughout grade school and then he can go to school with his peers when he is 13. He wouldn't like being in kindergarten as the oldest one in the class anyway. I can't imagine it to be a kinder garden than what I have here in this home. Likewise, he wouldn't like first grade a year later because he'd be older than the other kids, or second grade, or the third--" The higher authority did not answer. She had vanished with the inhaling, coughing, and exhaling of a big puff of smoke; and meanwhile Gabriele was high and smiling widely. She was vertiginous with so much life running through her veins that she did not want to waste. It, like the atoms of the cosmos, was pouring, clotting, recycling, breaking up, and then flushing out into something new within her.

The marijuana had relaxed her and she was taking a piggy back ride on the shoulders of a Heraclitus shaped cloud. Opaque questions seemed interlinked and mysteriously solved: of motion versus contemplation; Parmenides versus Heraclitus; being the warm, soft, cuddly mother depicted in Harlow's monkey experiments so as to not have a traumatized monkey on her hands versus finding more purpose to life than rearing one's young; attachment versus independence; and the containment of her son versus the release of him. What solved these questions was the analogy that just as solar systems in the spilling universe rarely have planets capable of sustaining life, few are the contemplatives in the movements of sociable and voracious man. She told herself that she had only one life and she would not dilute it for any "kid ." She thought, "I'll do my thing and let him do his" but what she really meant was that she doubted that she was capable of making him into a better person if she isolated him. With the exception of creative goddesses like herself, a mind was a photocopy machine and a file cabinet. Her son needed to go to school and copy external forces for good or for bad and she needed to pull away from motherhood to contemplate and create even if it meant going back to her lonely solitary ways.

He felt as if he were extirpated and then without roots replanted in foreign soil; but at the same time as if he were something less than a boy and shrinking exponentially every moment he was in school. Like any kindergartner, daily he yearned for the mother he departed from and could not understand why he was ushered so much of the week into a bus that took him away from her. He didn't protest despite being tearful. He went like any semi-cognizant lamb and camouflaged himself shyly in the thickets and brambles of himself. Mrs. Graham told them to drink their pints of milk and eat their graham crackers, pledge allegiance to the flag, skip around her desk happily or not, draw the lines that were the parameters of form and create form by means of color, bang sticks and rattles rhythmically like African Pygmies, lace and tie shoes neatly, say their ABCs and the sounds they symbolized, listen to stories and articulate questions about them, obey calls for mandated naps on mats where one could never sleep, and try not to interrupt these activities with requests to go to the bathroom while at the same time not wetting one's pants. Two years went by. He was in his second year.

Touch football, soccer, gymnastics, and all realms of movement in PE class helped to compensate for this institutionalized life. The discomforts of confinement were also assuaged with the help of homeroom mothers like his who brought in treats. Gabriele's cheese and cracker concoctions once each month were woefully inadequate in comparison to preceding days of cupcakes; and cognizant of this she all the more emoted a self-confident poise in the distribution of her crackers. She was certain that no one yearned for things but experiences; and by believing in the pleasures he and his classmates would get from her little efforts, she made it so. Her presence was a lesson on the quintessence of reality where successful emulation in superficial ways could be bypassed if done confidently. He was glad for anything that would stifle the unpleasant but pervading shadow of Mrs. Dinosaur who often forced him to stand under a coat rack with his nose against the wall as coats and the shortage of breathable air encased him. These episodes happened for letting his imagination stow away on passing vehicles he could see from the window. She alone was not the gravamen of his long list of grievances. He hated having to keep track of paper and pens, Little Orphan Annie with her preponderance of fat who aimed dodge balls toward boys' balls, and Shirley and her hitgirls who, during recesses, would often pin him down on the merry-go-round for the smothering of kisses.

One day he was sitting in the classroom dreading another time of having his energy subjugated to the mat when out of nowhere came a mathematical question aimed and moving toward him as an arrow. He felt the sting, fidgeted worse than ever, perspired heavily, and began to blush. The corollary of looking stupid, he knew, would be his inevitable smothering within the heavy coats of the clothes rack for not being able to give an answer. He would be standing with his nose pressed against a wall while his classmates took their naps. He wanted to answer the question and yet he couldn't see how he could do this if he hadn't heard it. He was at a loss and he resented his predicament. He wanted both to cry and put more holes into the pothole-faced teacher with the aid of his rarely forsaken tools of rubber bands and quickly manufactured spit wads. His ethereal dreaminess, moving and emblazoned with the sun, was an unrecognized form of experience. Experience was knowledge as intangible and ineffable as daydreams probably were; and yet this dreaminess was being indicted by Mrs. Dinosaur and usurped by her mathematical abstractions. "I don't give a flying fuck about numbers" he told her with the honesty Gabriele extolled and espoused as

well as her word choice. His two front teeth were missing at the time so as he literally spit out the opinion in a lisp and retarded noise the teacher was stunned to hear profanity of the worse kind not only coming from a boy that was her pupil but in the tone of Daffy Duck. Words, wisps of vibrating air, which should have been as fleetingly unreal as any passing wind, were such indelible things. They couldn't be dropped into one's shoes like doodled parodies of the teacher that he and his classmates often exchanged so that they could be perused later in the toilet and flushed away invisibly with urine and excrement. In ways, an idea in sound permeated another being immediately and non-retractably like a noxious gas.

Before school had started it was as if Gabriele and Nathaniel were completely alone except for the clients. It was as if in her remote choice for a home she had the idea that she could plant a society like a garden, water it nicely, and extirpate it of weedy or symbiotic associations. It was as if she believed that when left to her guidance, allowed to spin around happily in play according to his own benign whims, and following nothing but the occasional orphic music of the ice-cream truck, her son would be a self-contained paradigm of happiness. Back then when he was four and five she had two years of really believing that such bliss would go on perpetually and she half dreamed that if she succeeded with him, she could advocate Gabrieleism everywhere. It would be her movement--a philosophy of self-containment and human empowerment to ward off loneliness, curiosity, and hormones that always stunted intelligent beings from pushing onto the next species. Guarding against these foibles, according to her, would make one less of a sociable and hedonistic monster than he or she would be otherwise.

And yet, despite her conviction that her strange life was the way of truth, she had her misgivings about it. There were times she hated clients who had banged forcefully within her; and that tacit hate shot out like lasers from her eyes. It would be directed toward situations such as loud cellular telephone conversationalists interrupting her contemplative sketches in the park, and bank tellers who closed the counters to go to lunch once she arrived at the head of the queue with her non-taxable, ill-gotten gain. With the bank tellers in particular she wanted to snap off their noses like the ends of green beans. Also, there were times within her migraines when her stalwart ship felt puny and spun around in waves with all abilities to track its coordinates failing to operate. In illness she often wondered if her ideas about life were nothing but rabid madness. She wondered, at times, if denuding a human with her Gabrielism was like picking off the meat of the man or woman to get to the real human; and since she was smart enough to have reservations about her logic, everyday she continued to put her son on the yellow school bus. "Anyhow," she thought many times through these three years, "rightfully, there are laws against keeping children out of schools and breaking laws to live with an ignorant savage is more trouble than its worth." She was just sorry that she couldn't afford the time to home school him herself or send him to a private school.

From imagined ideas of Rita/Lily seemingly more real than the carbon-flesh copy, Gabriele drew her sitting on a bench in the mall admiring all the smiling facades of sociable creatures. According to Gabrielish logic, mall shoppers had such hobbies as retribution for having to prostitute a living and having to forsake the slow contemplation of truth and goodness in the fast pace monster called

society. Gabriele drew anxious and hurried desperation in the smiles of her mallhoppers, depicting them with the rectangular forms of grasshoppers. She thought about the fact that, outside of clients, Lily was always her family's only peripheral link to society. She wondered if it had been for the fact that in her confused state and the changing labels that doctors pinned her with, Lily was a society that was not part of the society at large.

Gabriele was not intrigued with other people since she found herself to be her main subject of interest and wonder. Riding into the depths of herself was oceanic but floating on the rivers of others in conversation was like having to carry the raft half of the time because the river consisted mostly of nothing but sledge and rocks. Many were the years in which she preferred the companionship of herself; and from childhood her eyes became incrementally hard and cold to others. She had to admit that having a hard haughtiness did nothing to make the world into a gentler and more affable place. If one could shop for a character before acquiring it she knew that hers would not be her first choice; and yet she had it because it was the natural consequence of a military family. From her mother and then Peggy and her husband she had been assailed with criticism (where she sat, where she stood, how she sat, how she stood, what she put on her plate, why the quantity she put on the plate, the time she spent in her room, the antisocial tendencies that had to be inherent for anyone to go into a bedroom as much as she did, how she parted her hair, whose comb she had used to part it even though it was always her comb, what she wore, how she shouldn't be wearing it since she shouldn't be acting like a princess or a tomboy, why she chose idiots to associate with as friends...). Still, it had been to the glory of herself. She told herself that the war games within the boot camp of family had made her fortified. She did not need people in her life. There might be some level of social interaction that was psychologically indispensable but even this sustenance of sociability could be breathed in and released as air. She would cling to no one; and she continually told herself that one day she would go to Antarctica.

Gabriele thought again about her interaction with this woman, Rita/Lily, Lily/Rita, Rita/Rita, or whatever. Sometimes she was truly empathic with her. For the most part, she used her as that extra person out there with whom she and Nathaniel could mention from time to time. Mostly she didn't give a damn about her one way or the other. Gabriele rued and ruminated about this fact. "Oh well, it's the human condition," she told herself as if she had the perfect excuse. She wondered if Rita and all isolated halfwits needed to imagine someone as caring about them even if such people really did not care. Just by being that imagined benefactress, she argued to herself, she helped the girl without even having to do it in reality. As she was thinking this she heard knocking on the door.

She put a wad of tobacco into her mouth. "Who is it?" asked Gabriele as if there could be infinite possibilities. "G-a-b-r-i-e-l-e," sang Rita. It was a sing-songey, monotonous, and lethargic tune. "Identify yourself," said Gabriele and then quickly began to move the canvas, tripod, brushes, and paint into her bedroom. The painting wasn't completed and she didn't want to respond to questions about it. More importantly, she did not want to be made to feel that she owed the painting or a replica of it to the unwitting model. "I'm Lily."

"Lily who?"

Lily giggled audibly through the closed door. "Lily Rita"

"Those are first names. What is your last name?"

"Nothing special. Just Smith."

"Kennedy Smith of the Kennedy dynasty--are you from the family of wealthy politicians?"

"No, nothing special. Hardware store."

"A hardware tycoon."

"Dad's a worker; but he supervises others--a manager. Nothing special."

"I think that is special." She opened the door. "Come in, Miss Kennedy Smith. Sit down over there while I pour you whiskey and cola without the whiskey." She had to admit to herself that she found her little friendship with Rita/Lily rather amusing. What more could one want from a friendship? It was fresh air in the stale cellar of one's mind.

As she took a bottle out of the refrigerator and poured the content into glasses on the counter, she looked onto this pathetic society that was hers. Rita/Lily's feigned smile was lasting an abnormally long time and waxed and waned awkwardly. "Man problems?" asked Gabriele.

"Sort of," she giggled bashfully. "Really, it's not having one. I feel lonely. I don't know what to do with myself."

"You're not supposed to date anyhow. Didn't you say that the group home got you a job waiting on tables in the concession area of the skating rink?"

"Semi-independent. I'm in semi-independent. Semi-independent counselors."

"Whatever. Same counselors; but okay, let's be precise: semi."

"I feel alone in the evenings."

"Read a book."

"Too tired to read. Gabriele, why don't you get married?"

Gabriele brought the drinks and sat down in her director's chair.

"I'd need a boyfriend first." She wondered if she had one, a hundred, or zero. She wasn't exactly sure what constituted a relationship with a man. Furthermore, she wasn't even remotely sure what a marriage was either: a couple of signatures on a sheet of paper, matching bath towels that said his and hers, or a declaration of two people as a unit which would then be naively believed and acknowledged by outsiders as having legitimacy.

"You are so clever and smart. Clever and smart guys would die for someone like you."

"What would I want with a man, Lily? I've already got the kid and he would fritter away my time every chance he could if he weren't in school. My god, after being a masseuse all day, it's bad enough to have one more male around here let alone two. I don't want to devote the time Adagio doesn't extract from me to fulfill more male demands. Then there are all those womanly things: to continually ask myself if some guy really loves me and how I can become slimmer and more desirable for him and all that crap. Worst of it all would be jealousy when he sleeps with someone else on a bad hair day. It always happens. I'd be eroded away and then I'd start asking myself who the hell I was"

"But love--not being alone."

"Perfect equation. Love is many selfish equations like that. I don't know. A female has to be a puppet taking back her own gossamer strings or she will follow the movements of love into the abyss. As for being alone, it is the only time to be free to sail in oneself without having to answer to anybody. A relationship is like trying to put on some fashionable pants that are a size too small with him trying to get into them too. No thanks." She spit out her tobacco in the trashcan and then drank the cola.

"Is that stuff good?" asked Lily.

"Snuff, Lilly. Not stuff! Do you want some chewing tobacco?"

"No...that is I don't think so...well, maybe a little." She laughed. Gabriele shared the substance. Lily began to chew for a few seconds and then reached her finger in to extract it from the crevices of her teeth.

"Do you have an empty beer can?" she panicked. She began to gag. Gabriele moved the trashcan near Lily and bent her face. She spit it out but didn't vomit.

"Maybe you should wash out your mouth and then drink your coke."

Rita/Lily ran to the bathroom, turned on the tap water, and then began gargling with water and then with mouthwash.

"That minty stuff sure has a good taste, Rita," yelled Gabriele toward the bathroom. "Make sure you don't swallow the damned stuff or we'll be doing this again."

Lily gargled, spat, repeated the process, and then yelled back toward Gabriele, "Do you miss Nathaniel, your Adagio?"

"Lily, you ask the same old questions again and again forcing me to come up with new answers to everything from why I don't have a boyfriend to if I take a crap when I get up in the mornings."

Rita laughed awkwardly for both were subjects she often asked about. "I want..." She gargled again and spat the mouthwash out. "I like to find out if people's ideas change."

"This people doesn't change. I'm glad the little--" She was going to say "little fucker" but she censored it out. "...guy is in school as I've said for the umpteenth time."

Gabriele chortled when Rita/Lily came back looking battered and weakened from her experience with tobacco. "Rita," she said, "It will take practice but before long you'll get the hang of it. You'll be chewing tobacco just like one of the boys. Then after more years of experience...if you practice...you'll be a pro' like me. You might even begin to condition American Barbie dames in the proper ways to spit it out like a cannon."

Lily laughed diffidently since she was in a depressed state and words were running about nonsensibly in her head like the yelping cries of wild savages. She sat down stiff as lead and Gabriele could see the terror of visceral loneliness in her face. She was afraid that the girl would be anchored like that during the rest of the day as a hindrance of her painting. "Oh," said Rita/Lily suddenly out of her saturnine depths, "I nearly forgot. The call. In my room."

"What call?"

"Huh?" asked the obtuse girl

"What call?"

Rita tried to reign in her thoughts and focus on where she was at and her relationship with Gabriele. "The school couldn't reach you. You've got to call them. They said it was really important." From her pocket she pulled out a slip of paper that had a phone number on it and gave it to Gabriele.

"Hmm, okay," said Gabriele. She took her telephone out of a drawer and put it in the phone jack.

When she arrived at the door of the home room with a bag of treats dangling inside a fist, her son's teacher told her that she had go go to the principal's office. The word, "must," took some swallowing but she accepted it magnanimously. She could see that the teacher, Mrs. Recla, found her daunting. The proof was in the face that was being taxed by not being able to frown. She knew that she was emoting a more civil aversion than the teacher could muster. As Gabriele tried not to conceptualize her as "the dinosaur" or "Reclasaur," demeaning second grader terminology, there was a subtle smile on her countenance (feigned or not). In part, it was amusement about the word, Reclasaur, but it was mostly of one who was valiently beyond worldly matters. With her equanimity she also displayed an obdurate, formidable haughtiness no different than any engraving or statue from Akhenaten to Lincoln, or Joan of Ark to Eleanor Roosevelt.

Indifferent to the fact that this was not her appointed time for being a homeroom mother and by the disposition of a teacher who was usually more affable (feigned or not), Gabriele officiously submitted her treats. Like a poorly written essay, they were glanced at and rejected snobbishly. She wanted to check up on her son who often sat in the back row but she was prohibited from looking into the room. She wanted to ask the Reclasaur what he had done to make her so "uptight" but Gabriele changed her mind. She decided that unless it were an emergency (and the teacher would have undoubtedly given the details of an emergency) she should defer knowledge as long as she could. She imagined that once she returned home there would be more to swallow than just cheese and crackers.

In the girl's room Gabriele lit a cigarette and stared at herself in a mirror. She didn't care what others thought of her but in a world where only appearances mattered she thought that wrapping up what little beauty she did possess would go further with a female principal. She did not believe in appearances but she was pragmatic enough to realize that appearances had their uses. Eyeglasses would make her look more intellectual if not outright erudite and opaque. Her turgid opinions would have more merit in such a look. She pinned her hair up into a bun and put on some tinted glasses that she rarely ever used. She smoked for a few minutes, staring in awe at this formidable higher authority being reflected from the mirror. Smoking like this in front of a mirror in the girl's room reminded her of her actions from the age of ten and as she chuckled inwardly to herself she then lifted the plug in the sink and lodged the cigarette down the drain untracably. In the principal's office she scanned an issue of Jack and Jill for 45 minutes. Then she became irascible and restless.

"Miss," said Gabriele with contumely toward the secretary who was the only visible party responsible for making her wait, "will it be much longer? I do have things to do and I can pretty well tell at this point that Jack and Jill is not very good reading--not for me, it isn't."

The secretary smiled painfully. "I'm sure that you won't have to wait much longer. I'm sure Mr. Quest will be with you shortly."

She wondered about waiting like this. Did authority figures believe that making others wait aggrandized their influence? For her, it lessened it. If such a person was not readily available to cater to her high ideals she assumed that he or she was a derelict in a back office playing solitaire or a lascivious Neanderthal playing footsie with one of the office staff. "Mr. Quest? Aren't I supposed to see Mrs. Simmons?" asked Gabriele.

"No," said the secretary.

"Who is this Mr. Quest?"

"Mr. Quest is the vice principal," said the secretary.

"Of course," she told the secretary. "Who else better to handle vice" Now she knew for sure that being invited here as this less than honorary guest would involve disciplinary matters. Quest's guest: there would probably be the abrading of both the son and the caregiver. She wondered whether this was about her son at all. Perhaps it was an inquest probing into her personal life to which she alone would be excoriated. It was a rather enticing thought to be under the spotlight as the pillory of ignorant people. It would give her the chance to refute their ideas to make these authorities realize that they were the ones strumpeting themselves as loud as trumpets. It was she who did it softly in her own little massage parlor in a trailer and only when in need of money and for as brief a time as she could manage. How many wives and husbands (wives most saliently) became such all of their lives to better their own fortunes: this was the idea that she wanted to haunt the corridors of their minds. If it would not besmirch her son and had no bearing on him, she would air her dirty laundry. She would submit a slutty biographical profile that would leave them irrevocably in a state of shock and awe but this would not be the case. She knew that this misbehavior (misbehavior being defined as action that was not sensitive

to the feelings of others) would be detrimental to her son and so she did not want to go into the school to be scrutinized by these creatures.

"No," she thought again, "even if they have found out what I do for a living they wouldn't have arranged a meeting to confront me directly about it. The matter would go through social services." She foolishly released some of her desultory thoughts to the secretary as she stared at the Jack and Jill magazine. "How strange," she said, "that someone should wind up with such a grandiose name, but I guess it wasn't his choice to be named Quest. Good god, the images in Jack and Jill are so violent. What with little children waiting all morning for the inevitable paddling and picking up magazines which have cartoons catered to Charles Manson it is a wonder that there aren't more school shootings. Wouldn't you say so, Mrs....I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

The vice-principal opened the door. If it hadn't been for the obscurity of her eyes behind her glasses it would have seemed that he was penetrating her eyes with intimate familiarity.

"Mrs. Sangfroid?"

"Yes, something like that," she said.

"That's not right?"

"Miss, if you don't mind; and even though I am a disciple of Freud, as much as I can be a disciple of anything, the pronunciation is "fraw" and not "Freud."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. I've been called worse things."

"Would you care to come into my office?"

"Sure," said Gabriele with a smile. She walked into Spiderman's web with great insouciance and sat down. "Hmm...I haven't been in one of these rooms since I was a little girl and got paddlings."

"Were you a rather naughty child," he asked facetiously.

Gabriele smiled at his boldness. She again thought it had a familiar warmth to it. "Not so bad. Actually, I was diligent enough. I just stayed to myself a bit much -- a very German characteristic but kids hate that sort of thing--maybe not in Germany. Who knows? Hating my stand-offishness they blamed me for what they did. Well," she interjected with a laugh, "I was a bit of a rascal too. I didn't squeal on them but got even -- putting bubble gum in girl's braids and things like that. I got the paddle on many occasions. I never cried though...but you don't want to hear about me way back then."

"No, it's okay. You don't have to stop so quickly for me. Learning about children's behavior is part of my job besides reinforcing student codes and the curriculum--understanding them--even kids as big as you with kids of her own-- and making policies suited to them...being flexible. Paddling too if needed."

"So, I guess it was you who asked me to come here."

"Yes, right."

"Concerning Nathaniel?"

"Yes, in a way. As you know, Miss Sangfroid, children aren't sheltered from violence in images or words any longer. The effects of television violence are debated year after year and nobody does anything about it. The way children behave today at this school is the way they might have behaved in Harlem or the Bronx ten years ago. I see more and more children who aren't sheltered from baseness. It's more than just catching a couple older children smoking in the bathroom once every few months: drug addiction, brawls, foul mouths--fouler than anything I would ever have imagined. These base influences make the children something different than children and I suspect that not being allowed to be innocent they won't see anything good in themselves or the world when they are adults -- just the baseness. Wouldn't you think so? They would become full of rage."

"I don't know," she said circumspectly. "Let's hear specifics if you are talking about Nathaniel."

"You are surely aware of him swearing the way he does or if he doesn't swear in front of you--"

"He does sometimes."

"Okay," he reaffirmed mildly. He found some satisfaction in the honesty. "Then maybe there are too many R-rated videos being played at home or other media where he might be hearing words like--"

"Fuck? From me, but he only uses words like this in choice situations."

"Lady, there are no choice situations for that," scoffed the vice-principal.

"I don't like the pejorative way you said the word, "lady." She stood up. She couldn't imagine being called a more vulgar word."

"I think we should talk about this. Sorry, I didn't mean to be disrespectful. You are obviously highly educated and I want to hear what you have to say. If we don't talk about it now sooner or later he'll get into trouble even if we ignore it this time."

She sat down. With unapologetic indifference she said, "Does it happen very often?"

"Not that I'm aware of but it shouldn't happen once. It was directed toward one of our teachers."

"Nathaniel's home room teacher?"

"Yes."

"The one who puts him in the coats with his nose against the wall-- the one they call the Reclosaur. Yes, I've heard about her. As a homeroom mother I've witnessed her. Matter of fact, I was planning to come to see the principal about this Mrs. Recla. You just gave me the

incentive. Do you approve of teachers doing that to students?"

"Not really; but from what I've heard he never pays attention in class."

"Who would, with violence being perpetrated in the classroom. Would you pay attention to this discussion if I threw coffee in your lap? Of course, not. You'd be concerned about how you feel from coffee being spilt on you. We learn what we have to learn to survive in our environment but if the environment is all bad than we withdraw from it. Daydreaming is one of many defense mechanisms not listed in psychology texts. It's used by children when old things like Recla don't know how to make them enjoy learning. It's used to escape if confined in violent environments. If he is stripped of daydreaming and is being coerced back into an unfriendly environment he'll use words--any words violently. Sure, with enough words being used violently as a teenager one then moves them into the concrete realm of actions. I really should remove him from school altogether. This is not the road I want him traveling on."

"I'll ask Mrs. Recla to not use him as an example in front of the class. Discipline like that can be humiliating to a boy."

"Damned right it can."

"Do you always use profanity in your home in what you call choice occasions?"

"I sometimes do. I like to feel free to let words gush out but I'm careful not to use them in violent ways."

"Well, he used the F word. I think of that as violent. Don't you?"

"No, I don't," she said. "Words aren't innately bad." She knew. The big bang was violent. Movement was violent. She knew too well that any sexual act was a violent shot at conception wrapped in pleasurable hallucinogenics. Virtually all music, movies, and other forms of popular culture were the celebration of sex, a celebration lasting much longer and more indeliably than the act being celebrated; and so culture was violent. Commerce was definitely strife. It was a competitive attempt to get the goods in a world of limited resources. A world with people tripping over each other in their competitive movements flooded one's senses. Noise was continually interrupting the contemplative assessment of what one has taken in with the senses or invented in the sacred domain of the mind. Movement and noise were the real culprits; and yet humans, sociable creatures of movement, would never indict them. Such beloved villians that brought them titilation were always allowed to go free. "Again, you seem to think that violence or love for that matter is in words instead of the love and hate moving them about. That is ludicrous especially with small children who experiment with language and haven't learned the appropriateness of words for various situations. When Nancy Sinatra sang, 'One of these days these boots are going to walk all over you' the word boot changed--maybe not indeliably but at least during the year of the popularity of the song. All words are sounds. Negative and positive connotations to words are constantly changing. 'Conversation' meant sexual intercourse in the seventeenth century and 'intercourse' meant conversation. Haven't you ever been on the bleachers at a great baseball game and yelled out, "What a fucking

great hit."

The vice-principal laughed. "Well, all right, maybe well-meaning men with cans of beer in their hands might slip on occasion and say such things but again that is adults. I guess you don't see the problem."

"Listen, Mr. Quest. What is your first name?"

"Michael."

"Do you have a middle name?"

"Yes, but why do you want to know that?"

"I don't know. I do. I like to know who I'm talking with."

"Frasier."

"Well, Michael Frasier Quest, I apologize that my son said the F word to his teacher. All right? This was disrespectful and I'll talk with him gently, nose free and out of the coat rack, and we'll see if we can calmly detach this word from his lexicon. And I guess you will have a talk with his homeroom teacher about proper ways to discipline a child that can be reprimanding but reassuring. Now, do I think that being playful with the English language is a bad reflection on my son, no I don't. Creative people find creative and positive ways to use words. Still, as I said, I'll remind him that the use of this one in particular has its limitations in society...that it can be offensive in most situations. Children are intelligent creatures. They seek approval. If you explain the reality to them, they tend to emulate the instruction."

"Fine," he said. "I think we can leave it there."

"What is that?" she asked. She pointed to a file that had her name on it.

"Oh, it isn't really anything. Just some information I found--merely notes--to help me know you a little bit before you came here."

"May I look?"

"Well, okay. I guess that would be fine." She could see that his thoughts sank back with his eyes. She knew that he did not want her to see these notes and so she wanted to see them with more yearning.

She took out a sheet of paper. She was relieved that there was just one. She read: Gabriele Isabella Sangfroid N 32 -- graduate of the University of Kansas; a Master's degree in criminology at Emporia State; a Master's degree in psychology at Rice University; worked for the state prison system in Kansas; and although not currently on public assistance such as food stamps and AFDC gained Federal Emergency Monetary Aid, FEMA, to pay utility expenses in January of last year; foodstamps once one month in 1990; no criminal record." She looked at him sternly.

"This information is that obtainable?" she asked.

"Between state authorities and schools, it is."

"I don't care," she said indifferently but with a sotto voce of

acerbity. "Make your little notes; type them up; publish them. People are amused by so little."

"It's just a note."

She nodded. "I know that but I'm not noteworthy." Even though she proudly scorned this bit of voyeurism, she again felt relieved that there wasn't more.

She could imagine him having asked her how she supported herself and her child financially. This question would have forced her to explain how she had considered all prostitution that every human did in life and had chosen the physical version to be the most honorable. It would have brought her such sadistic pleasure to watch him squirm around in iconoclastic ideas the way a convict had to adapt to prison or a mouth to the wiggling substance of hideous tasting Jello. Fortunately for both of them, he did not ask. She got up from her seat thinking how ignorant he was of the earliest essays and arguments about education. Even centuries ago intellectuals believed that education should not be indoctrination or to learn a practical skill, but exposure to important ideas that would help to guide an individual's perceptions. "Well, Mr. Quest, it's been a pleasure," she said as she shook his hand. "Just remember that if you soften Recla's approach toward Nathaniel I can't exactly guarantee what he will say to her at all times but I can guarantee that the vowels and syllables he uses will be benign. They will be creative and not hateful. Please talk to this easily offended teacher and remind her not to put him in with the coats anymore. That is if she wants to not deal with me in any other way than with a smile on my face and cheese and crackers in my hands."

Chapter Twenty-Two

He had assumed the continuum of excitement in the exotic anomaly of living together with a man. In the first month of living with Seong Seob he believed (as much as his ruminations allowed) that a union with a man would be perennial splendor. Back then he thought it would be more emotionally and intellectually superior to what his parents felt toward each other. There would be no transfer of a wife's affections to the children; and not having shared property, lackadaisical rose, shrub, and tree plantings and the conversations thereof would not bury him alive in a landslide of the mundane.

One night in particular Sang Huin was bored with love making toward his friend. Love was yearning for what one lacked and now, with all this time of having him, he could not sense that wish to possess what he had months earlier obtained. And yet like all other times they nonetheless climaxed to sleep the way one might eat some leftover pie to wash a pan.

Somewhere into 2:00 in the morning the ghost of his sister, Jun Jin, eclipsed over his brain and he woke in the shadow and heat of its passing. He was thinking of her progressively less all the time. Indeed, she was passing into a realm no different than nameless, traceless ancestors diffusing out and away like the molecules that once composed a mist. But still she did not go easily. If not clasping onto him chokingly as one who, dead, was nonetheless drowning, she would slam him against the internal walls of his brain for trying to relegate her into oblivion. She would definitely not go easily.

He felt a headache and imagined Gabriele's as well. He tried to shrug off both but was only able to dismiss what he imagined hers as being. He looked at the rising and falling of Seong Seob's chest within the silvery tinted shadows of twilight that fell through the curtain of their bedroom. The breathing of this friend was harmonic beauty and, at that moment, he halfway yearned for him.

Evading Gabriele motioning for him in the hallway as if he were supposed to go into the bathroom to help her vomit, he went into the living room and turned on the American military station, AFKN. New divisions of soldiers were being sent to Kuwaiti bases for another confrontation with Iraq. Pyongyang had recently dismissed nuclear monitors. The troops at the Itaewon base and at the DMZ were on a heightened alert to North Korean actions. They were the same old unresolved conflicts. "Feelin' good," said a soldier in military uniform before a television camera. "Feelin' the adrenaline. Glad I'm here to serve American interests and the people of South Korea, practicing war games and the like. I and my unit - all these great men from every division - are ready to go into action any minute we're requested to fight." Peace, thought Sang Huin, was not the natural state. Being titillated by the infinite possibilities in sexual liaisons with strangers and a propensity for violence were both the natural state.

Sang Huin turned on his computer. He could only jot down Nathaniel's thoughts. "The car is hot. He feels the burning sensation of his legs against the upholstery. He likes the heat. It prompts him to not delay by thinking, but just to move quickly. There is something pleasing in the car passing the world as wind. It almost makes him feel that he can pass through anything: through another car, or through the side of an embankment. He does not know where he is going." Sang Huin stopped. He was being taken downstream with his memories. They pulled him into them because they were the substance of who he was. As the founder of philosophy, Thales, stated, everything was made of water.

Sang Huin, this Shawn or Sean depending on how he spelled his nickname, had returned home from one of his last days of his senior year in high school to find his sister, Jun Jin, crying on the bottom step of the staircase. Her eyes were black and swollen and they were as dark as marble. She didn't seem real.

"Who did this to you?" he demanded, although he believed that he knew. He approached her slowly and solemnly. He pulled the strap of his book bag beyond his clavicle and allowed it to slide down his arm. He propped the bag against the side of the first step. It wasted a minute. He wanted to avoid this situation and a protective, invisible wall was around him. He felt as if he were watching a movie of quasi-real beings in an unusually personal situation that was just somewhat believable. He felt that both he and his sister were unreal just like the unreal situation he was facing. He was reluctant to broach the subject and he found his voice faltering when he repeated the question for a second time. The softness of an uncertain voice awakened her from the withdrawal in a capsule of non-being. She responded for she knew uncertainty and to hear it in another being coaxed her to come out of her own protective shell to acknowledge his suffering as well as her own.

"Help me," she said.

"How?" he asked.

"I don't know -- I don't -- just be with me nowE that's all," she whispered. She gave to him what she had: a bit of a morose smile. But, water to cement, his expressions were hardening from it. She could see this and again crawled up into herself. She was languid and bent despite her stiffness but her feet were tilted to the floor and suctioned into the frontal base of the step like an upside down insect. One of her hands had such a firm tightness as if enmeshed in the railing and the other one dangled without movement.

There was a child within him who was uncertain, who would placate and comfort those in distress from the knowledge of distress himself; and thus for a splendid moment he wavered non-judgmentally. And yet it was his father's tone he wanted to emulate. Shawn was now the representative of family with its senior members away at work. He could listen, comfort this stiff battered being who like him was a puppet being pulled from all directions, fragmenting, searching for truth in void, and at a loss with radically different thoughts, feelings, and probable outcomes. And yet there was the tone he started from, a tone he could not diverge from now that his face was stern, the gift was despised, and she, this older sister was absconding into herself once again. He had to stay on one track if he wanted to be a man at all. He reinforced his earlier words, the words of manhood.

"Whoever did this to you -- I'll kill him. You tell me now!" He blared his visceral rage. Alien manhood was disgorging out of him like a geyser as it did in all males when forced to forfeit being human for being men. The compounds being disgorged were obdurate, callous, and hard.

"Please don't tell mama or daddy!" she mumbled weakly.

"They'll see! Look at you!"

"I know." She pierced him with being lost. He was lost too but resented having it being mirrored onto him. It wasn't the model for being a man that he could pass onto his sons should he have sons, and he felt that he should have sons no matter what his sexual feelings were.

"What's happened to you?" he asked mildly. "For one year you've been a stranger. I can guess. I'm always left guessing."

"I've been ill -- so ill."

"Ill?" He wanted to believe her. Strangely, he wanted to believe in viruses that blackened eyes. He wanted to believe in physical sickness, which often had cures. It wasn't a major divergence: sickness meant being overtaken by a virus that was alien and so with love it could be as unwanted as this. One could be inundated with pleasure-neurotransmitters like anyone whose consciousness succumbs to a knockout gas. This was his subconscious association; and yet consciously he wanted to believe that she was literally ill and despised her for not being so.

"Take my hand. Let's go upstairs."

"I'll die if I go up there."

"No! Mom, Dad, and I will help you to become wellE if you're sick."
He emphasized "if you're sick" doubtfully. Then he became aware of the fact that he was playing a game the way he had always been led around by childish games when he was a naive and gullible boy. He hated her for making him look foolish once again. "Go up, June!"

"Sang Huin, if I go to my bedroom I'll slit my wrist. I'll jump from the window headfirst. I don't know. I'll end it somehow."

"What are you saying?"

"Feel it!" She put his hand on her lap. "It's alive."

He took back his hand in revulsion of it being placed there. Then his face grimaced.

"You're pregnant with a guy that gives you this!" He lifted her lowered face in his palm. "What's the name of this guy?" he demanded. He knew and it wasn't just a guy whom she had bred with but the adrenaline of being with one who had power, the glitter of being with one who had money and influence, the love of a body, and the friendship with this man who was her boss. She had been seduced by the demonstration that some male birds give to prospective mates when dangling worms from their mouths. It was the American dream. He had always believed that womanhood and prostitution were the same thing. "Release your hand from the railing."

"No, please, I can't go up!"

"Who's to say anything about going up. We're going down, down to him. I'll give you to him since you are his second marriage. He signed it with that thing growing inside you. Maybe you'll be his wife's servant. You're definitely his whore. You've seen this home for the last time."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Absent of Christ, this Easter morning began like many of those secular Easters of earlier years: getting up to fix some scrambled eggs in her bosky bath robe only to find her attempts at providing a substance of animal protein/vitamin B12 rejected for the chocolate effigy of a rabbit in the refrigerator, feeding him more chocolate than he typically got on a given day, and fixing dye in bowls so that he could color his eggs. She fixed some breakfast for herself. It was a self-made Eucharist of thickly burnt whole wheat toast, some beer, and a grapefruit. When he finished dabbing eggs in various dyes and giving to each a distinct design, she poured out some cereal for him.

He sat down with his usual fidgetiness at having to sit at all and let his cornflakes get soggy as he picked at them with his spoon. Easters were for him like walking about mesmerized in a chocolatey mist. He was preoccupied with catching the ethereal on his tongue; and Gabriele's bottle of beer looked more ethereal than the rabbit. His incessant whining for some of her beer caused her to doctor a bit of his orange juice in the hope that he would be satisfied if not happy in the last vestige of pure childhood.

As they consumed the putrid and execrable half-baked scramble of her macabre sense of a meal they heard church bells ringing superfluously at a distance in downtown Ithaca. Church bells were the metallic clanging for the assembly of superstitious tribes. Still, because she always heard more of them each Easter, they seemed melodious the way simple Christmas music fused with the happiness of being with family members while decorating a tree. And yet she knew that once he disregarded eggs, chocolate rabbits, and store-bought sugar cookies for more selfish pleasures, her Easters would entirely vanish. A child grew out of pleasures the way he grew out of his britches; and once this happened such clanging church bells would no longer have anything musical within them. They would only be noise. She sighed, thinking that all benevolent myths washed away like the sandcastle he had made for the sun long ago.

It was just a little over a year ago, while pinning damp clothes onto the clothes line, that he wanted to know the truth as to why his friends were repudiating Santa Claus. She explained that they were right in what they said; and that in a world such as this, what one saw was pretty much what one got. It was a testament in favor of empirical evidence. It was a statement that ideas were sometimes the copies instead of physical reality being copies of ideas. She told him, "Reindeer flying from house to house in a population of 6 billion people in 6 habitable continents just doesn't cut the mustard." Now she regretted that she had said it.

When they finished eating, she sent him out to play in the streets while she fornicated with a couple newly arrived clients. Following such extroverted activities that required all her acting abilities and social skills to be on target, she sank back into her hallowed, private domain. She drew a few freelance sketches for a local card company, cleaned the trailer hurriedly, and then began preparing lunch. It would be little bits of beef in gravy to be put on toast, which she so aptly and succinctly labeled as "shit on a shingle;" but for now it was butter in a skillet spewing anew in streams of orangish yellow sizzlings and sputterings like early components of galaxies swirling out into open space.

"Over here, Miss Gabriele. Howdy and top of the morning to you!" She looked toward this strange Southern and Irish sound and saw her son walking back and forth on stilts before the kitchen window. She looked at this freakishly elongated creature of ostentatious movements doing its dance. In ways she was envious of his sense of celebration in the moments, hours, and days of being but she couldn't help asking herself if this gyrating form had actually come from her although indeed it had.

"Howdy, over there," she said with the amicable indifference of cordiality.

"When's that shit on a shingle stuff gonna be done?"

"Don't know." She poured in her milk and flour. "What do you want with it?"

"Lasagna."

"Lasagna--always lasagna if not goulash. Well, we tried that last night." She thought of that mildly humiliating moment when his face had

wrinkled and cringed. The face had crinkled like an old newspaper in the muscles of a palm. She, his heroine of all these years, had been regarded with disapproval. Sure, the pasta had been overcooked and the starch had dripped from it but she couldn't see that this was any more repugnant than a juicy hamburger. His repugnance had surprised her and his exaggerated expressions had not seemed a commensurate reaction.

Yesterday the behavior struck her with its impudence. Even more, she was struck that just by living together as they did, she could feel a twinge of pain so easily and so preposterously. She was worried then that she was becoming as ridiculous a human being as everyone else. It was just a twinge of pain lasting a moment but it was too much. The whole foray into obeying a cookbook was an unsuccessful attempt at imitating school cuisine which she dumped in the trash in a choleric gesture lasting no longer than his facial grimace. She took the plate from him, removed her own as well, and scraped the contents away in five seconds. It had been a little thing but it was hard for her to forget it now that she was cooking another meal for him.

"Rick's gonna come."

"Who's that?" she asked as she stirred her concoction while picking at the meat the way one might kick away dead bodies littering the street." She turned back to the window but he was no longer in that frame. Already the stilts were forsaken action and he was going off somewhere else on a bicycle. She could only see this diminishing figure from behind. She was irritated that so much of the time he went off without permission and yet she did not feel that she could chastise him for what she had done when she was his age. Even now she was doing it: she was dragging him into a shiftless domain of a trailer-whore hoping that something extraordinarily *advante garde* would happen to him here. Maybe she had a moral obligation to take care of one whom she had brought into the world but his coming from her womb did not mean a claim to him. At least, this was what she told herself. She could guide him the best that she was able but if he wanted to jump fifty feet from a top branch of a tree or ride on a bicycle head first into a bus it was his choice. If he wanted to run off without permission, she told herself, why should she feel any pang from it; and yet, like a ridiculous human being, she did.

Phallicly shaking out some Worcestershire sauce into a big black tempest, she wondered how the sanctity of monogamy existed with the tenet to be fruitful and multiply. If promiscuity were the natural order, monogamy had to be the unnatural one: and yet, paradoxically, monogamy had become a revered moral code of conduct. It was no wonder, she thought to herself, that people were frustrated and confused. She told herself that there had to be a reason for monogamy to be such a sacrosanct striving although she was having trouble figuring out what that reason could be. The tenet existed but within it most men were given the wink for indiscretions while some women were stoned to death for them. They were stoned, she theorized, for making other men question whether or not the children within their own homes contained someone else's peculiar genetic codes. They were stoned for implanting anxieties in the piece of mind that man had. They were stoned because of this competitive need engrained in the human psyche to survive as long as one could and to pass one's genetic codes to the next generation. The tendentious rationalist further theorized that if one were to live in a remote rural town he or she would not make compatibility an issue. Knowing that there was no chance of finding

anyone better than the person one was with, such a couple would grow apart, stay together, and plant trees. She couldn't prove it; and if she could it would be just one more empty fact. And yet now it was an empty theory. Sometimes it struck her how this dance with ideas was like awakening to the fact that one was all alone dancing in an empty room of a lunatic asylum.

The quantum theory of her life -- the forces that drove her away from humanity (perhaps some inherent German characteristics, although she was but half German) and the circumstances that drove her back to humanity, the inherent need to be a social creature and the need for self-preservation within her own cloistered domain-- were the making of a dilemma; and being in a dilemma (a soap opera of one's making) was like finding oneself in a beautiful garden of undiscovered geysers. A dilemma was the air of Thales, the water of Anaximenes, and the fire of Heraclitus.

These forces of withdrawing and shunning but needing people were like the peculiar components of atoms. They bounced off each other and made her. At times the atoms pushed away from society: and then they oscillated back, compacting her to the world of selfish people with their insatiable movements...cats with their insatiable movements...insatiable cries.

The cat had once again dragged its prey to the metal steps that went up to the door of the trailer. She could hear that specific songish whine that it repeated for the acknowledgement of having made its capture. She looked out the window and saw her son and another boy standing there listening to these cries. The cat was wanting their praise for its work. From the cat she realized what work was: it was feeling self-worth from believing that one had gained something special in one's movements and demanding that other's acknowledge these captures for to not do so would relegate them back to the insignificance of just movement.

All creatures needed some type of work and yet she had none and she wanted none. Outside of the obligation of motherhood, all that she engaged in were art and prostitution. Neither one of them were movement in the strictest sense and so as such they were not work: the former was not action but contemplation and the latter one involved lying on a bed. In both art and prostitution she did not need or want praise from others for she had nothing to capture in movement since she was not moving. Even in motherhood, she was not trying to obtain some being to fill a void in her life. There was no void. She had been accepted as an FBI profiler prior to finding herself pregnant. She could have gone to that or to nothingness; and with the obligations of motherhood she had slowly chartered a path into nothingness. She did not need anyone telling her that she was beautiful or that her art work was worthwhile. Matter of fact, she did not need them at all. Others could come and go from her life through the revolving door in her castle if anyone had the power to budge it after crossing her moat. They could come and go and she would inhale and exhale them like respiration so long as they made no claim on her as she made no claim on them. Breaking definitions of work, how to make a living, and sociability, she told herself that she was a macro-human living with mere earthlings she could not fully identify with. Her mind was a bit scrambled in what she was thinking. Maybe she was saying that she was pure contemplation--something like that. She wasn't a hundred percent sure of any of her ideas. They changed with the moment even though ideas should be permanent and immutable when the physical

world was neither. Being profound was like driving one's car through potholes for the hell of it and hoping to not get a flat. Maybe contemplation was movement.

If the cat wanted to follow its instincts, contribute to her pathetic meals, and gain a bit of praise, she did not mind. She or Nathaniel could praise it; but this sport of playing with one's eventual meal, however, was loathsome. It was hard to revere Mother Earth and Father Sky, or nature as a whole, when it was essentially barbaric. She hated Mouse when it allowed its half dead prey to escape so that it could recapture it again and slap it around with the stiff rackets of its paws. She opened the window.

"Who are you?," she asked.

"I'm Rick," said the other boy.

"Do you have a last name?"

"Quest," said Rick.

"Quest as in Mr. Quest at the school?"

"One and the same," said Nathaniel.

"What's with the cat?" she asked

"It got a black bird."

"Not the owl?" She was anxious that it not be the owl that had nested itself in a wooden flower pot that hung beneath her window.

"No, your owl is okay I guess."

"Good." She turned to Rick. "Are you staying for lunch?" asked Gabriele.

"We will if your cooking doesn't make anybody sick," said Nathaniel.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

For a few seconds he hesitated fearfully but he pushed himself and let his temerity ooze out. "I don't want anybody to get sick eating it!" Her eyes became hard and haughty. She smiled a hateful smile for that son of hers "had balls." Gabriele shut the window on the opinions and personality formulating within this son of hers. With the window fully closed, she could still hear that whining of the cat wanting the payment of praise for having made its capture. "God," she thought. "Why does it have to play with its prey? If society is barbaric, the nature of an individual is worse." She wondered where she could move under the sun without projecting a shadow. She wondered if by finding a mission in life for the benefit of herself and others in the hope of making the world a less obscene place she would become more indecent than what she was. She wondered if she could even learn anything from a world where the nature of things wasn't exactly evil but was definitely cold, crude, self-centered, and merciless. She supposed that this question was the predominant experiment of her life, and it incorporated Nathaniel into it. The redundancy of the cat's disharmonious songish cries grated her

gray matter. She filled up a bucket with water and threw it onto the steps to cause Mouse to abscond to happier fields.

As if both were very young boys, she wanted to make playdough for her son and this other little entity that he had dragged back with him. She yearned to foster in a small way those who could still mingle within the solitary wanderings of the mind. From this malleable substance of flour children could be encouraged to continue as solitary units of the present moment where just the peculiar aspect of being alive would be enough to totally enthrall them. And yet she realized that she would be fostering that which was tepid in all of them for boys grew older and more sociable by the day and she, a maimed and hurting soul, was sour to the world. This sour quality ricocheted its dour force on her inner harmony forcing cynical ruminations and recondite perspectives. The railing, in her own head, about "the prostitution of work" was merely an excuse for not being more contemplative and productive. The reality was that she could not reside comfortably in the inner world even if she had all the time in the world. All that she could do would be to conjure oil paints and malleable pottery clay if not playdough in the hope of retaining an inner depth in a child capable of perceiving the entity in a unique way. Maybe the wish to make him once again interested in playdough was from the yearning to retain the earliest aspects of him. Through him she could have a childhood vicariously. After all, with Mother and Father riding off into the sunset in a tank, the beheading, and the disparaging comments by the Peggyites in the bootcamp of Peggy's Kansas home, she still needed innocence vicariously. She rejected the idea of making playdough. "I don't want to confuse the playdough with the meal," she told herself but really she didn't want to feel that malaise of one foolish enough to have a 7 and 8 year old do activities that they had outgrown. Her grandmother still thought that Peggy's thirty year old children collected coins and she still sent commemorative coins from every new state that she visited. After so many years Gabriele still felt blessed to be out of that fray because nothing was worse than trying to feel close to a bunch of hostile strangers whose only closeness was proximity and blood.

Glancing from the window at these boys competing with each other in a game of soccer, she was reminded even more of the way things were. Her son was a social animal now and all meaning would be in others. She tossed a salad. Unfortunately, as she was reaching for the burning toast she set the bowl on the bar with a bit too much thrust of the wrist, tossing it everywhere. She cleaned up her mess, raised the window, and tried to avoid being controlled by the roaring negative irascibility that strummed discordantly within her. Restraining herself, she said mildly, "Okay fellows, better put the game aside and eat this stuff or I'll feed it to the Mouse." Nathaniel picked up his ball and raced his friend to the door. The meal might have made him procrastinate were it not for hungers and thoughts of a chocolatey allure.

"Do you have mice inside there?" asked Rick as the two boys entered the kitchen.

"No, that's just her name for that old cat."

Gabriele interjected, "I take it that the 'her' might be in reference to me, your mother. And as for Mouse, what other name has it ever had? I wouldn't call it old either if it is still able to hunt." She disliked her son's disparaging tone towards a member of her family

that had been with her longer than he had. She thought that the words were rather treacherous and scowled; and yet she was cognizant that gender neutral pronouns akin to a chair and having thrown water at her furry child weren't outward symbols of love although they might be equivalent to how she was treated in Peggy's home as one of their family. "Are you hungry, Rick?" she asked.

"Yes, please."

"Good." She scooped up some lettuce, apple sauce, and cottage cheese and put them on a plate for him next to the shit on a shingle. "Here, Rick. This'll put some hair on your chest. "Tell me, with Easter and all, don't you and your family go to church?"

"It's just me and my dad. He likes Saturday Mass better."

"I see. No mom?"

"Dead."

"Oh." Her interjection was lucid but sympathetic. She thought it the right combination for matters like this. She admired his strong and unambiguous declaration. He knew that death was death and for one so young not to fudge when saying it gave her newly found respect for this widower, Mr. Quest, as well as his son. Was there really a realm where ideas were the true form? She was certain that Plato was right in thinking that there was. We were all imitations of ideas. But she was equally certain that no one returned to the realm of ideas once they were dead. Death was death. It sometimes occurred to her that if humans weren't honest about the tenants for the parameters of birth and death (sex and closure) they would lie about everything else within those parameters. If she could only get through the factory of life without becoming a defective misanthrope she knew this to be the highest measurement of success.

She listened to their kid talk for half an hour: some other kid who couldn't catch baseballs and whom they attributed as the culprit in losing a game; those who were successes and failures in a broad jump; teachers who reprimanded them; wretched gossip about poor Little Orphan Annie and her continual penchant for launching her cannon balls at male genitalia; action packed television movies they had seen; popular cartoons on lunch boxes; and sardonic complaints from the deprived Adagio for only getting to watch TV three days per week. She did find the food jolting around their mouths as they spoke rather amusing; but on whole it was dreary conversation and it began to give her a headache.

"Put your plates in the sink when the two of you finish. I need to think."

She excused herself and retreated into the bedroom while they ran to the refrigerator to put their ravenous fangs into the carcass of the chocolate bunny.

In her bedroom she listened for the door of scurrying boys to open and close. Then she began to smoke her cannabis like Shakespeare and let words in thoughts rise from the ashes of the mundane. As they rose in a cani-beer cloud with the levity of laughing gas, she stayed in the bedroom and began to write. She did not feel sick enough to go to the

bathroom this time. She thought that she should really lock the door of the trailer but she knew that the Nathaniel would stay outside busy unto himself or with his friend. Less and less would her company be needed. She wrote: "Dear journal, I've been thinking that the personal life should be banned. This socializing and lovey-doving just slows down society's progress. Everywhere, clogging sidewalks, there are these Cornell University girls holding hands with their guys. Makes me sick. If I go to a waterfall or a park to paint or pick up some milk at the 7-11 I have to wave my hand and shoo them away like pesky flies. And you know that each of them is thinking about what he's thinking about her. So apparent! They are orbiting around their guys at all moments of the hours. They are everywhere subservient to chemicals of love in their heads that make them subservient to his whims; and I want to be the demolition of those ties. I see my vocation as roller blading down sidewalks through those linked hands while I get to my destination. I see myself on sidewalks leading to the grocery store. I'm on roller blades and I'm breaking a few arms and blading a few lovey-dovey hearts. Sometimes I dream of shouting through a megaphone, 'About relationships and needing people I caution everyone to be circumspect. Can another be water or oxygen? Can another one be your sustenance? Stop this delusional MTV thinking! You are letting one simple neurotransmitter banging against a pleasure receptor control you. Females, don't be foolish enough to be women! What are you doing wasting all the minutes of your life trying to get someone to be with you? What on Earth makes you want to block off your own thoughts this way? A man won't stay with you forever. They never do and sooner or later you must confront your own inane foolish selves that have been underdeveloped and uncharted all this time. Find a deeper awareness than the personal life. Find a vocation that will allow you to tap into the entity. Tap, tap to not be the whimsical dictates of a selfish man. Tap and confront one's real aloneness. Be intrepid by aloneness for from it one finds oneself. It is by being gregarious that you lose yourself. Befriend your aloneness. To do otherwise makes men think that your highest duty is to be ridden in like riding on a horse. Tap Tap. Buck the man from vaginal penetration. Watch him run away like a horse slapped on its side. Plug into your special talent that links you to the entity and you will never be lost again. You will be part of the new invincible species.' Still, what can I do? I'm just a mere me. I mailed some photographs of Adagio to Peggy and her gang. Sort of appearance only. Decided it was best to keep up their interest in him. Promised that someday they would not only see him but keep him for a while. Don't know why -- True, I don't like them despite that they are his his godparents and all--but sometimes the idea of a hiatus from this Mommy game is a bit tempting. I could dump him on them. Antarctica -- Antarctica. It's still in my dreams --"

"What about me? Willya' take me with you when you go off to the seventh continent?" The voice was that of Smokey-The-Bear in the "Don't start forest fires" advertisements.

"Up here, youn' lady."

She looked on the shelf. "Well, fuck. You're not Smokey at all."

"No, youn' lady, I'm not. He's just a distant cousin." Gabriele looked at the foot long stuffed polar bear sitting on a man's handkerchief on a shelf above the dresser. She had bought him one time when she went to Buffalo, New York. "Poor Gabey, nobody loves ya' 'cause ya' don't love 'em. Going to restaurants all alone isn't no fun.

Parks alone, waterfalls and painting with your paint brush, even fornicating alone. Even when you are with people you are separate. Poor Gabey." Suddenly the polar bear began to change into the higher authority.

"Gabriele, it is me" said the higher authority. " Look at yourself, held together by the stitching of hate-the plastic-eyed polar bear with the stiff arms that the factory of the human race mutantly created -- it will be you who shall feel the walls of artificial fur ripped from its threads, and your stuffing falling out. For a little beer on top of four joints makes a person see the unsealed human fragments that had been smoothed over in time. Come on Gabriele, the gal who still chews tobacco and spits it into an empty beer can...the gal with the deep dark-ocean eyes...the gal bereft of what the normal means, grip that other beer bottle now. Together with the joints, this is the only medicine devised to rebreak the strangely concocted pieces that have been glued into the broken you. Drink and smoke! Become fragmented again with the hope that you will heal and be normal. A 17 year old girl goes to eat a meal in her boyfriend's home and a wife to her in-laws. How is it that such simple pleasures continually elude you? How is it that you have made such cynical and erroneous views of the world?" No sooner had her higher authority spoken then Gabriele heard a skid of a fast moving car suddenly stop and a child scream. The polar bear and the handkerchief with the initials embroidered on it tumbled from the shelf. Gabriele quickly stabbed the marijuana to its ashtray of death and flew out the door.

"Who is this mother fucker?" she mumbled to herself. Then she knew. Here was MF, the vice principal of her son, her former client, shouted at hysterically by the mother of the dead little girl. Gabriele held the woman who was deranged in bereavement and sunk into gravel and dust of the trailer park. She was her bulwark.

"So, he will be her lover -- this MF?" scoffed Saeng Seob in their bed upon hearing his last chapter.

Sang Huin regretted having begrudgingly read him this chapter. He only read parts of the manuscript when asked to do so. Seong Seob could only understand the superficial aspects of the story at best and he only asked to hear those bits of it read out when Sang Huin seemed to preoccupied with writing it. Sang Huin supposed it gave them something in common. "Maybe. I don't know, really," he said evasively. He removed his computer to a table that was adjacent to the bed and picked up a magazine. His eyes began to peruse the photographs of male models in Gentleman's Quarterly who if known and involved in his life would pull him out of his numb abyss of insipid days into the vibrancy of desire in nightly embraces.

"And become pregnant?"

"I don't think so. I don't know at this point." He yawned. "I wouldn't know what to do with that. I need some believable drama in it." And yet he felt that there was no drama within his own life. Giving private lessons to children he didn't particularly care for, his days were missionless clutter that exhausted what little extroverted characteristics were within him; and coming home to Seong Seob with a lack of sexual variety in that domain was flattening him in the malaise of inordinate boredom. He was certain that there was no drama in his life; and yet paradoxically he knew that drama was inherent even in

rocks that weathered away in time. Drama was change and it was in all things. If drama were in the rocks, it too was there in a simple life. His was laden in resentment over the idea of returning home to this blind lover who couldn't see that the two of them living together was inhibiting the progress of his manuscript. "Any ideas," he asked.

"She could have a baby and then throw him in a well."

"Why? What well? I don't want to write unbelievable melodrama."

"It's not unbelievable. It happened?"

"Huh?"

"To me. Postpartum depression. I'm told that a few weeks after my brother was born my mother became depressed. She wouldn't eat very much. She wouldn't leave her room except to go to the temple. One day she wanted to go to the temple and she couldn't find my brother's shoes. When the servants couldn't find them either, she dismissed the servants. She told them to not come back. When they were gone she made a bath for my brother and drowned him. My family says that maybe I fought back and it was too much trouble for her in the bathtub. Anyhow, she decided to drive me to an old contaminated well on my grandmother's estate, pried the boards loose that covered what was left of it, and dumped me in. There wasn't much water in it so I didn't drown, but I lost my eyesight." Sang Huin felt an empathy as deep as the gods while he listened to the wind howling through the crack of the window. It was a barely audible murmuring of ineffable pain. It was palaver but it called to him somehow, pushing him from his malaise to the malaise of it all.

Chapter Twenty-Four

She could guess that the quick entrance into the trailer park, if it were such, was a reaction to her, the nefarious whore, whom he had ridden in sync to a female's need for pleasure many years earlier. Maybe as an afterthought to the decision of allowing his son to go off with Nathaniel, Rick's father recognized the address his son had gone to. If that were the case she supposed that she was in some way culpable for him driving quickly, if it were indeed done quickly, to remove his son. The inescapable fact zipped her up into its body bag: the removal had lead to the neighbor girl's ill fate and early demise.

She wasn't sure who was to blame. Perhaps it was fate itself. She parsed this concept of fate. She asked herself what it was and it seemed to her that in most situations it was the selfishness of myriad individuals who, together at a convergence, unintentionally brought about another person's harm. She rued over the unfairness of those who thrived for a time and those who seemed bound to perish from their inception. She could become engrossed in her own quasi-pleasant little world and not think about the bigger picture. By comparison to many others suffering from starvation, disease, war, and menial labor her life was that of a contumacious child who refused to leave the amusement park for fear of no longer having such a dizzy perspective of it all. She could become a bit religious (anything from a witch to a Christian) and further the vertigo. Within the lotusland of America, so removed from intense pain and hunger, she could hide to have a brighter perspective where some god or another was still keeping the whole

creation, if not each and every individual, safely in his pocket. She did not, however, want self-deception. As much as she was able to do so, she wanted to know reality. Justice was equity but equity was not in the natural order and so the natural order was unjust. What justice there was existed as the creation of man; and so, in ways, society was more righteous than the natural order.

A day before the funeral she could sense a malaise so palpable it seemed to flatten her under its foot like a bug. While her Adagio was at school (if he were indeed hers, for she doubted the tenet of people belonging to each other as it was action and clutter of small earthly creatures who needed to fill their time and the vacuum of their minds no differently than her son and this Rick when they had played with a soccer ball, plastic and air, to gain a connection that bypassed one's lonely domain), she went into the bathroom. She stared at the mountain of his and her clothing beside the washer, which she had crowded into the stall of her shower. The molecules of their stink seemed to bang against each other in the musical vibrations of Eric Satie's musical composition, Gymnopedies; and with the dead heap of morose and musical laundry, her lethargy, and the horror of being a domesticated woman as all womanly slaves since the beginning of time, she couldn't bring herself to do the laundry.

She told herself that she was indeed a silly woman. Nine years ago she had entertained herself in this mental challenge of being desired by one whose orientation was not so inclined to women, spun herself in a specious illusion of intimacy when, in youth, sex was such a novel and believable medium of intimacy, and given birth in the belief that aborting an embryo was barbaric. Now she was struck by how this connection that she brought into the world would be an ongoing frittering away of her days. She cackled at her absurdity, which caused Mouse to jump on top of the washer and stare at this mad woman inquisitively. "Hi there, Mouse. Haven't you ever seen a woman laugh while doing the laundry before? You really must get a life." She chuckled at the cat.

She told herself that there were too many people in her life when really there was just one. She told herself that contrary to her precept that people should be breathed in and out she was cluttering up her life with them although really a neatly isolated and Antarctic existence would have given her nothing to contemplate. Still, she again entertained the idea of dumping her son at Peggy's for he had become too indispensable to her life and this was a deep vulnerability. Still the quandary persisted: there was no way that she could allow him to be damaged by the disparaging animadversion of a family no different than a "boot camp" or military training camp. The internecine war games in this so called family of which she had extricated herself brought most damage onto outsiders like herself and she did not want to perpetuate it to the next generation.

Gabriele heard a thump in her mailbox. She received a letter telling her that she was terminated from the local greeting card company. She rummaged through her sketches and found one of her impish ones, less pertaining to social etiquette, missing from the rest. She must have mailed it in by mistake. She guessed that this was similar to what she might have done to be ignored by Hallmark. With Hallmark she wasn't quite sure what she had done but this local greeting cards publishing house was clearly piqued. Did the subconscious, like an empress dowager, make its maneuvers on conscious reality behind the

scenes? She had played such games for so long. It was no great wonder they had dismissed her. Only an idiot would have been surprised by this playing with the fates. She also realized that she could not prostitute herself more in her other occupation to rectify the lack of incoming finances. Sanity only allotted so much prostitution per week. "Oh, well," she thought. "Maybe I could sell my paintings."

The thought of herself as an artist the way some might proclaim the title as a full summation of themselves was never something that Gabriele did. She could admit, "I paint" to herself. This was an obvious fact, but she never went beyond that. This added relevance of a bleak economic situation, however, made her say, "I could possibly be an artist."

Evading the menace of time consuming laundry, she sat in front of her canvas but found herself thinking about the neighbor woman and her deceased child. That woman would have pillaged through hell for the opportunity to wash clothes for her daughter. Gabriele felt ashamed of herself for groaning about domestic chores and she felt deep empathy for her neighbor. She went to the grocery store and then brought over a packaged basket of fruit for the grieving mother. She knocked and the woman opened the door slightly.

"What?" she murmured numbly.

"Hello. I hope you don't mind. I was worried that you might not be eating."

"They let him go, you know."

"Quest?"

She took the basket. "More food. People always give food, energy." She laughed bitterly. "Yes, Quest, and I don't know why."

Gabriele released a sympathetic interjection of "Oh, my!"

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters now. If I'm alone for a minute I keep hearing her everywhere I go but there-there just isn't anything. It doesn't seem real. I don't seem real. I make movements but it doesn't seem like me. I'm talking to you now but it seems like there is somebody else talking who isn't me. You aren't you either. I'm just watching you like from a distant seat at a movie theatre or something is watching that isn't me. "

"That's natural. It will be that way for some time. Feel it your way as long as it takes."

"How would you know?" the woman asked bitterly.

"I don't. I just imagine it is," Gabriele said softly. She did not want what she knew to intrude. She just wanted to listen.

"The police say nobody saw him when he entered the trailer park. Nobody knows if he was speeding. According to the police, Sally ran in front of him to get a ball some boys threw to her." Gabriele couldn't imagine her boy wanting to play with a girl. Then a cold feeling shot through her body: what if her son had thrown the ball at the moment that the car was coming into the trailer park in the hope that the girl would

run after it and get killed. "What if this is a reaction to Little Orphan Annie?" she thought. The idea was too chimerical and grotesque to take seriously. She dismissed it but the cold still streaked through her body.

"Have you had breakfast? I know it is the same food idea. It is an empty gesture in an empty world. Would you like for me to stay with you for a while and help you get something to eat - I'd stay for as long as you'd like."

"My mother's here. I've got to go now. Thank you."

"Sure, but take this" said Gabriele. She wrote down her telephone number on a sheet of paper that she pulled out of a pocket. "Call me anytime, any hour, if you need a listener."

"All right," said the woman. She shut the door.

Gabriele went back to bed. The sun dominated through the covering of the drapes. She took her quilt and draped it from the curtain rod. She could not see the point in anything other than sleep. The experience of the senselessness of the girl's death had just fused into other elements of the void and stunted her. If her son were here and continued to be absolutely unaffected by what had occurred she would have been tempted to allow him to bring in orange juice and burnt pop-tarts to show sympathy for herself who was a woman in a philosophic void. She might have done this despite knowing that he would never be empathic to such philosophic quandaries. He was a product of motion and he hadn't experienced enough of life to understand something like this. Like now, each time when the void descended upon her she told herself that she could not fight it off anymore than one could avoid inclement weather. She would just have to ride through the fog that permeated it all. She let the void devour her energy, and then she fell into the sleep that the Ancient Egyptians thought of as the death of the soul. When the quilt fell from the curtain rod she woke up to a tepid rejuvenation.

She got up to fix herself something to eat. The cat was on the table eating the left-over pancakes that she had fixed for her son before he went off to school. Instead of shaking the cat in the air, making it appear to be in the midst of convulsions, she just sat down and watched it eat. Then she tossed the dirty plates into the sink--a function that was not habitual to her, but one that she didn't mind taking on this day when washing them would add to her mental void.

She didn't have him go into school for any part of the day even though the funeral wouldn't take place until 5:00. Instead, long before sunrise she loaded up kid and canvases into her old car. Then they began a long ride that would take them briefly into Syracuse, into Albany, and then back to Ithaca in a circuitious meandering of interstates and main streets. She had that pivotal expectation that if she were able to find the addresses of art galleries the curators there would guide her toward various amateur art fairs so that she could sell her work. There was, however, that less realistic hope that they would have customers who might like the "sui generis" of a Gabriele Sangfroid enough to ferret out the libertine creator from obscurity with this needed substance of money. For their purchases such members of the apparatchik would find a link back to originality and freedom that would assuage their banal and stressful existences.

However, in his untoward behavior characterized by argumentative insubordination about getting in either the car or the school bus, restless climbing over the front seat within the first 15 minutes into the ride, being told to go to a theme park every ten minutes, and claims of car sickness, she could not feel that anything auspicious would happen to her.

"I don't know why you dragged me here with you," he complained early into the morning when they were approaching the city limits of Syracuse.

"Drag, my dear, would be to tie you to the back of the car and pull you on that sweet behind of yours." She gave a wry but playful smile. "Would you like that?"

"Sure. It'd be like water skiing."

She remembered the time that she had taken him to a lake along the Adirondack Mountains to bring to him the entity, the best that she could, since jumping into leaves had been construed as child's play. From a restricted area used for paddle boats and used by swimmers they had rowed along and watched sailboats and water skiers within a bloody orange sunset. She added, "Yes, but with no water or skis--only hard pavement worse than being throttled by a vice principal."

"Mr. Quest?" he asked.

She did not say anything. She no longer spoke of him. The police had not charged him with manslaughter and as far as she knew, the boys had lost their ball, the girl had gone after it, and MF had just turned into the trailer park at a normal speed. She had tried several times to engage her son about his feelings and experience being present at the girl's death and yet then and now he did not seem particularly bothered by it. He never said anything depicting blame and confusion over Mr. Quest's role in the tragic incident.

"Sure, I'd like to be dragged that way" he reiterated.

"Hmm," she said as she pulled out a bag of chocolate from her bookbag. In most occasions she was so conspicuously purseless. "Here, have some chocolate and peanut butter things and eat them in the back seat-and be careful that you don't drop part of one and sit on it. I don't want that stuff squashed into the vinyl, or worse, to have to scrub it out of your clothes."

"You need a new car like Chuck's mom. She rides around in a shiny big red van and not like this stinky old thing."

"That ostentatious woman again. Well, I'm delighted for her. I guess if her van is not stinky she must have a son who is neat and doesn't smash chocolate and peanut butter things into the vinyl."

"What is stinkiness?"

"What is stinkiness? I guess it's the decomposition of matter, molecules dancing around in the air or beginning to come apart like the chocolate in one's mouth. Chocolate, however, isn't stinky. Maybe the decomposition of things falling apart and going back to elements like hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon can either stink or be rather fragrant"

"Why isn't the chocolate stinky?"

"Good question. I hope that you become a scientist who specializes in that very thing."

"I hate the smell of those deCOMosing paintings in the trunk. I can smell them from here."

"To each his own," she retorted.

"Why do they smell so bad."

"So that you won't eat them."

"But the smell is so bad I might think they're trash and throw them in the trash."

"No, you'd know better than that because you'd find yourself in the trash. We're searching for buyers of these paintings so that way we won't offend that dainty little princess nose of yours."

"I don't have a princess nose. I have a manly prince nose."

She smiled. She liked the bantering especially at times like this when it wasn't a distraction from a higher contemplation but a distraction from a monotonous one. The minutes went by and soon they were in Syracuse. She presented some of her less preferred paintings and three of them were taken on consignment. In Albany two of her best paintings were offered a showing this way; but as she was insisting on cash, they acquiesced to a paltry pittance of \$300.00, which she, in her ignorance, was delighted to gain. She vowed to attempt Rochester and New York City at a later date. After eating some vegebürgers and hamburgers from a fast food restaurant, they returned to Ithaca for the funeral.

During the funeral she saw that sadness had flattened over the bagginess of MF's sleepless face. She felt sorry for him. She realized that he was a sympathetic character who could not be made into the abhorred culprit. It occurred to her that the four of them were a microcosm of the human family—each unwittingly doing its small part in the harm of others and each insecurely cuddling in the blanket of themselves where they might dodge feelings of compunction. They would not be alone: there too Little Orphan Annie, the company of executives in charge of manufacturing dodge balls, and the males who had harmed the poor girl, might also abscond.

Chapter Twenty-five

A couple years passed of being no one's whore. She just painted and studied toward a Master's degree in art history, passively delegating the obstructive clutter of motherhood and all other clutter to her assistant. Her work was resplendent to few; and yet within the limited coterie of art enthusiasts and modern art collectors searching for potential investments, she was a success. They made her so for having one of her paintings on a wall was a portal out of the mundane.

She also believed that she had succeeded. To her, success was

measured inwardly but bolstered by things obtained with the purchasing power of money such as her recently built home within an Albany suburb, a new van, and choosing to be bedizen in some expensive jewelry that she wore repeatedly. More importantly, she was bolstered by her freedom. She was now one of those rare birds under the sun, free to explore her ethereal ideas and whims without any major economic considerations. She was one of those rare birds left alone to grow fully within herself.

Apart from beautifying herself unnaturally in the concrete of makeup and displaying feigned smiles, which were done for potential art buyers and Gabriele aficionados, no demands were put on her that she didn't choose to place on herself. The house, the coruscating bits of rock that sometimes dangled from ears and neck, and her new van would have meant little to her if it weren't for how strangely unfettered this success was. It was exempt from all forms of prostitution and she was C.E.O. of only herself. This C.E.O. had no behemoth bureaucratic agency to feed, tame, and prod to a gallop at all hours. She did not have to give her every conscious thought to it and every unconscious thought trying to find some aspect of herself outside of the dinosaur she rode upon and whose domineering presence enervated her when she tried to control it. Instead, her success was full license to run around in the thickets of herself. She was in that other garden of the barefoot child; and she had arrived there on a magic carpet to which few adults could shrink and reposition their limbs to sit comfortably enough to guide the flimsy rug through the windy caprice of ideas.

No longer clinging to poverty as the savior of oneself from prostitution, she was able to relinquish domestic womanly servitude by this appointee, Hispanic Betty, as her housekeeper, cook, and office worker. From this faithful, illegal worker she was able to relinquish soiled underwear, stubborn grass stained pants, meals she was never able to master, buying multi-colored tissue paper for decorating a Valentine's day box, exhorting him to do his homework, and a host of trivial matters on a given day. Because of Hispanic Betty, who was ripe for servitude no less than a virgin for plucking, she could dispense with such trivial clutter. She could spend her time on the meditation of the entity, which always gave her tokens of appreciation in the form of unique perspectives concerning her world. In such a figurative and literal garden where she painted behind her house, she was aided by the verdant colors of the yard half the year and the snow and holly during the other half, the mellifluous smells of clean cold air of winter or of neighbors burning grass or leaves, the winsome blowing of the limbs of her trees, and the dulcet sounds of birds making their homes within them.

With such an idyllic life she should have had headaches less frequently and yet they came with more regularity and intensity, smacking her forehead from within and dredging what was once pure and cloistered waters. With a temperature, black spots filming over her vision, and the need to vomit on and off for a period of hours, each time she experienced a migraine she would be thrust into human vulnerabilities and find herself extremely perplexed as to why she should be so diminished.

The previous day, February 12th, every small movement was exacting and she was forced to go to the drugstore instead of a pot dealer's home since this inward insurrection was so great. She suggested that Hispanic Betty drive her to the doctor. When the woman kept trying to insert the key in the same wrong position within the ignition and at

last primed a bit of gas into the icy cold vehicle with the accelerator instead of pumping on the brake peddle, she still had no confidence in her. Lacking this confidence, they switched to a taxi. Throughout that day she was vertiginous and lost, not knowing how to center herself or what to center herself around. The day had been like walking around in an eye-stinging blizzard.

Now it was February 13th and Gabriele was outside drawing the creatures of love depicted by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium: the hubris of whole beings that Zeus was ready to slice in half and those already cut and diminished desperately searching for their "better halves." She cynically snubbed love as hungers for sex and that personal domain of wanting to love and be loved, which were more hungers and more neediness. Then two things dawned on her. They were opposing ideas that refused to be irrelevant. They refused to be vanquished from the kingdom. They refused to stand outside begging like a Buddhist mendicant at 6:00 a.m. in Laos. They were the making of a more self-actualized Gabriele. She realized that there was great beauty in two people caring about each other for it was nature's plan to use selfish hungers to create that vulnerable spot within the human psyche that needed consistency and permanence among other things; and that she too yearned for a studly apparition who would touch her and by his touch make her real. She felt so empty within these past two years of celibacy. There were days in which she felt that her pristine intellectualism was an absolutely drab prison cell. If someone were to touch her on her shoulder--just a simple human touch--she would not be wallowing in the sludge of her thoughts. She would not be masticating them like a worm.

Taking a break on the porch, she began reading one of her textbooks but soon she fell asleep because of the decongestant she had taken earlier for a cold. For a minute she dreamed that the makeup on her face was an oddly pleasant sensation like baby powder on an infant's buttocks and then the powder began to constrict her face into feigned smiles. She ran into the kitchen and grabbed a scouring pad to abrade away the stiffness before it all began to make her face crack. When she woke up she saw the mail truck drive away. Then the door opened and a woman stepped out with a stack of envelopes in her hands.

"Hispanic Betty," Gabriele asked, "The mail has already come?"

"Aqui esta, senora."

"Anything important?"

"No se nada acerca de esta asunto. I don't know nothing about it. I just get it. Don't look at it." Gabriele didn't care what the woman purportedly hadn't done. It seemed to her that anyone who did a family's laundry had to develop some curiosity about them and she thought it would be rather unnatural to not scan the addresses on envelopes. It irritated her that the woman was so circumspect if not outright leery; and yet she was an illegal worker who needed a job.

"That's professional of you," she said indifferently.

"That's the type of woman I am."

"Swell," said Gabriele indifferently as she perused each envelope. She mumbled aloud. "Ah, not unexpected. A Valentine's card from Rita

Lily and one for Adagio from Peggy. Not unexpected there either." She sighed.

"Esta demasiado frio estar fuera. Necesito volver a mi trabajo. Tengo cosas hacer."

"De acuerdo," said Gabriele and she watched the busy bee fly away from her cold Antarctic garden. Given her new awareness that claiming others in a mutable world was an innate human instinct whereas breathing people in and out of one's life was just a defensive anchor keeping one from being carried away by an instinctive reality to cling to someone, she felt regret that she hadn't taken an interest in her son's construction of a Valentine's day box. She told herself that that this year might be his last year of actually believing that the world was full of beautiful cards and sentiment exchanged with one's peers. She went inside to write letters of contrived gratitude to Rita/Lily and Peggy the way her son and his classmates made Valentine's Day cards for a world of virtual strangers. It wasn't totally contrived. She needed others. She loved others.

Book Three: Alone

"No good can come from chilling tears. This is the fate the gods have spun for poor mortal men, that we should live in misery, but they themselves have no sorrows. There are two jars standing on Zeus' floor which hold the gifts he gives us: one holds evils, the other blessings. When Zeus who delights in thunder mixes his gifts to a man, he meets now with evil, and now with good. But when Zeus gives from the jar of misery only, he brings a man to degradation, and vile starvation drives him over the holy earth" --Iliad

Chapter Twenty-six

A colonial sofa with an arched wooden back; the dark drapes absorbing the light that would have saturated the living room; Ravel's Bolero playing lightly from her CD; and a fly above vher face...cacooning there, she could only focus on little monads of reality at a time: now it was pulling back the hair out of the face and toward her pillowed head; comparing her thoughts to the over-shuffling of Tarot cards flying off in all directions, the chopping of meat at a butcher's shop, or the static of television stations intruding into each other; and the recent and recurrent memory of MF (visibly older but obviously easily recognizable when she saw him in the audience while making her address from the podium). For ten or eleven hours now there was pain and the slow scattering of her thoughts was as a child on a beach with a fist full of sand who discovers his souvenir has been ebbing out of the cracks between his fingers.

She could not shoo away the pesty fly that was as pesty as Mormon flies (those sententious dragon fly missionaries who had knocked on her door earlier that week--Nauvoo, Illinois, Mormon flies so succulent and "so fuckable," whom she had reluctantly rejected from her door). The migraine was intense and she could only lay there in her tomb. Her sterile thoughts were filth. Her harmonic bliss in aloneness was, in illness, devastating and lonely as one suffering in solitary

confinement. Within her sickness earlier suppositions about the world discomfited her. They mutated into something less than worms and hid themselves in her gray matter.

Powerless--she who years earlier had been an avid racketball player, criminology and psychology scholar, and a forger of a new destiny, an individual who had made a success by embellishing her inner self in marketable products on canvas--here she was lying on a sofa unable to even successfully shoo away a fly. The weak thing she had become, she tried to suck it into her mouth. She tried to use the human mouth as a vacuum cleaner as this fly incessantly tried to land on the contours of her face. She put a hand over her face and turned on her side. "Come away with me!" she imagined MF as saying. "Come away with me, the two of us out of this palse place!" And again, as throughout her illness, the thought of him was as a light beyond the tunnel. She did not know the reason for it. She had only spoken to him once beyond the service she had initially given to the widower in her previous profession. They hadn't spoken at the funeral. Even though she could have met him again through parent teacher conferences she had delegated these sessions to Hispanic Betty.

The previous night had been an extroverted evening: a reception at a temporary art exhibition where many of her works were on display and then a speech she gave to art students, faculty, and others interested in her art at a university in Albany. She told them that successful art could be a natural propensity or from just learning to paint when not having a natural propensity for it at all (usually something in between) + dispensing with any conventions that stifled an unbiased and uninhibited desire to play in ideas and see the wonder of everything anew. She supported her premise with quotations from Emerson, Thoreau, and myriad artists. It was a typical speech presented and specifically catered to those who yearned to hear motifs stressing independence even if it bordered on the absurd. To her the self should be married and revered but seeking uniqueness in a forest like a post Taoist or post Transcendentalist was to seek it from an external force. Still such was her audience and she would prostitute herself to them a little bit.

As she was listening to Ravel's "Pavane pour une Infante Defunte" she heard the doorbell. She knew that she could not get up without the most trying effort so, staring at the fire alarm some seconds, she finally raised herself briefly. She pushed the "test" button and continued to press it for a long moment of a sonorous outcry. Was her door unlocked? She hoped it was and wasn't. She heard a door open and footsteps. She returned to the sofa. She wondered if it might be a bill collector, a life insurance salesman, or a well endowed and handsome rapist. A whole host of other possibilities entered her head. She told herself that whoever it was, thief or saint, if this person weren't scared away by the fire alarm, she would demand that he or she go buy her some aspirin. Surely it wasn't Lily. She hadn't spoken to her for so long and she would never be able to figure out how to get to this city let alone her home. Was that it? Had she used Rita/Lily to fulfill her limited social requirements and then dumped her, figuratively, on the side of the freeway linking to Albany? Had she forgotten about her when there were other people in her life? Were all humans this way? Was there no such thing as caring? She heard further steps pursue the top story...or was she imagining them? She wanted to push the fire alarm again--it didn't make sense but in her pained mind the sound of the fire alarm would make robbers leave and Zulu witch doctors with instantaneous and magical remedies appear. She did not,

however, have the energy and that fly kept buzzing around her ears. She kept swatting it but missing it each time. The footsteps were those of a man's. She heard boot soles clunking hurriedly up the stairs under her miniature chandelier. Were they Michael's footsteps? No, surely not and yet she hoped they were all the same. There before her, in leather boots, was Hispanic Betty.

"Fuego! Levantese, senora. Hay un fuego en su casa, dama."

"Oh, it is you, Hispanic Betty. There isn't a fire, you silly deranged fool."

"No, hay un fuego. I heard the fire bell."

"Oh, all right. Just trying to get your attention." She had to muster up all her strength to make her ideas cohesive and sensible. She smiled with the full manipulation of her white fangs. "Please go after some aspirin. I swear I can't take much more of this without some relief. El dolor esta demasiado. Por favor compreme unos aspirina a la 7-11 convenience tienda." She closed her eyes. Words were arduous feats.

"Esta usted enferma otra vez?"

"Yeah, sick again. I thought you were on vacation. No desea ir el vacaciones?"

"Purse. La otra noche perdi mi monedero."

"Yeah, I saw your purse, tu bolsa upstairs--arriba la escalera; but run to the convenience store or the grocery store for the aspirin--whatever is quickest. Rapidamente!"

"No, dama. Hoy no tengo trabajar hasta cinco."

"For Pete's sake usted es terrible perezosa. You are floja-lazy floja, floja-lazy."

"I'm not none floja, please Miss. I'm your good illegal trabajadora. Don't throw me in the streets."

Gabriele again thought of having figuratively tossed the carcass of Rita/Lily into the thickets of weeds on the embankment. "Please, Hispanic Betty, as one of our family go out to get it and then you can have the day off hasta cinco por la tarde."

"You won't fire me now for looking floja?"

"Not if you fulfill my fucking request and get the goddamn aspirin."

After she took the aspirin she got some relief. She had Hispanic Betty get Nathaniel ready for summer school and then she sent him off in a taxi herself. When both were gone she ate a little something. When she recovered more of her strength her mind was still very groggy and painting was far removed from the agenda of the day. Since there was no painting there was no agenda and so she began to clean the house. Inaction, she thought, might lead to a void. A void in the proper state of mind could lead a strong person to philosophic discoveries and a strengthening of one's fortitude; but in weakness a void required energy

to escape, and so it was best to keep busy. She saw that a string of cobwebs was dangling from one of the elements of the chandelier. She looked at it, and not knowing how to get up there she decided that this was not a good place to start on a day when one happened to be sick; and so she went into Nathaniel's room.

In the room she dusted everything from the little volkswagon that ran on D batteries to the breeches of the stuffed animal, Pluto. When she opened one of his desk drawers she discovered a child's book called "Heroes of the Bible." It was published by the Latter Day Saints. She wondered whether these dragon flies were so insecure that they even needed children to validate the stories they projected into their minds. Religious minds not only projected such stories onto all the walls of their brains but cast themselves as more Disney characters into this metaphysical film within the most salient roles. God that destroyed humanity in the flood so that something "good" might generate from it; Abraham who was ready to sacrifice his son to any arbitrary and barbaric whim that this godly tyrant entertained--the Bible was camouflaged brutality as was this book that catalogued Joseph to Joseph Smith. Plato would call it more misrepresentation of the gods and yet she couldn't call it libel, slander, or misrepresentation if there was no god and nothing to misrepresent. She took a break and had some bread and grape juice like one more cannibal eating Jesus' 2000 year old body and drinking the virulent tonic of his 2000 year old blood. She resented the Mormon flies for having given her son that book and yet she knew that sometimes people could be positively influenced by something at a certain stage that years later would be beneath them.

She told herself that since Hispanic Betty would be back at 5:00 she could spend the day recuperating in a park. She would not be missed. When he needed his bicycle fixed it was Hispanic Betty whom he turned to. Just the other evening she saw him drag a tent out of the garage. She asked if she could help him. "Hispanic'll do it," he said.

"Well, I'm rather good at such things--repelling, camping, and you name it as long as its outside the house."

"S'not an issue. She's good at everything. You're not needed," he said and the words resonated deep into the far reaches of herself where she remembered Peggy saying, "They don't want you so they pawned you here so quit blubbering for them. I opened our door to you; fought with my husband when I didn't want you here either--and look what you did to me. Look again! Pen marks on this upholstery. You ruined the sofa--a two hundred year old piece of furniture because you don't have sense enough to take pens out of your pants." She remembered all those years where she was this pariah absconding into her room. She remembered this second war where they laughed and ridiculed her every move and how Peggy never acknowledged it was happening. She remembered how Peggy's husband had one day come to her and tried to undress her and that she bit him which invited his fullest hatred of her. From that day onward there wasn't a comfortable moment. Even at Christmas this "uncle" excoriated her for sitting with the rest. She had to sit in a corner of the room and hide in books and distant places. She wanted to tell Peggy about how he had drooled over her with his wet slobbering eyes and then tried to undress her, the biting, and how the biting had led to more contempt. But she was wise. She knew that there was no use broaching this subject any more than shedding any feelings over the decapitation of the Turk. She was all alone in the world and the choices were to kill herself or to

become immune to others and not let them affect her and she chose the latter path.

At the park she swam for a short time in the swimming pool. Gleaming studfish of the Spandex species were everywhere and their gleaming bodies magically invoked within her sexual feelings--each in his own way. Then she sat along a lake watching row boats stir the waters that were turned to silver in the sunlight and joggers running on a road that was to her right. Her womanly instincts wondered what life would be like to be involved with one of such studly apparitions. She disregarded such lowly inclinations by walking around the park. She followed loud pop music and then with a hundred others she did some aerobics according to the movements of the teacher on his wooden platform and then, exhausted, she lay in the shade of the trees. She became aware of feathery leaves, angular leaves, paddle shaped leaves and the fronds of palms and ferns. She briefly fell asleep and when she awoke those leaves had become a silhouette. She felt blessed to be in such beautiful variety and the ostensible plan that went into it, or at any rate, "one hell of a variety from adaptation"; and this healed and restored her. As she watched runners also fade into silhouettes she yearned for the mystery of their movement. She wanted to run to foreign countries and escape this God sanctioned superpower that school children were brainwashed into believing as better than all other countries. She wanted to peak inside these foreign lands and say "Hi" to its denizens.

She went into a bathroom in a McDonald's restaurant and changed into more formal clothes. Then she went shopping at Sax. The outlandish prices to the clothing of super rich snobs appealed to her, as it had before, but when she got back to her car she was reminded that they were just fodder for covering nakedness.

By chance she saw that a travel agency was still open and she stepped into it. Photographs of Peru, Mexico, Egypt, Italy, and China graced her. Where would she go? Should she take her son with her as part of his education? No, she told herself. This would be a contemplative retreat.

A week later she went from New York to San Francisco; San Francisco to Tokyo; and then Tokyo to Bangkok. She took in temples and Buddhas via the river boat bus, the Chao Phraya Express. She saw opulent skyscrapers and she meandered through labyrinths of tacky tin and wooden cobbled shacks along the river. She saw two young boys with Butch haircuts in dark blue shorts and light blue shirts embracing each other as they walked closer than lovers, emaciated and fur-lost dogs beaten with sticks and then shoved into large racket and burlap bag instruments like butterfly nets. She watched the dog catchers dump the hounds into wooden crates, uniformed teenagers in sidewalk restaurants enjoying the process, coconut tonic vendors putting straws in the cut coconut shells and fruit on a stick salesman pushing their glass ice and fruit carts. She spent most of her time downtown. On the sidewalk she saw men's underwear sprawled on a table top that was balanced by one of those plastic stools used as chairs at sidewalk restaurants or those for tired sidewalk salesmen. "I wish I had the man in the undies" she said aloud to her amusement. Then she passed containers of raw fish on ice next to the sharkfin restaurant. A young man who gained a commission from bringing in the masses into the restaurant said, "Fish! good!" He was so palpable and so much in her reach. She turned toward him and stopped. She put her hand on his chest and slid it down to his waist. "Fish good, you say?" she asked and then giggled like an

embarrassed school girl for she was embarrassed by her own temerity. "Fish very good!" said the google and glaze eyed fish salesman. He put his fingers into the waste line of his pants and jiggled them in a couple seductive bounces. Outside of the fomenting of her own sensuality, she felt the imagined spirit of Buddha permeating everything like a warm wind.

After three days here she went from Bangkok to Rome. Her world was that other world, that ethereal world consisting of the highest apogee of man, that which was least in his making and yet here it was manifest in tangible objects from one museum to another. This was her idea of heaven: to be fully in that small realm of one's mind where true beauty existed and within a city where others, some living and most dead, had also engaged in that area of the brain and produced objects so splendid. At a Burger King a block away from such a museum she bought a couple veggie-burgers, an apple pie turnover, and a chocolate shake. When they were deposited on her tray she turned and walked to an empty table. Near it she stopped with mouth agape. There at an adjacent table were Rick and his father, MF.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

In Burger King words ensnared the artistic ascetic for she too succumbed to polite requests and smiles. For whatever chimerical ideas she had about isolation in Antarctica she knew that too little society, as too much of it, would be deleterious. She too would have been an incontrovertible loose canon had she not maintained some sociable traits; and so she sat down at their table despite not wanting to do so. "Rick, if you weren't seated with your father I wouldn't have recognized you. Heavens!" Heaven--it was a word that nobody believed in and everybody used. She put her elbow on the table, chin in a palm. Then she focused her intensity sociably, basking him with it gently in the rays of her orbs. She knew that her gesture was probably an affected one, oblivious to the fact as father and son might be, but she did not think its contrived essence as being all that important. Hers was like one of Peggy's few favorable gestures, only she had improved upon it. Instead of using this gesture for situations where there was an affinity of values she used it, on occasion, to further rapport. By pretending to care more than one actually did one couldn't help but emulate and believe in the skit, making the dubiously real in fact real. With a deep albeit contrived sense of caring, she said, "I haven't seen you for so long. Are you still friends with Nathaniel?"

"So-so," said the boy ruefully.

"Well, don't worry. Everybody meets new people and are attracted to those new influences for a time which help them grow. I'm sure you and Adagio will be friends again. I bet he likes you very much. I know I do." Then to MF she said, "So you guys are taking in Rome?"

"Yes and other bits here and there. We were in Venice a couple days ago. Nice--well worth seeing as I'm sure Florence would be. The problem is that a man can spend the whole trip traveling from one city to the next. So...I've decided that I and this big guy will just stay here in Rome for the rest of the time. Are you here all by yourself?"

"Yes, here all alone. Tell me about yourself. There's got to be a lady friend somewhere here in Rome."

"No." He smiled bashfully. " Just here with my son."

She guessed that the widower was being faithful to the memory of his wife by not pursuing any other relationship outside of an occasional sexual liaison with a whore like herself. She liked the assumption and it made her feel closer to him. To some degree she wanted to ferret out the truth on this matter but the assumption gave her such a warm feeling and she too liked her endorphins and dopamine. "Nathaniel is at home staying with Hispanic Betty."

"Hispanic who?" He chuckled.

"Hispanic Betty. Well, that's my name for her. My assistant -- a lovely person in her own way. She's illiterate in both languages but again in her own unique way a lovely enough character. I give nicknames to everything. Nathaniel is Adagio and my cat, Friskie, is Mouse. Nathaniel will be fine with Hispanic Betty. Did you guys just come from the museum?"

"No, we've been sitting here waiting for you for days. Finally we can go into the museum now that we have an expert to show us around. It's been rough sitting."

She laughed. "Wow, Michael! You knew I'd be on this very speck of the planet within this time and space. Handsome and charming as well as psychic. I'm impressed." She laughed again as she glanced at his playful smile. It occurred to her how much of a human's life was consumed in frivolous exchanges of happy feelings. There was really no substance in it at all. She turned back to Rick who was as yet free from being overwhelmed in the sensual impulses that created the libidinous ego, lascivious sociability, and the lustful lies of human will that willed the stimulation of the pleasure receptors of the brain at all times. "You and your father will have your eyeballs shooting out of your sockets when you begin the art tour in this beautiful city, I promise."

The boy laughed with a feral, garrulous confidence. "Now it's my eyes out. Before it was gettin' hair on my chest if I ate your stuff."

She smiled. "You remember. It was called 'Shit on a Shingle.' To MF she explained, "That's a nickname for one of my domestic dishes. It's also known as beef and gravy on toast." To Rick she added, "And given time it will grow hair on your chest. I promise." She began eating her veggie burger.

"Mrs. Sangfroid," said Rick, "what are you eating? It's orange."

She looked at the edge of her burger. "More like raw sienna, golden ochre, cadmium yellow, and goldenrod dark...hard to explain the color. Saffron the closer you dig into the corn. This vegetarian hamburger probably isn't all that nutritious fried with hamburgers but here we are as guinea pigs within modern existence."

"That's a heavy one from a sandwich. Tell me what you mean," said MF.

"Well, I mean that we don't grow our own food so we are reliant on what others present to us as good and we follow the masses into places

like this out of convenience and laziness. We are like cognizant teddy bears on an assembly line to have our apertures plugged up with plastic eyes but there is nothing we can do about it. Anyhow, two cheers for Burger King. Hip hip hurray! Hip hip hurray!" She laughed, more amused and interested in herself than anyone else.

"You don't eat meat, Gabriele?"

"Not much," she said.

"Okay," MF said disapprovingly.

"Whether or not animals have any value outside of becoming a product to serve to us doesn't matter so much to me. I think what I think but you can't prove it one way or the other. I just feel that having the attitude that everything exists to serve human pleasures and appetites stunts any enlightenment one might hope to get on this planet. It's not the animal rights perspective but my own."

"Good for you. I admire that," he lied. Their conversation paused and she saw that MF had removed both onions and pickles from his hamburger. She watched both males sink their fangs into the aesthetic round bits of carcass. She told herself that there was indeed something atavistic about it.

"Dad hates vegetables--won't ever eat them."

"Is that a fact!" said Gabriele.

"That isn't true; and don't talk with your mouth full!" rebutted MF irascibly.

"We never have tomatoes in the refrigerator."

"We have Ketchup. It is tomatoes plus."

Gabriele laughed. She was marginally enthralled with the charm of their bantering. Then, like the sound of crickets, the human noise became monotonous. Still, it was better than being deaf, and it bedizened her ears like large cheap earrings containing bogus stones.

"I saw you when you gave your lecture in Albany," said MF to Gabriele as if wanting to change the topic.

"I know. I saw you there. I wanted to catch you but there were droves of people and one reporter swarming all over the place."

"I understood that. It's okay."

"Did you drive up just for that?"

"No, my parents live in Albany but I wanted to see your work and listen to you."

"Wow, thank you" she said humbly.

When they finished eating and were walking to the museum he said, "So, you were in Thailand before coming here. What were your impressions of it?"

"Hmm...I guess that before I went there I half-way wondered if it would be comprised of people without wills the way the Buddha rejected self saying it was an illusion--but no; it was full of mall hoppers and people pacing here and there anxiously with their cellular telephones, eyes glazed over, totally self-absorbed like in the states although perhaps less of them...a lot of poor seeming so quaint from my vantage point but probably not from theirs. What's your impression of Italy so far?"

"Well, it is hard to say with so many tourists. If they get rid of the tourists one can have an impression."

She laughed. She liked that answer. It seemed to her the correct answer; and since he seemed to her a conduit of reality, she felt that he was enmeshed with her somehow. She did not want to believe in fate but here they were together in such an unexpected place. The strangeness made her a bit superstitious. "How long will you be here?"

"Maybe a week. And you?"

"Not long. I can't afford it and Nathaniel won't pick up the phone or reply to email so that troubles me."

"Anything wrong?"

"No, I'm sure it is a bit of resentment about me going on this trip."

"Won't Hispanic Betty answer the telephone?"

"Are you kidding? No, she refuses. She dusts around a telephone like it's a snake and moves to a different room when it rings." He laughed.

She led them into color, perspective, and forms of Masters who had died long ago. They led her to a planetarium, the coliseum, and then a small amusement park on the outskirts of Rome. After Ferris wheel and a roller coaster rides she and they were addicted to motion and so they went on the water log ride as well. As they came down a miniature waterfall they were drenched. From these rides she knew that she was thrust into further action. Without consciously choosing it, she was now on a womanly ride of feeling great pleasure in the company of a man and something resembling family. It occurred to her that this was the ride that all broken adults with battered children inside them went on. From love and establishing a family of one's own one could break from the wretched past. One could remove the glass fragments from the exploding glass house of family, bandage wounded childhood, and could at last distance oneself from memories of the guardians of hell. The ride would be that of a new family and beginning, a type of forgetfulness.

All this time had gone by and still Sang Huin woke up from nightmares with a sweat glazing his forehead. He could not help but remember driving his battered sister to her lover's mansion, dragging her up to the door, watching her faint on the stoop as he pushed the doorbell, and then watching from his car as the wife discovered his delivery.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sang Huin had a very strange dream one night. It was a night in which he had experienced a cancellation of a lesson and instead of returning home he had gone toward the Myong Dong area of Seoul to a gay Turkish bath, which he hoped would exorcise him of the void.

Like any explosive, the chemicals for the detonation were inside the container (himself); and all it required was a small sensation as its spark. It always struck him as peculiar and intriguing how a sexual feeling that was so internal should be linked so indelibly with the external like a woman's ability to produce milk, which required birth and a baby to suckle if it were to not dry up.

There, once again in the Turkish bath (as if this time would be a less specious form of intimacy than all others), he had sought excitement -- fireworks of sensation within a dark room for orgies. There, like a balloon, he had blown his body in titillations and desire only to be deflated to a moment or two of tameness and godhood and then an equilibrium -- this concoction of a little god and a lot of animal called a human being.

And when he returned home to Seong Seob, there was a contrived inflation and deflation of the phallus in the ersatz of coerced will. Then he lay there like a squeezed orange, albeit a discontent one. He was unable to sleep for countless minutes that seemed as hours. And when he did go to sleep he dreamed strange and erratic things. At worst these images burst and burned against the walls of his brain like jets against the World Trade Center. At best they expanded and contracted nerves in his brain like the coldness of an ice cream headache. Accelerated by too many graphic CNN reports and satiated in anxieties and guilt within his own life, he dreamed that Gabriele was living in an isolated area in Pakistan with her cat, Mouse. One evening there was knocking on her door and when she answered it a stoic Rita/Lily with obdurate, mechanical, and glazed eyes injected a drug into her arm. When Gabriele woke up she was staring into the face of Osama Bin Laden. "Where am I?" she asked as she lifted her head and wiped the pallid dirt from hair and face. A translator relayed her voice to Osama Bin Laden. She recognized him too. He was Khalid Shaik Mohammed. Osama said something and the translation was "Al Qaiida Hills in what people wrong to call Afghanistan behind Tora Bora. You relatives must pay big ransom or we cut off you head."

"Relatives?" said Gabriele. "If you mean Peggy, you inane turbaned bearded little freaks, she wouldn't give you a nickel or a dime to save my head. She wants every cent to go to Wal-Mart to buy toys for her beloved grandbabies so they will smile at her and reach for her before they do their own mummies. She likes babies: the thought of them fills her with dopamines and endorphins; and the inveterate shopper that she is, buying for them couldn't make her much higher. Such neurotransmitters run amuck in her. Mama bird must do what she is created for. Anyhow, nobody's getting rich off of my head and I want -- no demand -- I demand to know how I got here and I further demand that I be transported back immediately."

"Remember Rita/Lily, devout Moslem sister: she inject you with tranquilizers, give you swallow sleepy pills, and then put you in trunk of you car. There she drive across border," said Khalid Sheik

Mohammed."

"Thanks for the info, Shake!" said Gabriele. "She always was a crazy; and crazies are always religious--no offense." Gabriele heard Osama's palaver in Arabic."

"Osama wants to know if you play volleyball with us." said Khalid Sheik Mohammed. Khalid Sheik Mohamed smiled widely with his fangs.

"Volleyball?" asked Gabriele. "It's a bit strange, but what the fuck. Will it expedite me getting out of here?"

"No doubt! Osama want to be a good host while you here. He want to have fun with you."

"All right, if I must."

"Splendid," said Khalid Sheik Mohammed. "You must."

Osama slapped a desert mosquito that kept circling around his big nose. He flattened it on his face. Then his large tongue came out with the twitch of his face and the mosquito fell onto its waterbed coffin. No sooner had the Al Quaida mastermind eaten it than the Taleban cleric, Mullah Mohammed Omar, snuck up like Death in a brown hood and robe. The one eyed reptile then cut off Gabriele's head with his hatchet. Osama Bin Laden and Khalid Sheik Mohammed then began their game of volleyball. Mullah Mohammed Omar stood at the side of an invisible net counting score as the two other men volleyed the head over the line which he had dug into the dirt with a stick. There was talk of getting access to North Korean nuclear fuel rods, a strange epidemic that they had manufactured and proliferated in East Asia, and assassination plans for George Bush. The face of Gabriele's head kept staring at them while she volleyed about. Gabriele thought, "Talking politics and playing ball: these inane turbaned bearded little freaks can walk and chew gum at the same time."

Sang Huin suddenly woke up and went into the bathroom where he splashed some water on his face. His face looked heavier when he stared at it in the mirror. He realized that as much as he had hoped to hold onto youth, it was already shed and blowing around like fragile leaves within another time and space. He chastised himself. He was getting older by the hour and yet he had no career aspirations. His Bachelor's degree in music history was worthless. He probably had no special aptitude for teaching and even if he did, he doubted that being this native gypsy who appeared on people's doorsteps at their request counted him within the ranks of teachers. What did he know that he could teach? There was nothing he was trained for, he had no competitive strife, and he did not know of anything worth doing.

He heard the sound of rain and so he went to a window but could not see the substance of this harmonic pattering in external darkness. He listened to its orphic sounds, inventing reasons to go into this gentle falling of sky: milk for his cornflakes or batteries for his Walkman that he could purchase at the AM/PM or the 7-11.

He wrote: Gabriele put on her hat and sunglasses and went into the rain with a bag carrying her keys, passport, wallet, sketchbook, and charcoal pencil as well as makeup and a bottle of this newly acquired substance, perfume. She had been told that there was a park near her

hotel where she could see the ruins but, despite floating on cloud nine, when she arrived there all she could see were the ruins of her own life.

Michael was lovingly amuck in her thoughts and since she would see him in a few hours she was in a heavenly abyss greater than having the license to do some Italian stud fishing in the pool of her hotel. She loathed how the chemicals of this infatuation had been detonated in the Leaning Tower of Gabriele causing major structural damage. Furthermore, the smoke of the aftermath distorted the world in such a fervent red mist. If she hadn't been on her guard or had been born a half-wit she could have easily believed in love and bliss at every turn. She, the master of reality, guessed that she was walking on a precipice: that very soon if she were to part with him for a week she would be there in the pangs of the travail of loneliness -- a most lost and forlorn creature and an ignominy to herself.

And yet despite her higher authority and monitor wanting her to discard this man sooner rather than later, she regretted that she had resisted the idea of him getting a room in the same hotel where she was staying. She could have made his trip less lordly and more "in touch" with the common man if he had stayed with her instead of ensconcing himself in four-star hotels. Also she would have saved him money, not that saving money was so essential if he were indeed part of the wealthy Quest family of Albany.

She thought it was noble that he, a member of the wealthy class, had chosen to be a mere educator to help young minds. "In a sense," she thought, "we are both educators but he has chosen to not make business and money a priority whereas I yearn for money and things. I am just a fool who has gone from being impecunious to an upper middleclass snob -- okay, a bitch with a servant even if I call her my assistant. And I am not free. I'm always fettered to canvas." She meant that as free as she was she always had to be unique, clever, and technically masterful at all times to have a reputation and to pay her bills--one of which was her tuition. She could have gained a "scholarship" but she did not care to have strings attached. She did not want to teach pathetic dilettantes in some basic class what a paintbrush and pallet looked like. She didn't want to sing to them, "This is the way we paint a pig, paint a pig, paint a pig. This is the way we paint a pig so early in the morning."

Perambulating through the park, attempting to conceptualize the internal and external reality she wanted to transpose to canvas, she became distracted by Italian lovers. Strangely, for her, she looked on them in joyful awe. Unlike in America when she had wanted to roller-blade through their interlinked arms or sweep away these lovers who littered the world with their specious illusions, she now appreciated them. These Italian couples abetted her fantasies of she and Michael strolling together under one umbrella instead of the solo half being under there now. She could sense that her rule in the crumbling and further leaning tower of Gabriele was faltering, floundering, and foundering. This, while she walked, was evident by her sporadic humming of Joni Mitchell's "Michael from Mountains."

Sitting on a bench in the gentle rain, she watched the heavy traffic and the shuffling array of Italians through the iron bars of one of the many walls that went around the park. It seemed to her that it all had the splendor and significance of love. She was not at ease in this rosy/fiery way of looking at all things and yet she couldn't quite see

the harm in such elated perspectives. If all people were like Moonie cult members avoiding negativity wouldn't the illusion transform reality? If love were an illusion, she couldn't see how it was different from anything else. Each generation of people were passing shadows thrust out at dusk before being swept into darkness. Everything was an illusion although it seemed to her that some things were more real than others or at least less illusionary. Shadows were illusions of tangible things and perhaps these blocked rays of light or diminished forms were of something bigger. Was life just a pale version of what was really out there? She did not know. She was still waiting to get an email from God.

This inchoate friendship/ relationship was releasing her from the manacles of heavy, oppressive, and dragging thoughts and so in certain moments she couldn't see any reason to oppose it. Did she care to be as dour and sour as a spinster? Such women became more acrimonious with each new birthday.

Before she had time to go back to her hotel room with only a couple rough drafts to show for her efforts, they came for her in the park. Although he, like his son, preferred motion, Michael had persuaded his son to sacrifice a bit more of their time before her beloved alter of art. The taxi's meter was aggrandizing numbers for some time when they finally found her and took her away with them.

He believed that his closeness to Gabriele would increase if he showed himself as someone willing to enter her hallowed institutions -- institutions he came here to see but on the fifth or sixth time these buildings were like visits to a mausoleum.

Only as they were trudging up more concrete steps did it occur to him that he should have asked her if she wanted to do something different. And yet when he looked at her smile that was so radiant from being linked to art and linking it to them he could tell that she would never find art museums boring let alone cloying the soul. He was the deferential gentleman, and his inveterately shy son tolerated the museums with little fidgetiness.

After they were inside for an hour she began to lean on him the way he liked women to do even though he had not let them do it for many years. But he detested how she was dressed. Like at the park, she was still wearing sunglasses and a hat that coaxed upon itself and draped down as if it had been thrown into the wash too many times. She would pull the glasses down to the tip of her nose when they came to a work of art, talk about it and what she knew about the artist (if anything), and then move them up her nose. He did not understand this flagrant violation of femininity. It was as if she wanted to be as inconspicuous and stealth as a bag lady for fear of being mistaken for Michelangelo. He had avoided the subject in the taxi under the belief that she would remove them once they were in the building.

"What is all this?" he at last asked as he pulled on the brim of her hat.

"Oh," she interjected and acquiesced wordlessly as she smoothed out her hair. He was pleased. She was transforming from a sallow and destitute street person back to an image more suited to be loved. Within the machinations of self-centered man, each saw the other as an "opportunity" and each one contemplated and re-contemplated what that

opportunity was in vain.

He wanted to move about and change visual images as if he were in front of the television with his remote control, but she wanted to stare for a few moments at these portals into the entity.

When they were outside again she put on her sunglasses so as to counter these feelings of "tenderness" which could misdirect her down a long and dark labyrinth of tight one-way back-alley actions leading further into her own obscurity and to prostate positions at a man-god's feet. For he was already becoming a bit of an extension of her own little life and a medium for more intense pleasures that she could not reach alone, and so she put on glasses that he disapproved of so that she would not lose herself to him even in the most miniscule way.

As with the brain that made deals and compromises to reconcile contradictory opinions within itself, she knew that a woman would need to be deferential in a relationship that was that extension of herself. She told herself that she would try to be as little accommodating as possible. She smiled as if ready to laugh for the two of them at this stage were nothing. They were merely accidental traveling companions. She thought that even if they did become involved with each other the myopic perspective of a personal life and love might be nothing in reality but attempts at cell replication in this organ of the Earth in this organism of the universe. Such was the human predicament of not knowing anything of reality but one's own caprices. Her levity was transient. She became serious.

"Why do you wear those things?" He smiled. His tone was more bantering than condemning. If it had been altogether condemning she in her moody caprice would have walked away proudly, severing him without saying a word in that behavior typical to those whose youth had been besieged in the worst of ridicule.

"I don't know. Sometimes I want to be different. Sometimes the glare of the sun gives me a headache."

"You aren't feeling sick now, are you?"

"No."

"Then take them off."

"Ask me in a nice way."

"Please do it. Do it please. Do please it." He laughed.

Her womanliness flowed in and she took them off, begrudgingly eager to please and a little excited that someone should take an interest-- even a critical interest-- in the mundane aspects of her life. She felt sexual energy hit her in a large wave since two wills clashing against each other was a sexy thing. They followed Rick who had run toward a hotdog stand.

"Corndogs -- won't you have one, Gabriele?" asked the former MF.

"I don't eat meat, you know."

"Well, you should, you know. Its why the brain size of man is so

much bigger than his hominoid predecessors."

"I doubt that much evolution can come from a corndog. And if I had a bigger head it would probably explode all over the place. Wouldn't that be a pretty sight?"

" Maybe your grandpa slaughtered your pet pig at his farm-- something made you this sensitive. I wouldn't know about that but I do know that as long as the killing isn't man to man it's just nature's checks and balances." She saw that truth lay there and not wishing to dismiss it, she nodded. She wondered if he had put too many limits on his theme. Maybe murder and wars were checks and balances of man on man too. He smiled with a flippant boyish mischievousness. "You know, by walking from the museum you have squashed at least a thousand ants and other creepy things, but you haven't given up walking from what I see. Survival of the fittest, Gabriele; and the fittest animal is the one with the most bills in his wallet. If the pig had come with a wallet and could out-spend me I'd be the one on the stick. Come on. Haven't you ever eaten a corndog before?"

"Well, yes. When I was a girl, I guess."

"That's probably the best life gets as an adult: secondhand experiences, reliving childhood." He ordered three corndogs and soft drinks from the vender and gave each their share. "Here!" She took the corndog and began to eat with them. She imagined the corndog as a vegetable. She imagined it as an important experience.

"Good?"

"Yes."

"More ketchup?"

"No."

"Rick?"

"Yes." And she watched the bloody substance squeezed onto the boy's phallic symbol.

"See, you enjoyed it as a girl until you thought that your pet pig would be next. Associationism."

"David Hume?" she chuckled.

"John Locke/David Hume--I'm not sure which. "

Rick had to go to the toilet and so Gabriele was left in awkwardness at being with Michael all alone. He grabbed her hand and led her to a bench. He kissed her and she liked it even though the nearness of him felt as if she were being stung by Houston fire ants. It was a sweet inimical sting. It was a contract of mouths and joint breath, of two becoming one but not of equal parts--more of a stronger company forcing a large competitor in a merger.

And the days of the week proceeded on--that day closing most eventfully on a surrey, a four seated bicycle, peddling and encircling Roman sculpture at the Borghese Garden, and then watching a mock chariot

match in a field known as the Circus Maximus. The ensuing days were of seeing the bones of 400 monks at the Cappuchin Cemetery, going to the ancient Pantheon temple of the gods with its open portal to the sky, sitting in outdoor restaurants near fountains still spurting from ancient aqueducts, St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, and the catacombs. Their final whole day was filled with Etruscan art, a return to the Coliseum, another meandering around the ancient statues at the Borghese Garden, and back to Laneur Parco di Luna amusement park for a ferris wheel ride and trampolines. For all her brooding on life she realized that such contemplation was just hiding from it. She thought that motion and community were natural and having opposed them all along had been foolish. Like diving into a pile of leaves, these simple pleasures were transcendence into the entity. When she was again alone at the airport showing her boarding pass she walked to the plane like a propped up cadaver.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Lightning flashed into Hispanic Betty's makeshift bedroom and she woke up to the artificiality of her life ensconced in a room that was not her own with things in it that she was a little uncomfortable to touch even with a dust rag. She was here and off the streets but the glitter of being such seemed dimmer as she woke up in the flashes of lightning.

Her first self-coerced thought was of Nathaniel and needing to be responsible for him. She was compelled to perform her newly delegated responsibilities of guardian despite not really knowing what they should consist of. This role of guardian, as she saw it, consisted of the same cooking, shopping, and cleaning she always did plus maternal functions that varied with each woman like checking on him at strange hours even if, fettered in language barriers and stumbling about in her illegality, she might not know what to do if something were really wrong.

Resenting the fact that this had been thrust upon her, she nonetheless was able to drag herself out of bed to see if he was okay for the maternal instinct to attend to the young during a storm was in the collective consciousness of all female fauna. She knew that the true challenge would be for her, who had no family or friends in this country, to perform this maternal role without caring for him inordinately. She put on a bathrobe and snuck down the hall to his door where light slid under the crack like an urgent note.

He was chatting with one of his Internet friends, seeking an affinity with those acrimonious others who construed themselves as being abandoned and neglected but hid it in cynicism of all other matters. But to her who knew nothing of chat rooms or anything in particular about computers the boy was simply writing a report for a class and so she was hesitant to knock on his door and tell him to go to bed.

Hearing the pecked tapping of the keyboard, she imagined the sliver of light at her feet as a computer printed note that said, "Mind your own business, Betty, and go back to bed"; and, smiling from an amusing end to her ambivalence, that was exactly what she did. From her bed, her lair (if she could call it hers), she ruminated about what had happened to her recently: Gabriele having picked her out of the homeless shelter from the other strays; the proud and sagacious confidence, if not hubris, which Gabriele possessed in bringing her into

this home without even asking her to forfeit her passport; the loyalty generated from such trust; fear that the ringing of the telephone was the attempted connection of immigration authorities; barely getting around on the crutches of the English language, which she had ineptly

cobbled together from scraps; the fear of the six and sometimes seven day a week servitude in this remote home diminishing what little chance she, a homely 22 year old, might have of creating her own family; this fear motivating her to get a cheap efficiency downtown although she was rarely ever there; and how the imposition of taking care of someone else's child was a calamity waiting to happen.

Over the course of the week she worried excessively. She worried that she hadn't heard from Gabriele to know when she would return. She worried about having this awkward tenderness for the child (this wanton thought of him) caused by having to care for him and make him her exclusive concern and pleasure. And she worried that she would resent Gabriele's return since it would inevitably pry away this maternal fusion. She also had specific worries of the present day: that this act of absconding in his room, not wanting to play cards or board games like Checkers and Monopoly, meant that he might not like her anymore; and that he was now in his room for two hours and she wasn't exactly sure what he was doing in there.

Then came more of those ideas that self-flagellated her flaccid mental skin throughout the week: if something bad were to happen to him she might not know about it or have the vocabulary to ask about it; if she were aware of it that she might not be able to explain it; and if she could explain it she might prevaricate or become twisted in mendacities since she would not know how to explain her connection to this Sangfroid family.

Still, no matter if these nightly ruminations made her placid or just got her stuck in rehashing the same worries, she was glad to have them. They resuscitated a self-concept that languished each day in being cognizant of her own babbling in this north-of-the-border language.

She heard Nathaniel's footsteps in the hall. She wanted to open her door and call to him and yet she knew it wasn't so much for him as for herself. For she was feeling the travail of loneliness and it was not imagined suffering but a physical assault on the body of the mind.

She did not want him to think that she was spying on him or that she, a servant, would have the effrontery or impertinence to tell him what he could and couldn't do in his own home; but still, she told herself, she needed to monitor him. She once again diffidently walked into the hall and sought the traces of the boy. He was downstairs in the kitchen as evident by the light. Listening closely from the stairs, she could hear the refrigerator door open and a pitcher of milk being drained.

Had she not felt like a florid group of cells shot out like random shells into the void that made up the cosmos, she would have been satisfied by this and she would have gone to bed and slept soundly. Instead, she went down the steps and into the kitchen.

"Knock, knock, Nathaniel."

"Oh, hi there, Hispanic Betty."

"You no can sleep none?"

"Haven't tried."

"I can to fix you food. Maybe you are hungry."

"No, I've got a plate of Betty cookies. You know, I ate shit before you came here."

"Es verdad?"

"You bet."

"Pobrecito. Well, your mother is smart, brilliant, wonderful artist. Everybody has something good they can do and some things they can't do none."

"You could put these cookies in packages and sell them," said Nathaniel. "You'd get more than working here for my stingy old mother." She smiled. She had been random matter rolling about in empty space moments earlier and now she was put safely back to earth snapped into society like an instrumental piece of life's daily puzzle.

"Hispanic Betty, do you think school is like that?"

"What?."

"I mean good for some people and not others."

"So-so. Your madre, Gabriela, may probably kill me for saying it but I think you're right. I mean you need kid school and teenager school. Nobody should to be a dummy--but some maybe they find that special thing not in classes. You go to bed soon?"

"Pronto."

"Pronto. Excelente. Necesitas dormir las horas bastante para tener un dia grande por la mañana. I go to bed now. You do it too after to eat your Betty cookies."

"Hey, Hispanic Betty, why do you have two names?"

She laughed. "Because of Santa Gabriela. Como se dice? Nickname--it's a nickname. Your mother has told you when she comes back?"

"I don't know" the glutton said evasively as he devoured a cookie. "Buenos noches."

"Buenos noches, Nathaniel."

In the morning Nathaniel took a bus to the facade of the school and then meandered downtown as obscurely as he could. His virtual friend twenty years his senior had told him that summer school wasn't "all that important" and since this reinforced his own ideas about the matter, there was a guilt-ridden conviction in his movements as he splashed through puddles in effusive kicks of vexation. Nathaniel, who was less than a decade from the womb, had his mother as his conscience; and this

conscience chastised his every deviation. And yet it was she who had made herself inaccessible. And when she had the chance to make it up to him with a summer trip abroad it was she who had departed alone.

For a couple hours in front of a computer he used a joystick as an extension of the arms of virtual boxers, and the flights of airplane bombers. With it he could also maneuver entire armies according to his sense of viable strategies not that his age and turbid thoughts at present could offer much beyond the contribution of his reflexes. When his body felt stiff he paid, left, and then lit a cigarette in the back alley. Stealth in front of the back wall of the internet cafe and computer game arcade and crouched behind a trash barrel, he tried to release clouds of smoke in various shapes the way in earlier years he had blown bubbles of various sizes into the air. He coughed as much as he smoked and the shapes of his smoke were nebulous; but his cigarettes were a self-taught rebellion in back alleys like this one and lacking male influences both good and bad maleness was an awkward stumbling of trial and error.

Coughing inordinately, not able to master smoking a cigarette with that insouciant fortitude and confidence seen in movies, he went into a Ben Franklin dime store. There he twirled the plastic sunglass rack.

"Hey kid, stop that," said a clerk "It's not a merry-go-round." But in fact he had been imagining it as such and his mother strapped there by the clasp of Lilliputian schoolboys the way Shirley and her friends had fettered him on merry-go-rounds and besieged him with kisses. Only in this daydream there were classmate enemies from a couple years earlier accosting Gabriele directly with their ridicule. Simultaneously they reviled, scoffed, and guffawed the culprit instead of her son with, "Dirty lady bringing men to your trailer drinking their pee like a toilet. Our fathers know of you personally. In the Laundromats our mothers talk of rationing water because one of your spells has caused the lack of rain. "

"Kid!"

"I'm buying," said the boy with his mother's contumely. He pulled out a twenty-dollar bill waving its voluble greenness as the true emblem that conveyed everything about his country and his world. Restricted from spinning the rack, he sought less mindless thrills. He tried on various pairs of sunglasses before slipping one pair in his underwear and then walking up to the cash register to pay for the other pair. It was a test of nonchalance and despite palpitation and sweaty palms he passed it successfully.

He waited at the movie theater for the form behind the emailed image to come to him.

"Nathaniel?" asked the man.

"Yeah," said the boy.

"Hi, I'm Tom." The boy began to reach out his hand toward this urbane form of manhood he wistfully hoped would befriend him. A handshake was a guise of strangers with amicable intentions; but he had to withdraw his hand awkwardly when the man did not reciprocate. "Hope you haven't been waiting long--I went to get some snacks for us. Every boy likes chocolate." He smiled but it waned insincerely as he

guardedly looked around the empty parking lot. "So you ran away from school?" He bantered and then shoved a cigarette in his mouth. It jiggled in his chuckle.

"Sort of. So, you ran away from work?"

"Sort of." Tom grinned sheepishly. "We've still got a few minutes until the movie. I'd offer you a smoke but I probably shouldn't out here."

"I had one a few minutes ago."

"Oh, okay-- take off the sunglasses. Can't use them in there." Nathaniel pulled them up on his head. "You look just like your photo minus the glasses. What about me?"

"Older in person," said the boy.

"Oh," said the man. His tone, as his word choice, was vapid as life, to him, was vapid. The thought of age slowly gnawing on him while he engaged in life unawares made him want to evade conversation and entomb himself with youth in the movement on a screen in a dark room.

"Let's go in if we can. I've got the tickets already. You sure you can get into something R-rated this way?"

"I've done it before. Here: I bought you a gift." He took them from his underwear.

"Ah...Children's sunglasses with a ninety nine cent price tag on them. You shouldn't have." He sniffed them. "Although I do love the smell."

The boy gave a full hearty laugh.

"Do you always keep things in there like that?" He was careful about his words and glanced around the sidewalk. The boy did not understand him and said nothing. "What do I do with these things?"

"Give them to your son."

"I don't have one."

"When you have one"

"I won't have one," he mumbled evasively. He opened the door and they went in.

Seated together, they consumed contraband chocolate peanut butter cups and cola that the man pulled out of his bag. The man told himself that the boy was like a nephew. He did this to allay guilt that was burdening his positive self-image and so that he might restrain himself from a touch that could cause him to lose his prey so soon. His hormones boiled and steamed like the rolling levity of atoms and yet he did not reach for the succulent young flesh there beside him. The boy told himself that the stranger was like an uncle for there was a dull aching within him of one needing to believe that somewhere he would find a man's interest in him -- one who would take him to baseball games and whom he could confide in, one who could teach him how to become a man.

When the movie ended the man said he had a better film in his apartment and they went away together to his furtive domain.

On his sofa bed, which had not been pushed back into a sofa, they were propped up on pillows. They were half sitting and half lying on a bed watching a movie and eating grilled cheese sandwiches and potato chips. Somewhere into the video was a car chase. Apoplectic expletives of the driver being chased--words that were part of the lexicon of American culture but ones to which he did not understand fully N puzzled and intrigued him. He was eager to know jargon that he assumed was linked to this thing called sex (whatever it was) and abbreviations like S&M and MF that were stranger yet. The ideas within these abbreviations were so hidden there that he got a sense that they were the conduit for experiencing great things. He felt that by cogitating all of these mysterious words and abbreviations long enough he would be able to transcribe them as if the English that was chiseled on the walls of his brain were a Rosetta stone. As he was pondering this Morse code of the adult cabal, there was a feeling of a hand under his buttocks -- a hand that then passed through the border of the elasticity of his underwear to direct contact with his flesh. Nonplussed, he turned to the trespasser and saw for the first time an erection that seemed such a freakish abnormality (here it was poking out of jogging pants that had been slid down to his hips). Even more fey was that mesmerized and fixated look of yearning for absolute pleasure on the face of this stranger called Tom. Nathaniel removed the hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Can you help me? Pull down your underwear. "

"Why?"

"Don't worry. I won't tell anyone you came here to my apartmentN you won't get punished if only you help me a little. Put your mouth on it or let me enter."

"Enter?"

"Your butt hole."

He asked himself if this was sex. He had assumed that it was a moonstruck look and a bewitched yearning of adult lunatics for kisses from the opposite sex.

He wanted to scream, "No!" and to whine that he wanted to go home. He was hurting and feeling diminished in years and he wanted to cry. He was scared despite his interest in how this freakish penis augmentation was linked to sex. He wished that he had never been so foolish as to come here or even gone to the movie theatre with this stranger. And yet he tried to hold onto his senses. He realized that to oppose a man trying to get his fix of exhilaration might be risky. He tried to figure out the most innocuous or least deleterious path that his childish mind could concoct. It was mostly a feeling since he was not all that logical. He remembered that mesmerized and fixated look of yearning for absolute pleasure on the face of this stranger. It was proof that although sex was linked to another person, it was mostly an internal function. To disengage himself and yet fulfill his curiosity, he returned one of the stranger's hands on his buttocks and placed the

other long hand onto the stranger himself. Then he watched the stroking and pumping that lead to a whitish disgorging. With its passing the stranger went into the bathroom to urinate. A few seconds later, Nathaniel quietly exited the apartment for the first city bus he was able to descry. He kept wistfully hoping for his mother's return. He missed her.

With all windows open and at top legal speed, the wind dishevels his hair. His sunglasses are so dark that they make the day into dusk. His car is strewn with myriad CDs but he repeats the same song from one that belongs to his mother. He sings along with Led Zeppelin.

"I've made up my mind to make a new start./ I'm going to California with an aching in my heart./ Someone told me there is a girl out there/ with love in her eyes and flowers in her ha-ir./ La la la la/ I took my chances on a big jet plane./ Never let them tell you that they are a-l-l the same."

He beats the steering wheel to the remainder of the tune until he glances at the gauge and decides to pull into the next gas station that he encounters. He has to laugh and that laugh comes out in a bitter and cynical drool. He wipes his mouth with his sleeve. His California girl lives in Sante Fe, New Mexico where her husband recently divorced her. She isn't a girl but a woman who last week, after recuperating from her face lift, emailed a photograph of her new face. She is just Hispanic Betty but he doesn't mind. Older women are more appealing to him and this one has always cared about him. He will use whatever she has to give to him. He has no compunction.

Chapter Thirty

And for those who never had epileptic seizures or other afflictions as young children and never witnessed their weaknesses mocked by cousins or other "family," their blessings were to be content to emulate others in their society and to follow the desires that were innate in human instincts.

But for outsiders like Gabriele, who when very young survived their mothers and fathers running over them in tanks and their forging of mutinous lives in the distant east only to then briefly succumb to spells of seizures following the witnessing of state sanctioned and individual applauded barbarity (in her case a couple weeks after the Turkish man's decapitation), their only blessing was a key to the discontent of their days.

Abhorring the cold and cruel functioning of Turkey's legal system and the world at large, this little Kansas girl, Gabriele, became sick upon her return to the States. When her sickness and flaccid sensitivities were vehemently ridiculed by "family," it was through the determination of her will that she willed herself well; and the seizures that mysteriously came mysteriously vanished.

Realizing that she had gone from one group of belligerents to another, and that this particular family was no less akin to war than

the other one, she tried to think how best to survive being in her aunt and uncle's domain. This family's attempts to hurt her could not be controlled but being hurt resided in her domain. The latter was her choice. She told herself (it was really more of a feeling since, as precocious as she was she could not reason so well) that she would not allow herself to be destroyed in deliberately planted psychological landmines in this temporary coming together of family. In her own way, despite her young age, she felt the equivalent of "Why should I be a casualty in a make-believe war when the real landmines are real indeed and wide-spread in far reaches of the planet." And so she walked through back corridors of herself until at last she was in the outside world staring back at a gigantic cage. All alone in the outside domain she read her books like a good scholar, and watched some of the six billion spider monkeys within that cage. She saw how they obeyed their hungers to eat and so they did some tricks to get their food, hungers for sex and so they stole monkey mates which looked similar to themselves (monkeys were notorious xenophobes who only desired non-threatening monkey mates from nearby trees), hungers for stability so they clung to the same sets of branches and ate the same brands of bananas, made sacrosanct rules for themselves like never defecating on a tree, and developed little routines for themselves as to when one must eat (the arbitrary concoction of breakfast, lunch, and supper given appointed times) and when to swing to a new branch. So, it was with true chagrin that despite her obdurate snobbery at having to live beside such opprobrious creatures that she should find herself as one of the myriad monkeys.

The four of them had just returned from an American football game and she was still numb all over like someone who had been kidnapped, blindfolded, and finally freed with no explanation. She would have been less discontent to sit in a world football game (this thing Americans referred to as soccer). When young, she liked playing the game herself so sitting through continual action, even if it were continually boring, would not have been so bad. Better, she would have eagerly challenged Michael to a racket ball or tennis competition or played badminton or croquet with the whole family. Instead, like Patty Hearst taken from relaxation in front of her TV at gunpoint, she had been carried off and put on bleachers at an American football game. The boys, whom she nicknamed Mr. Placid and Mr. Petulant (Michael, formerly MF, being Mr. Phlegmatic), had willed this to happen. She couldn't have opposed them. It was her son's tenth birthday. It was one of her presents to Adagio that she should sit there on the bleachers stuffing these frankfurters or weenies into her mouth and staring onto this little sea of intermittent tackle and throw action (the object being thrown like an irregular, phallic weenie). There were crueller fates than the desire to jump out of one's skull. She had to continually remind herself that it was her son's tenth birthday and that she was doing this for him. These reminders helped her to construct a florid and baroque facade of smiles and chatter. Her chatter was a repetition of their ideas about the players and the plays. Since she hadn't really observed a thing and they seemed to like womanly creatures who would parrot their ideas, parrot them she did. The game being one and then two hours relegated to the past, it still seemed to go on incessantly in their imaginations.

Here she and Nathaniel were 8 years removed from patty cake. Here they were now nestled together for his blowing out of the candles on the Betty Cake made from a Betty Crocker cake mix. Here they were as part of something larger--four birdies and a Betty in the nest. Because of the random bird droppings of fate these people were somehow hers (or at

least it seemed so according to her feelings).

She told herself that in her promiscuous years in Houston she had been a crazy woman defying her repugnance of physical touch to play seductress games, half wanting to conceive a clump of clay in whom she could shape her animadversion of life, her gentle contemplative preoccupation, and her glint of disdain. However, these two--father and son-- were born through the sanity of her head in a feeling of love. These relationships conceived in the art and beauty of Rome were of friendship and a shared exploration.

In both how she conceived Nathaniel and how she had auspiciously gained the other two she had to applaud the unconventional way it all came about. It was much better than boy meets girl, boy and girl hunger for each other, boy and girl claim each other to have something solid in a world of passing shadows, boy and girl in part briefly dream up a romance for themselves to escape their solitary enclosures, and boy and girl in part become victims of a delusive mist the making of one's selfish genes which say, "Mortals, reproduce so that we, the genes may go on in perpetuity."

As Nathaniel blew out the candles, Michael began to cut the cake. He did so within the last remnant of light within dusk while obtruding a cloud of cigar smoke into the room. Cigar smoke and clouds of it over her food was especially loathsome to Gabriele; and yet she didn't say anything. She bit her tongue and ruminated on what this thing called a relationship was. Her higher authority said, "It is an intangible bridge of one person to another that seems more real than the people who make up the relationship. It is keeping one's opinions concerning a man's nasty habits in shackles."

"Fire! Something burns in the kitchen," said Hispanic Betty as she returned into the darkness of the dining room after going to the bathroom. She had a handkerchief half wadded up in her hands but bits of it still fluttered in her gestures.

"No, he's puffing on an old man's turd." Gabriele's wanton words galloped away like a wild stallion.

"Gabriele, why don't you try to be a little more crude if you can," Michael interjected. "Betty, hit the lights if you will."

"Turn?" Betty saw the cigar as she turned on the lights. "Turd. Oh!" She realized that which was spoken about was "turd" and not "turn."

"Sorry, Hispanic Betty," said Gabriele. "Nathaniel didn't want to wait for you. He had to blow out the candles immediately so that he could inhale his cake."

"I waited ten minutes, Betty. How long does it take to piss, anyhow?"

"Adagio, women don't just lift the lid and spray. There is delicacy in it." Gabriele hoped to break him of his misconception.

"Well, she doesn't make a trickle. I think she puts TP in there to clog up what she thinks is bad sound because I don't hear nothing and we're always running out of toilet paper."

Gabriele laughed. "Double negatives are for Spanish, dear heart."

Michael said, "My mother would have taken dish soap and washed my mouth out with it if I had said something like that."

"Would have?" Gabriele laughed derisively. "Either she did or didn't. If she didn't clean your mouth you wouldn't know that she was a profanity policewoman ready to strike you with her bottle of Ivory dish soap. Am I right? To say 'Would' you would need to know about her doing it so that's proof of you saying something wrong to provoke her to do that outrageous action. What did you do?"

"All right, Smarty. OnceN just once and I learned my lesson; and no, IO m not telling it."

"Scared that Mom might come over with the Ivory soap once again, eh?"

"Maybe."

"Please get that smoking turd out of my face."

"Gabriele, you are going to stop that crudeness right now! Here, give Betty some Betty cake!"

"Que cosas oir! What things to hear." She sat down between Nathaniel and Michael. "And smell."

"Betty," said Nathaniel, "Put your snot rags up your holes and you won't need to know we are around."

"I taked care of you when tu madre was not here and this--you dices cosas malvados a mi." Betty got up with her Betty cake and moved to a chair near Rick who just ate and withdrew from the world of commotion.

Gabriele hit him on the head. "You. Apologize."

"Sorry, Hispanic Betty."

She hit him harder on the head and the smack made his ear burn.

"Sorry, Betty." True repentance, Gabriele assessed, was such a coerced thing. A person naturally saw only his own perspective. To have empathy for others was such a chore and in some cases was only gained with the crack of a whip.

Here he was at ten with at least a tenth of his life completed. Once an infant content to have his feet played with, each year he needed more explosive pleasures and a larger array of them and this would continue into insatiable hungers of money, power, property, sex, and love. But she knew discontent was in all things -- When she had picked up Mouse from the inhumanity of the Humane Society it --

She could feel a nascent migraine swelling within her, and like Betty and her allergies, she absconded to the bathroom.

A few minutes later Michael knocked on the bathroom door. She wanted him to go away but at the same time she wanted him inside to hold

her head and to pin her hair back from the rim of the toilet. She wanted him to understand her pain and console her in empathy.

"What's wrong? You alright in there?"

"Sure."

But he heard her strenuous efforts to vomit like the cries of stretched muscles. They were as empty as yawns. "You're sick. Are you sick? What am I smelling in there?"

She turned on the fan.

"Smelling?" she asked idiotically.

"Open up the door."

She opened it and smiled painfully. "Don't freak out. It's a joint."

"It's illegal."

"It's necessary. It's preventive potN sometimes when used responsibly. See, once in a while, I feel a migraine coming on. Michael, darling, it isn't homeopathy but it relieves symptoms for lots of illnesses and migraines too."

"Flush it down the toilet. What if the boys were to see you smoking that?"

"What if they did?"

"Flush it down the toilet," he commanded. She did as she was told. She watched her tiny higher authority wave goodbye to her sadly as she was sucked into the whirlpool with her ship.

Chapter Thirty-One

15 years ago when receiving her graduate degree in criminology at Emporia State University Gabriele got cards of congratulations that were not at all palatable to her. Reading the writing on these weighty bits of paper should have been just more insipid clogging of one's time and shouldn't have made much of an impression on her unfavorably and yet she couldn't help resenting this intrusive attitude of "Read me! Read me! Take moments of your life and read me!" She believed that the factory produced clichés contained therein were not congratulations of past academic accomplishments but more the prompting of those who advocated that post-graduates utilize ideas for pragmatic pursuits. These were mass produced clichés of ignorant professionals in bondage to the idea that worth was wealth secured in slavish development of commodities or services, which were the means of affluence. Such people erroneously believed that, if well compensated financially, a life spent planning a product to develop an artificial and insatiable thirst or governing men so that they did not founder totally in their base instincts, as all earlier predecessors had done, was a constructive engagement of one's hours on the planet.

Among others, there was a card from her aunt and uncle and another

one from her perfidious and mutinous parents. She opened and read the other rubbish before putting it in the rightful place but she let these particular envelopes lay on the counter, near her toaster, for a day or two before stabbing her foot against the ribbed lever and guiltlessly opening the trash can's jaws. "Saccharine for the alligator--gotta feed 'gator," she thought and then pitched the envelopes and their unopened content into the trash. It was such an American gesture, which was an alloy of a disposable culture and the independence by which one might extricate herself from the visceral, vitriolic virulence of a dysfunctional family.

And when she got her Master's degree in psychology in Houston there was a pleasant absence of this driest of sentimental tripe until one day Peggy sent a belated card and letter with "Urgent" marked on the envelope. Gabriele opened it begrudgingly. It was one of those half-hearted apologies of "If I've done anything that has made you wrongly perceive..." or "If I've done anything that has made you believe..." with something like "that you are unloved" or "that you weren't wanted." Now she couldn't remember the exact details even if there was that indelible impression of one who would never apologize or admit that there was anything to be sorry about.

Still, it wasn't an unpleasant letter (she had had worse) and her vantage point when she read it from a lawn chair on the deck brought a happy serenity even onto it. A humming bird was boldly drinking from its feeder of nectar, a butterfly was fluttering above a potted plant, a young boy who was running for his ball was casting such an elongated shadow in the morning sunlight, and this vertical shadow was appearing somewhat three dimensional from her aerial perspective.

Furthermore, while concentrating on this invisible bombardment of molecules rife in the verdant yard she was also trying to figure out how best to sketch the atoms of fragrance and how this burgeoning dotty texture of atomism, rather than impressionism, could be extended to the sketching of the boy, his shadow, the butterfly, the humming bird, and a pensive woman looking out of the window to avoid packing her things.

So, reading the letter and not being of a mood to demand contrition of one who had never been contrite, she was not disappointed even though as an undergraduate she had unwittingly expected a metamorphosis of contrition to manifest itself in her aunt's sloppy handwriting. A more salient fact was that this particular letter accompanied with a greeting card of congratulations was a pensive deliberation on their relationship. That being the case, she kept it for a couple weeks before at last passing it into the jaws of the trashcan. If not a tacit apology this less than insipid letter was a wistful yearning to reestablish the relationship and from it she felt deep sympathy for her aunt.

Hundreds of times anew from childhood, Gabriele was unable to even go back for a day under the roof of an uncle whom she had successfully fought off from attempted molestation countless selves ago. Gabriele never mentioned this incident to anyone. Although in early childhood she was able to pinpoint it as the catalyst of their vehemence toward her she never said a word. So her uncle and male cousins disparaged her for what time she got up, how she combed her hair, for being left-handed, how she held her fork, the amount of time that she spent in the bathroom, where she sat, the position she sat in, why she read so much, why she was spending so much time reading in her "cage," that she was probably shedding hair on the living room sofa, why she put her legs

together so prim and proper at the supper table, and why she opened her legs like a tomboy or a lesbian cunt. She told herself that childhood would not last forever and that this was something that she would pass through without crumbling to pieces. "Matter of fact," said the voice within her, "you will get through it all unscathed." And throughout each day of each year she remained sangfroid, believing that a relentless cold stare would attenuate their cruelty, and yet no battles did she win with the Antarctic blasts that she sent their way unabatedly. And years later she never mentioned it in her letters to Peggy. Why would she with reality not being an external phenomenon but pictures rendered by the brain that were unavoidably reworked to justify certain ugly scenes ("Why don't you want to go with your uncle and cousins to the lake-really Gabriele, you need to work on your disposition - no man would have you the way you are becoming"). And yet her aunt sensed this absolute inability to return to Kansas in their communication so she wrote that she would fly in to see her. Gabriele agreed but looked at her coming with dread. Removed, reshaped, and orbiting around other things in the depths of space, Gabriele was a distant star. A connection back to Peggy, she then reasoned, would take enormous energy in a sustained sympathy and it was doubtful that even with the best effort, anything good could be gained from it.

The meeting happened. The aunt, who was usually such a martinet, asked about her niece's weight gain as if it could be anything other than pregnancy. Choosing chocolate as a more viable lie than a tumor Gabriele lied in speech but Peggy lied in belief. Worse, when pressed on the issue, Gabriele promised that she would come back for a visit and seek employment in Kansas. It was a successful meeting of active but coerced lies and passive, cajoled mendacities. There was a facade of feigned smiles throughout the day despite a sense of consternation and loss. It was a day of many awkward and reticent moments of not knowing quite what to say.

Now she was to be awarded a Master's degree in art history. For her it was an eventless day without ceremony. It was a normal day of putting up new wallpaper in one bedroom and then cleaning up to help Hispanic Betty with dinner but interrupting the latter task from incompetence and the need to drive the boys to little league practice. Even until now there were no cards or special letters sent to her, and this was as she liked it. She did not need anyone to congratulate her because she did not feel that there was anything to be praised for. She might have learned the history of art but she had lost the sense of herself as an artist. The cracks of her damp coldness had been filled as complacently as a warm moss. In family there was no discontent with the world and within these heavenly cellars all else seemed musty and art the specious delusions of crack addicts.

Heretofore most of her paintings had such a still contemplative depth within the glint of the eyes of prostitutes and street people who could pull down lightning; movement had the fading lines of ripples in a pond; hard movements belied the simple pleasures; pallid colors delineated the richness of form in a world of vanquished color; friendship was portrayed with discomfited and inexplicable sense of betrayal; people were stoic mannequins straining about in contorted action and exhibiting eyes of consternation at being in ceremony and societal roles that were not what they had imagined them to be; Antarctica was a resplendent distant background in contrast to the war ravaged Middle East with its oil wells ablaze; and in stores where customers headed for scanners with an incessant array of things, these

people were as blue as waves, curled and dashing as foaming breakers, in movement seemingly happy but in practice discontent. Sometimes the dominant colors were tawny but pert, ruddy and pale, and recalcitrant but with lament. Often her protagonists possessed the ideal curves of Raphael paintings and her antagonists had the angled linear depth of El Greco portraits or of distant cars. Her protagonists had a resistance against the social instinct; but she had succumbed to its truth like an insect to the light of a lamp. She was flitting from one specious light bulb to that of another: now not able to contemplate and finding sitting still to paint a torturous sensory deprivation; and now with endorphins and dopamines uncorked, she was oozing in the unbearable lightness of being.

Chapter Thirty-Two

By night she would lie with him in this hunger of flesh, pleasure, and merger; and after the cessation of sexual intimacies she would still feel undulations. She would snuggle up to his body and drowsily sink onto his chest while his head turned away from her, parting to other dreams and other illusions since the fire for this one had burnt itself out. The odors of his body would merge into her, and they furthered her illusions of a metamorphosis into something greater than the concoction of reason and the attempts at making sense of the world, which had to be done alone --a sense that she engraved onto the interior walls of her brain the way the ancient Egyptians chiseled eulogies in the tombs of the pharaohs. The smells of his body brought to her a pleasant titillation if not love of all things that were caught randomly by the magnet of her pondering. As she snuggled there she was reassured that there were possibilities of loving the world in ways she had never imagined by extending herself to him and becoming something different than a stuffed polar bear with the stiff arms that the factory of the human race mutantly created.

Then they would sleep some moments and his chest would no longer be her life buoy at all but a magic carpet ride or a Shuttle flight as gentle for her as if she were an insect on an eagle. She would be taken to where one's head might brush against the stratosphere before descending in an arch back into wakefulness. Upon them both awakening there would be frivolous pillow talk. He would sometimes narrate snippets of his life in a cathartic random response to whatever idea preceded it. In some ways he was like those who could not tolerate the impersonal aspects of self-consuming jobs and would affirm their existence to a psychologist or a priest at a confessional. She learned of the attitudes that drove his interaction with the world--a family's overemphasis of money, which made him become an educator, and yet a belief that owning and operating a business was one's only means of success. He was cognizant how the force of one's family caused one to emulate and oppose its attitudes and had a sense of humor about this, which she admired.

Often these talks were of irrelevant and petty matters that were amusing on the pillow but so easily forgotten off of it. One time he asked her what she would be doing the following day; she told him that she had to go to Wal-Mart to buy the boys some underwear and socks and some paint for the deck, and that she might look around for some clothes for herself at a mall; and then he expressed how once a cleaning lady who was doing her work in the men's bathroom in the mall had caused him to be unable to relieve himself. She giggled like a schoolgirl at a

slumber party. She reciprocated by telling him that in "Bang-COCK" cleaning ladies "go in and out of bathrooms with their mops with impunity." She teased him that maybe there were these ostensible cleaning ladies everywhere whose real duties were to cause inhibition, clogging, and insecurity within the male gender. From this her mind took a tortuous and serious linking of ideas. She began to ruminate that society was upside down. Cleaning ladies in men's bathrooms, forced to smell urine, soap, and bleach all day should be paid the most and that they who were the benefactors of the world like presidents and prime ministers should be paid the least. She argued that only then, when equality was gained and each person given either money or admiration as compensation for their work, would the world be a just and harmonious place. He laughed, thinking it was another joke, but she was deadly serious.

And yet once he told her something significant. He told her that his mother was not his mother at all but his aunt; that his real mother, suffering from post partum depression, suffocated his baby brother in the bath water, dumped him, Michael, in the bracken waters of an abandoned well at her parents' farm, and hung herself in a shed. After the funeral, his aunt was urged to come to them from her home in a small Italian town. Gabriele felt an empathy as deep as the gods for she too had been run over in family which for her made hugging, touching and feeling emotions such an alien plain to this date. She too had been recalcitrant and had done antipodal actions to thwart this Aunt Peggy and Uncle Jake but for all her freedom the actions had been emulation or rebellions against this absurd, vague memory of family. Thinking of him at the age of three clinging to rope and pail she knew that she loved him.

Hate was everywhere. It was the striving to exist and to have a dominant importance in the inconsequential affairs of man. Just as the provincial Korean bravado within Sang Huin or Shawn had made him so mercilessly obdurate in administering justice against his sister and her pregnancy, so the Americans camouflaged innate aggression behind terms like axis of evil, rogue country harboring weapons of mass destruction, links to Al Queida, and liberation for the Iraqi people. They and their preemptive strikes, they and their selective targeting with improved smart bombs, were killing and harming thousands of civilians after evoking psychological trauma in this failed shock and awe campaign. They, by heat and explosion, decimated myriad soldiers who either chose to be such to secure a decent livelihood or were conscripted with threats; and yet the Americans melted their bodies in this internecine campaign sending them up amongst the other gasses the way thousands of their civilians had been melted within the World Trade Center towers. The Saddam Hussein regime, for all its internal atrocities, had posed no new threat to the world. It just had the potential for potential and this was enough because the days were dark indeed. One group of tyrants and their sadistic entourage holding a nation hostage for decades had to be the example for the capabilities of their virulence was greater than that envisaged by Al Queida -- at least so the George Jr. administration, for all its cowboy stuttering, still glibly and volubly conveyed.

He thought this as Saeng Seob sat down in the living room and said, "Can you really think with that thing on?" Sang Huin knew that he couldn't--at least not well--but the television was their child from which conversation was begotten and extant. Without it their intimacy

would have exhausted their conversation long ago.

"Turn it off if you want."

"It isn't bothering me. I'm used to AFKN by now."

"Well, sometimes AFKN has movies about American history but I guess not with the war. I needed a break from CNN. An hour ago CNN reported that we--I mean the Americans-- bombed a residence where they think Saddam Hussein was staying at. Four two-thousand pound bombs. They thought that killing the innocent people of that block was nothing next to the chance of him being there-- he and his sadistic sons. Who knows how many innocent people were collateral damage."

"Do Americans think it was right?"

"I don't know."

"Was it right?"

"I don't know." It was a cold calculation, a moral choice that was not meant to be that of humans; and yet someone behind a desk had made this one to have a chance of reducing the length of the war and its casualties. He had never been good at modern math so his studies were centered innocuously in musicology. "What do I know about this?" he asked himself. "What do I know about anything?"

"Will they do that to the North Koreans?"

"I don't know. Don't know--hope not. What are you reading?"

"Nothing."

"What's nothing?"

"Comics."

"In Braille?"

"Yes."

"You can't see the pictures. There are no pictures in that book, are there? There are words. I guess being blind makes you have to develop a vivid imagination." Seong Seob did not say anything. "Comics about what?" He was trying to control this disapproving undertone that often crept into his voice. He disliked wasted leisure. It did not seem to him that leisure should be such a frivolous pastime with the few when the many were so needy. He also did not like Saeng Seob's lack of motivation; and it was only because of his friend's blindness and knowledge that his mother had thrown him like a coin into a wishing well of death that Sang Huin managed to stay mute about this issue. For the first time a better reason for not judging others formulated in his head: he who was a promiscuous homosexual, an unfaithful partner to his friend, one who had urged the abortion of his former girl friend's embryo, and had by his Puritanical Korean values been an inadvertent abettor of the crime against his sister, Jun Jin, had no moral authority to state an opinion about anything. Even if Saeng Seob at times exhibited double his own reticence making conversation short of impossible, he knew that this was even less of a reason to judge him

than the fact that he was such an unmotivated sloth. Still it was natural to think that one's own introverted character was right in being such and that someone else who was sometimes even more reticent, was abnormal. He thought, "So this guy has a part time job with his cousin and no real hobbies outside of strumming on a guitar and light reading--these are innocuous pursuits in one who from his pain could have become a hardened criminal. Surely there are blind bad guys in penitentiaries; and who am I to judge him?"

. "A cat"

"Garfield?"

"Yes."

"In a book?"

"A collection."

Relinquishing the idea of having a meaningful conversation, Sang Huin changed the channel to CNN and got his fix of war updates; but a half hour later it became an overdose. He turned down the macabre sounds and returned to his computer.

By day Gabriele would make calls to her beloved so that she could get that rush in the pleasure receptors of her brain. Then, when warranted, she would go over to the site of the future school and Michael would always ask her what she thought of the construction up to that point. She would say her unvaried line of "It sure is coming along well," which of course it was invariably. Occasionally she would sketch her ideas of the interiors of faculty lounges, secretary offices, and other miscellaneous rooms. She would submit them to his blank stares and then she would have to admit that she did not "know the first thing about interior design." And yet the same aversion that she had toward holding hands in the day was making her into less of an active lover at night. Grateful to be made real by being pulled out of the stuffy chamber of her head, still it was sometimes difficult to repeat the same half hour rapture each night as if this hunger for merger and thoughtless ecstasy were to bring on intimacies and awareness that the previous night's half hour failed to do. This perspective was exacerbated all the more when she considered the fact that the urges had been no less poignant during all their other times together. Each night there was his hard thumping to please himself fully with little regard, now, for the best means of her arousal. Although still pleasurable, and even more of a gyrating release from thoughts, it now seemed more like being tossed in a blender, and each night her embraces became more like frozen fruit.

On weekends they often went to nurseries to buy shrubs and trees for the landscape of her home as well as that of the school; but one Saturday morning he got her to acquiesce to this yearning to find one's maker that was there in the collective consciousness of primordial modern man. At Mass she fidgeted with some beads in her lap and chanted Hail Marries. She chanted these archaic trifles although, tacit and hidden away amongst her private thoughts, she had her own version of a Hail Mary: "Hell Mary Juana, full of recalcitrance, the Lordess, Santa Gabriela, be with thee. Blessed art thou in the salubrious realm of illegal substances and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, beer and chewing tobacco. Hell Mary Juana, servant of the Gabriele goddess and

her partner, the sun god, give us something sweet to hallucinate now and at the hour of our death. Amen." She looked over at Nathaniel there in her pew. He was barely able to keep himself from launching through the roof. This sententiousness and pomp was too much poop for him too. For the first time in months she felt a special cognate affection for her son that excluded the others. Feigning smiles only when cognizant of Michael glancing toward her and silent as death, she tacitly spoke to Nathaniel in an imaginary utterance, "I'll make this up to you--we must all play with the tinker toys of language in thought to have some degree of meaning within our petty lives; but God and heaven are empty make believe words of a feeble animal. They are a feeble species who need to look for external meaning and finding only tragic random chance within the mortality of the family and friends that have given them pleasure, and then their own mortality as well, resort to storybook scripture, churches, and chants. Their jargon of God, heaven, hell, and sin don't refer to anything-- totally empty words--and to have to forfeit running around, celebrating life to sit uncomfortably in this dark Saddam Husseinish torture chamber--I'll make up for this. What can I give you? What about a dog or a gift certificate to Swenson's Ice Cream parlor? No, too much sugar. I wouldn't want you bouncing off the walls any more than usual."

Following the service the boys were sent to a Catholic version of Sunday school and she was paraded in front of a bunch of stiff strangers with eyes euthanized by talk of the heavens. He introduced her to various people but the introductions were an awkward mix. She was given their names with little else and they were given this spiel that she was an artist who had become his girlfriend and was now contributing some ideas for the interior design for his school, whose beauty was distracting him from building his version of a loosely affiliated Catholic school, and who might draw some "pictures" of the school's patron saint. He said it in various ways but each time she felt flaunted like a woman seeing the image of herself in a bra on a lit billboard in front of a bench at a bus stop only in her case bust size and her ability to wear lingerie beautifully did not matter. It seemed to her that he was trying to boast a vague connection of an artist to the school, which she couldn't quite figure out unless he had the idea that she would teach art there. The stout and husky figure that she was, she couldn't see that his introducing her as if she were Helen of Troy would grant him a lot more customers. A half hour into being introduced and memorizing names that she would forget once out of there (one young Russian who exercised with Michael at a fitness center and had the most forgettable name of all) she told herself that she did not want the four of them to stay there a minute longer. She used English like a crowbar, demanding that he remove the boys so that they could enjoy the remainder of the day; and from his saturnine expressions she could see that she was the condemned one. As the condemned one she knew that she would be free to implement whatever she pleased since he would be too sullen to have it any other way. She knew this for she had been condemned before.

Not needing to worry about being condemned since she was already such, she went ahead and argued that the boys should be left with Hispanic Betty if the two of them were still planning to go to the nursery. She didn't want to see them dragged through flowers, trees, and shrubs (Nathaniel spilling his incessant complaints and disturbing big Mr. Phlegmatic by making him morose) or kept in the hot truck the way they were on the previous Saturday. To be in the truck all alone with nothing to do but slap one another and pull each other's hair while she and Michael were plant hunting for verdant plantings, they would be

nothing but prisoners and their apoplexy from incarceration would probably cause severe fraternal loathing. If nothing else, their whole day would be constricted by adults' self-centered preoccupation with contrived accomplishments since it was adults who ruled over them -- adults who went contrary to the senses which implored that through contemplation one might celebrate the day.

Gabriele and Michael returned with two German Shepherds as well as five or six tree roses in the back of the pickup. Caring less about the plants, Gabriele was eager to witness dog meets boy and boy makes dog into a friend but the joy was stymied in stepping inside the house. When they went in they saw mercurial Mr. Petulant executing punishment against the son of Mr. Phlegmatic. Nathaniel had Rick's head under the running water of the faucet. The crime was spilling a glass of milk; the punishment was a near drowning; and the perspective she chose to take for a fuller understanding of this situation, as Michael pulled off his belt, was Piaget's idea of the moral absolutist. As the brazen non-flinching boy was being whipped, she thought to herself that she would need Betty to monitor their every move from now on for children's system of government was more procrustean and draconian than that devised by adults in most, but not all, areas of the global jungle.

On a Monday built vapidly on the vacuous graves of wasted hours, she heard the school bus return and the barking of the two hounds. Curious about how Nathaniel related to his dog when she was not around, she went to the studio window to witness this interaction of dog and boy inconspicuously.

Outside the window there was the same rectangular wooden container where, at the trailer, she had planted a flowerbed which an owl then used as a domicile. Now it was fastened under the studio window with a different choice of flowers. She remembered the days preceding that move to Ithaca: having climbed onto a tree, which had been the umbrage of the trailer, with slow, surreptitious movements, shooting the owl with a tranquilizer gun, and pulling its body into a laundry bag without falling from the limbs of the tree. It had been a time consuming undertaking and at the time she had doubted whether it would actually succeed; and yet here the owl was well acclimated to its setting. Looking onto the bird now she was pleased: it had succumbed to the belief that the trailer had been nothing but a dream just as she had awakened or succumbed to the belief that her arduous efforts to paint visions imagined in her head had no substance and that only filling one's mind in the clutter of activity that involved others did one actually live at all. After all, contemplation involved having to contemplate something and what else was there but this ball, this planet of movement? A racket ball player was called such because she played racket ball and a rebel because she rebelled--all people had self-worth by defining themselves in words of action.

From the window she noticed that Nathaniel played with his dog when she was not around. He actually had some affection for it. Had she bought at least one of these dogs for the experiment of discovering his ability to care or to prompt that attribute? Was it for the companionship of both boys or was it for her own companionship? Maybe the dogs were bought to fill the hours when she wasn't taking the boys to their scout meetings, buying clothes for them, rooting for them on bleachers at baseball games (she had tried rooting for them as a voluntary concession stand worker, but her tacit words and supercilious coldness to the inconsequential and insufferable gossip of these

motherly peers brought her a flurry of unfriendly glances not all that different than what she received in all the other days in the years of her life), tree planting, or going to the site of the school to say, "It looks like its really coming along well." It was all of this and more. So much that was selfish, altruistic, curious, and indifferent went into the simplest of acts.

She could see there, in this dog centering its actions on her boy and her boy responding by throwing out a shoe for him to fetch, a reason for all this carbon to be divided into so many organisms. Looking through the window at this interaction (saliva drooling from the mouth of one and smiling fangs from the other) she saw that the universe communicated with itself and that it's self responded in a distinctly varied perspective. It was by doing so that the universe was at last real. There was no doubt that there were other worlds like the Earth throughout the cosmos. Simple pleasures, simple interactions, were the entity, and she knew that the whole thing was good. She knew that this overlapping of the universe in carbon beings interacting with each other in their distinct ways were the talking heads that made the universe real. The sight of forty-dollar sneakers there in the drooling waterfalls of the dog's mouth caused her consternation. Still she did nothing. She just watched and recalled what had occurred yesterday.

Yesterday, Sunday, when she had approached this gathering of boy and dog Nathaniel had shoved the animal away and when it still pounced on his legs as he walked away from it, he kicked it on its belly. She didn't mind him showing that he disliked her. She saw it as a passing stage: a diminishing but still open animus toward her for the trip to Asia and Europe without him, resenting this distribution of her attention to include two other males, taking umbrage over her slight favoritism of the chosen over the natural members of family if he did indeed perceive it (certainly he saw and resented the grocery shopping with Rick that was done without him), this refurbishing of the whole of family within contrived Friday night croquet games of bonding regardless of the mood and wishes of individual family members at the time, and this slipping out of a boy's closeness to his mother so that he might fit into himself. She did not concern herself with that in the least. He could critically assess her and show his dislike openly so long as it was done respectfully. True motherly love was raising children and not needing to smother them in maternal, nurturing instincts or expecting understanding that their egocentric beings could not muster. The paddling yesterday was not as punishment for hostilities toward her (hostilities that existed because of issues he was trying to resolve in himself) or to oppose Skinner's belief that negative reinforcement accomplished very little. It was done as justice for the dog and a statement on behalf of it and all other animals that they weren't there to be targets of aggression. It wasn't negative reinforcement per se for none of that could work with him. She knew that skinned knees from bicycle accidents and the whippings he got from Michael (Whippings she was beginning to resent) were proof that the boy was somewhat stoic to pain. Outside of learning that Nathaniel did not dislike his pooch (only herself) she lost herself in Internet articles on owls until she and Rick began racing and banging their carts against each other down the aisles of the grocery store, and Monday went by uneventfully.

On Thursday morning, when everyone had gone in accordance with their habits, she ate some burnt toast with her grapefruit and for ten minutes stared at a coffee pot with glazed eyes. There was a time when inanimate objects never failed at reflecting the ennui by which she

gazed at them, causing profound ideas to be projected onto her consciousness like a great beacon of light shown onto a screen in dark movie theatre --a filmed documentary of the entity and its discoverer, Parmenides. Now meditation on a blank wall brought a sketch of that wall within her memory and this was all.

So, from pure boredom, she decided to watch the dogs that were all alone and unto themselves in the back yard. Since she wasn't exactly next door to Antarctic penguins and these two specimens were infinitely more fascinating than calculating the exact strands of gray hair in the underbrush that lay fully on her scalp, she cast spells onto the dogs making these smelly bodies with panting faces oozing out halitosis objects of mild curiosity. They were certainly something to consider for those who had nothing better to do with their time. Betty was busy behind the loud vacuum cleaner, and Gabriele could hardly retreat into her bedroom to escape the noise since the fusillade of Michael's flatulence a half hour earlier had been so rife that the air freshener could not do much but dilute it in an equally reprehensible odor.

She went out on the deck and looked onto a world that was definitely for the dogs. The German Shepherds moved in the yard unrestrained. In a more genuine way they seemed happier to sniff and distinguish bits of the world instead of this obsessive bliss of centering themselves on human masters. Much of the time Nathaniel's anti-social dog growled when Rick's dog came near him; but, depending on its mood, the two at times could play and wrestle with each other amicably. Gabriele fed them Puppy Chow and watched how they relinquished their freedom to instantly come for their meals. She pondered how all creatures were always slaves to hunger and the desire to obtain more than their allotted share--at least both characteristics were apparent in Nathaniel's dog.

Her thoughts echoed the breakfast talk a little over an hour ago. Rick had wanted to bring his dog to school and had suggested that he could tie it to a bicycle rack. Nathaniel had scoffed, "Right, ignoramus. D'you think Betty'll come behind the two of you with a pooper-scooper to keep your ass from being expelled. I think not!" Now, thinking of it, it still struck her as funny. It hadn't bothered Rick. He had retained his placidity the way his dog was now happily wagging its tail and looking up at her while its partner stole the food that was in its dish. As agreeable as Rick's dog was, she could understand Mr. Petulant's canine perfectly. Half-battered and half-loved even for a few days in this thing called family, it was lost there in the bosky thickets of confusion. Made to sleep with Nathaniel so that it might know him as master, it could already sense that his love was tepid at best. Feeling inferior and groping around in pleasurable associations so inextricably linked to pain it was sometimes bumptious, aggressive, and striving to leave a concept of its superiority onto the other dog's mind.

Months passed. She could not think anything in particular about the owl or the dogs let alone anything else. They just existed along with her existence and as incommunicably as her reticence. The late April rains were making shallow ponds within her yard. Sodden as the mustard MF put on his eggs, or the streams rolling across her sidewalk, the turgid sediment brought turgid sentiments of desperation in her mind. Then out of nowhere came a chain of events as if a blessing. They offered a respite from the void by the clogging of one's days in myriad tasks. It was clutter devised by her bed partner's making and it beeped

according to the schedule in a PDA/ pocket computer that he lent to her. It all started one numb day when Rick's dog was licking her face and she wasn't even cognizant of it doing so and the telephone was ringing but she wasn't aware of it either; a message on her old answering machine informing her about Nathaniel's truancy; the imbroglio discussed in pillow talk; and the smell of MF's breath cajoling her to withdraw the boys from public school and to home teach them until the private school opened.

Eager to escape imprisonment in the void, her intransigence on the issue began to break down and there she was arguing with him playfully, agreeing with him silently, kissing him, needing the intoxication of his breath, and that tendentious male assertiveness of that one right perspective. Her tenuous arguments were playful and like any male he felt licentious flames from this clashing of wills, this electric and sexy friction, and this knowledge that by rubbing her in his arms and planting his seed in her he would conquer all resistance.

The next morning she kissed her MF at the breakfast table in front of the others without inhibitions, massaged the nape of his neck, and then sat there holding his hand under the table as she bobbed on some type of cloud. Betty's frying of bacon did not seem nauseating; the mustard Michael put on his eggs radiated warmly like the sun god, Aten; and the flatulence of one or more males at the breakfast table seemed aromatic. Convinced of her mission to be a teacher, she was suddenly the indispensable cue ball setting others in motion but being banged along with them. Her busy new life often involved the search of the right books to purchase; the readings, the making of handouts and worksheets; her impatient lectures, enforced homework, and administered tests; her punishment for recesses of savagery when Mr. Placid's head of hair was often pulled out of the sink like a fisherman's trophy; more lectures; taking Mr. Placid--never Mr. Petulant-- with her grocery shopping or searching for acceptable amateur art for the school lounge (a Gabriele Sangfroid deemed not tame enough); sending another one of Mr. Phlegmatic's suits to the dry cleaner; and then driving the boys to baseball practice, boy scouts meetings, or swimming lessons. Her only contemplation during the first week of this teacher act was to sit on the toilet to urinate and defecate. It brought not only to her a physical catharsis but, from the bathroom window a view of Betty burning raked grass and leaves in the yard. Smoke hovered over the tree limbs like a thick massive spider web and she saw that the fire that was leaping and the smoke that was hovering was her own life. She told herself that she loathed contemplation. And so the months passed by in a vapid and dizzying succession of things to do. Real existential pondering or the internal creation of meaning within herself were troubles she did not need to ponder.

Sometimes she doubted herself and wondered whether motion had become an ersatz; and this quandary was as pesky as a fly trying to land on the oils of her shiny nose. She kept having a recurring dream of floating on the mattress of her bed to undulations and the sounds of waves splashing against a wall. These bedroom walls had old pallid-yellow wallpaper that was bubbled and flaking off and patterned onto the strips of wallpaper there were hexagon shapes. Cartoon versions of herself and her family were trapped in each hexagon like semi-beings in monads that were unable to connect to the bigger picture, but like the wallpaper they were fading away.

In a last exasperated appeal for her to apply for work at the

school before it opened, he reminded her that the boys wouldn't be there to teach any longer so she would need to do something with herself. Ruminating would never succeed; but an external activity like painting that was so outwardly self-absorbing might be used to subtly reiterate to them who she was as if an action or a set of actions were the summation of a being. By painting she could only thwart the aspirations of others by making them realize that her own selfish agenda came before theirs. Such an appearance would make her outwardly narcissistic and impregnable in their perspectives. For otherwise they could take her apart piece by piece the way souvenir hunters chipped off Teotihuac¸n or walked off with the Petrified Forest.

He would perceive the less concrete images in her paintings to be feral, and yet he would remain taciturn, scowling but leaving her to be herself. Maybe there would be some of these bedtime reminders, although not so many as now. Now there were these continual reminders of suits to have cleaned, grocery items for his palate and pallet (colors for his mouth that she would be vile and immoral to ignore) and reminders of what their boys needed, the agenda of pleasure for these little monkeys whom she was meant to chauffeur from place to place (a karate class for one, a baseball practice for another, a friend's birthday party for one, a jean and shirt buying extravaganza for both).

But now, she would not paint for she did not need it to support and pull herself back as if she were the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Her foundation, she told herself, was not as tenuous as this. And even though she was a true woman for him, catering to family matters and allowing herself to be his whore (he asking her questions about men she slept with so that it would excite him enough to maximize his pleasure when impaling within her) she told herself that she could do it without needing art as a crutch. She was a true woman as he liked it and yet had her own sense of being fully Gabriele within her own head. Painting would merely be a prop of a weak feminist. Yes, she could have told him that she had her art, that focus of the realm of ideas that had been her vocation before he moved in with her, and he would have scowled discreetly, never criticizing its odd feral qualities directly. But she would not have believed herself to be an artist anyhow since expressions were being effaced in each new day of life's mundane inconsequentiality.

She just gave him a wry smile and shrugged her shoulders. Too busy: the phrase was air above her lips and it just hovered there like the gossamer smoke strewn in the branches from Hispanic Betty's burning of leaves. She didn't dare say anything. She just let off a whiff of air. With head in denial, she silently repudiated that the school was even being constructed let alone finished, and that the two pupils who put motion and a sense of being busy into her life would soon be gone. She didn't want to discuss any of it. Still the school opened, not being subservient to her solipsistic thoughts. Its opening brought to her regret that she had chosen to not work there and that a role and an interaction with others, which had so easily defined her, would no longer be there to cling to. She had circumscribed her yearnings to go on with teaching, was now miserable, but believed that not prostituting herself in high school psychology classes or elementary school finger painting had been the right choice. Wounded not by vacuous stretches of hours but by the severing of this habit to place meaning and happiness on one's role and interaction with others, hers was a battered retreat. She withdrew into her own books to not be entirely lost unto herself and she knew that knowledge contained there was one step toward building herself apart from the addiction to the chaos and motion of others.

She again returned to the nothingness from whence she came. She sometimes sat in her studio with a carton of Swenson's ice cream on her lap reading books on owls like any good ornithologist, got nebulous readings of Tarot cards that she smacked into Celtic designs on her bed, or sometimes drew funny faces on the patio with the chalky edges of rocks. Feeling discontent if left alone for five minutes and incrementally disconcerted for every minute beyond ten, she often interrupted Hispanic Betty to ask what she was doing as if housework were pantomime and the gestures could only be guessed at. The days were invariably long and despite their plodding movements they clunked into each other like two emaciated furless dogs in Thailand that were enervated and stupefied by starvation and blindness.

She questioned who this MF was. The boys were easier: the preferable one who had not come from her womb purred more often than he whined and the one with the demanding mouth railed and complained in less of a dual personality than the former but on the pettiest of things from her forgetting to buy him Pop Tarts to Hispanic Betty's abuse of toilet paper; however both could be easily characterized as egocentric toy soldiers who beat their drums chaotically when their batteries needed recharging or a TV advertisement had indelibly branded a "need" onto their brains. The other one (this Michael, this MF, this Mr. Phlegmatic) she knew in multi-interpretable bits for all her intimacies with him. She knew that he was glad that Rick now had a mother but this might have just indicated that he was glad to have some woman chauffeur his kid to after-school activities and take the kid clothes-shopping so that he did not need to do it. She knew that he claimed to be pleased that Rick now had a surrogate brother who might "toughen him up a bit" but this was ironic since the only one he beat with his belt was Nathaniel (except for occasional S&M sessions with her, and during that time she would struggle to gain the mastery of the belt, and it was she who more often than not would be the sadist). She knew that he had taken the boys to an amusement park a week ago when she was going through what she believed he thought of as an imaginary sickness, and yet she wasn't sure if it was from love that he removed all noise away from her or from simple indifference and neglect. Inconsequential facts littered her mind about Michael (facts like him giving his aunt a poinsettia every Christmas or that he liked to sodden his eggs with mustard), but was this inconsequentiality the real summation of the man? Was she, his woman, in such a needy state of mind that facts like this and the manipulative power of sexual pleasure so much more enhanced when with another should posed themselves as intimacy. Was this the epitome of a woman? It might be; but then, she told herself, she was a female and not a woman, and that she was a goddess and not a mere mortal. Her love of him, she judged, was a few facts mixed in fantasies begotten in neediness. What she asked and chose to know about him and the feeling of love she mixed as color on her pallet to spread around these facts were her own invention. She decided that she did not know him at all.

Her mind would not rest it there. She continued to think, "His obsession with viewing his watch could be from nervous energy instead of a desperate wish to succeed at every turn -- who knows? His change to a CEO instead of an educator could be interpreted as a wish to make the educational experience everything that it should be so who am I to say that he is a derelict to values I was attracted to. His buying of other businesses and doing whatever it is he does shows industriousness and the desire to leave something to his children." She said these things to convince herself that she did not have a stranger who slept in her

bed. But then she thought, "Even if he is a stranger -- there have been lots of strangers in my bed. Should I chase him away out of a fear that we are all strangers?"

This enjoyment of hearing his footsteps on the linoleum when he stepped into her home, his smell within the cologne he wore, the pleasure he gave her (now less synchronized to her needs, now more male banging, but still pleasurable), the beautiful black eyes that were hard and virile, sideburns on his handsome, swarthy face, virile hair on the nape of his neck and as abundant growth on his fertile chest, and a general masculine handsomeness that told a woman, that breeding with him would grant unto her beautiful babies with little or no chance of deformities--these things were the most primordial instinctual drives of attraction and bonding that made her love him but still she did not think that these things were so much him as they were the promptings of a woman's breeding.

He was a busy little entrepreneur opening a fitness center with his Russian friend one month, an Internet cafe the next, and some minor investments in between that she knew less about. He did whatever he did throughout the day. Questioning him about his schedule annoyed him in his taciturn ways. She was made to feel that he did not want business to intrude on his personal domain or the personal domain to intrude on business but that, she knew, might just be her own positive interpretation. For what she knew there might be another woman. She didn't own a man's body. He could do with it whatever he wished so long as he didn't bring any disease to her. She told herself that jealousy was a primitive instinct of men warding off the responsibilities of babies that weren't composed in part by their own DNA, women who did not want to lose income, that food of the hunt, for themselves and their kids, and both sexes wanting to ensure that their bed partners were slavishly loyal at assisting their pleasures. She told herself that she was beyond such absurd human foibles as jealousy.

And yet she did not know who she was: she was now not even a teacher--just one more person groping around lost and clinging to others and, to a much lesser degree now, the commotion of the days, in order to be cognizant of being at all. She did not want to think of him, herself, or the demise of her higher authority nearly a year ago, and how like a good captain her higher authority had bravely gone down the toilet with her reefer ship. She thought again about the boys. Children were often thought of as callow adults making their inchoate journeys into adulthood. To her, adulthood was not superior to childhood: it was just two of the four links of recycled life no less purposeful than any raindrop slapping into the surface of a river which would then ooze back into the ocean before slowly being evaporated back from whence it came.

Sitting on the patio doodling on the concrete with the chalk of rock in her right hand and left hand like Moses holding back the waters of drool that came from her affectionate beasts, she felt the beginning of what she could tell would be an intense migraine. She tried to ease her apprehension by joking to herself that it would be no more than a seven or eight quake on the Gabriele scale and yet the foreboding knowledge of her vulnerability was exacerbating the pain and making her body rigid. In that sense it was a bit psychosomatic. She went inside to take one of her pills that never did her much good. The water was more immediately beneficial. She drank it voraciously to lubricate her dry throat.

As she was drinking her water she heard the lonely howls of Rick's dog. Disregarding simple pleasures, which should have slid down the apertures of a being's senses and filled lonely vacuous gray matter with curiosity and awe, this dog was fixated on her. It "needed" her. Domesticated creatures were so needy and clinging but she was reluctant to disparage this behavior as altogether delusional since she could not even disabuse herself of such inane notions. It probably was delusional but it still deserved sympathy, and so she once again went out to be with these dogs. Was this the only meaning of life, she asked herself, this soothing of imagined mental travail? She believed that it was. She picked up Rick's halitosis harried hound and took it into her bedroom--the cat, Mouse, having succumbed to cancer shortly after she returned from Europe and its body placed in a shoe box that was buried in the forest behind the house. She went to her bed and had the dog lay at her feet. She pressed her palm on her forehead and closed her eyes. "In Biblical times," she thought in an attempt to recall, think through, and solidify to long-term memory what she had read, "one of the fairest of fowl was the owl. The historical origin of the owl is, of course, the historical origin of the bird which probably evolved from one of two groups of dinosaurs, the--oh shit, I can't remember-- during the early part of the Jurassic period. The term, Preavisanusphyllus or I don't know what, is applied to flying reptiles. SomeE what's the wordE ornithologists--some ornithologists say the earliest bird was a tree dwelling reptile which began flight by gliding from one branch to another although other experts say that it was a running, leaping, terrestrial animal which gradually increased the length of its leaps by the use of long forelimbs. After the appearance of Archaeopteryx Lithographica, the first known bird, the myriad species descended from it. It is hard to isolate when the first owls evolved. The first owl may have come out of the Cenozoic era of 70 to 40 million years ago if not the latter part of the Mesozoic era, which was 135 to 70 million years ago. The Mesozoic era was characterized by large seas, lakes, deltas with deserts, and occasional glaciers. If the owls came out of this period it was when the last of the dinosaurs were dying out. The Cenozoic era had volcanic activity and geological unrest. The environment was -- " She couldn't concentrate. She wasn't confident of her facts. They were like sand falling through her fingers. She went downstairs into the kitchen, took another pill with some cola, and then fixed some burnt toast but the idea of buttering it seemed so nauseous to her that she ate it bare. Then she went back to her bedroom, feeling as mad as the pharaoh, Akhenaten (or Akhenaton) who purportedly worshiped the sun in his desert utopia until he was fully mad.

Her shadow on a wall in the hallway when passing into the bathroom to vomit seemed fey and she somehow felt subordinate to its alien presence. She felt so needy and wanted the shadow that was Michael, the last vestige of something somewhat real, to merge into her shadow to give it pulp and tangibility that she, who was less than her shadow, entirely lacked. She wanted the virile male shadow to stifle her thoughts, to free her from ever becoming old, and to shoo away loneliness and meaninglessness N an aloneness pesky as that incessant fly landing on that shiny nose of hers and as meaningless as a sedentary stick insect spending its life camouflaged as an inanimate object. She vomited before she got the lid up and the colors looked like the hard, tactile brushstrokes of thick orange palpable paint of a Van Gogh. Both her trembling head and her strained and feral vomiting moans seemed to be to the rhythms of Chopin's Funeral March.

She cleaned the bathroom for a few minutes and almost felt salubrious to be wiping with her sponge around the toilet; but, losing energy and feeling the heavier drumbeats of a migraine's gradual crescendo she realized that she was just passing out of one pain and going into something more intense. There were noticeable barricades to her thinking, checkpoints in the junctures of her thoughts, the looting of her ideas, and a forehead on fire like buildings in Sarajevo. Feeling extremely weak, she dried the floor, toilet, and sink with a towel, rinsed out the sponge, and lay on her bed. She felt startled to see Michael enter the bedroom.

"Hey," he said. It was his version of 'hello' distorted as it was in an oxymoron of informal indifference. She wondered whether she could expect anything better than this as sick and listless as she was. All sick people were an ignominy to those who were well just as contemplation was an abhorrence to all that spun in action, and as death was an opprobrium to the living.

She imagined the wraith of her higher authority saying, "Creatures of motion in their mortal frames unto their termination at death are incapable of true contemplation. Needing to subdue the earth, theirs are half-hearted prayers never to reach their destination E th never -- "

"You have the dog in here," he reproached her with a gentle disdain.

She now wanted to waive him away like a fly -- he who a few minutes earlier had been needed no less than air to breathe. She didn't say anything.

"Huh?" he demanded

"Yeah." It was her version of 'mind your own business.'

"Come here, Roman." He clapped his hands and made a downward gesture to the dog.

"He won't come. Look at him." His eyes are alarmed and his chest is heaving. Still, I think he knows that if I don't hold out as his aegis he can still elude you. He knows that you find it repugnant to pick him up so he's playing dumb."

"You're spoiling him. Get him out of here. I'm not coming into the bedroom tonight if it smells like this."

"I smell your farting."

He cracked a smile bashfully despite himself. "Betty's cooking."

She wanted to say, "True she likes frijoles, jalape-os and the like, and the boys like Mexican food too" but her pain trod into the breath of the utterance like children kicking puddles. She was doing her best to put on an agreeable facade--that appealing facade of the bantering bourgeois in the levity, the amusement park, that was supposed to be the world-- but it was hard. It was too hard.

"Why are you just lying around?" he asked critically.

"Just resting," she lied. She frowned. His repudiation of her sickness, as not all that different than the attempts at malingering by

former pupils whom he had beaten with his board, irritated her; and yet she doubted herself. How did she know what he thought? How did she know that he believed that her malingering was synonymous to theirs and had disdain for both? She did not know anything. It was speculation. It was discerning a mood and then devising fiction around it. But then, how did she know that she didn't know what he thought he knew? "I'll paint later. I am just thinking what to paint on" she lied again to test his reaction toward her proposed return to herself.

"You should wash that dog--both of them."

"What time is it now?"

"3:30"

"You hardly ever get back here until eight."

He went into the bathroom where he began to brush his teeth. The toothbrush muddled the cohesion of his words. "I'm in between meetings. While I was driving I spilled some coffee and then some ketchup from my hamburger. I need to change jackets so can you take the one I have on to the cleaners?" Water came down the faucet but it was a parsimonious dribble. She thought to herself that rich people were so stingy about the damndest of things. She could not hear any water but she did hear him spit into the basin. With a toothbrush still in his mouth he glanced into the bedroom. "Are you unhappy with something?"

"No," she said.

"These headaches again?" His disdainful tone had the sotto voce of exasperation as if she were the pesky fly who should be shoed away.

"Fuck, don't say it that way. It isn't psychosomatic."

"What did you say?"

"The headaches aren't psychosomatic."

"You need to watch that mouth," he said sternly. He rinsed his mouth and spat. Then to soften his austerity he added, "Remember there's a bottle of Ivory Soap in here to wash out your mouth. You know, if there weren't two imitative boys to consider I wouldn't really mind all that much a slip here and there. As you have pointed out a bunch of times guys get enthusiastic at ball games and say things they shouldn't say. I've been one of those guys. Fine, I can buy that; and you are kind of right--the love and hate in the tone of voice matter more." He turned off the faucet and came into the bedroom with the stained suit jacket on a hanger. "Look over here. I'm putting the jacket on the chair. Make sure that you take it this afternoon so that you can get it tomorrow morning."

"I'm ill, Michael."

"Then have Betty take it."

"She can't drive."

"She should know how to sit in a taxi, don't you think?"

"Well, I wouldn't know whether she knows how to sit or not," she retorted spitefully. His voice was a meat cleaver to her thoughts. "Why don't you ask her yourself? Tell me something: I want to know why you don't want me to paint."

His face cringed. "Since when have I told you to not paint?"

She was silent and taken back since it was true that he had not expressed anything like this. She told herself that she needed to acknowledge this fact to be truthful to herself. He had not made her into a wifely errand girl but it had occurred from following his subliminal promptings. It was her womanly love that had made her succumb to his every wish less enthusiastically than most women but with enthusiasm nonetheless. If she were a has-been artist she (not he) had made it so.

"Sorry," she said. He was in the clothes closet, putting on a different jacket.

"No problem." He looked on this slug hanging from a pillow with a bad smelling dog on its lap. Her lifelessness disgusted him. Then the next moment he was disgusted by the thought that she was there, dormant, as if waiting on a bed for her clients. Scrambled by a non-Christian desire to rape her and a bored yearning to leave, he spoke what he knew that he should not say. "Listen, Gabriele, there is something on my mind: my father and my aunt have asked when they can meet you. When I introduce you, of course, I want to say, 'This is my fiancZe, Gaw-bre-el spelled like Gabriel but with an E, loving mother to Rick and her own son, who talks mildly and politely with no fowl words, and she is a respectable teacher or she is an artist.' Of course I don't want to tell my parents 'This is my fiancZe. She lies in bed and gets headaches just as she did in her former profession.' 'What profession is that, dear son?' 'Dear mother and father, it is the oldest non-taxable profession which is somewhat illegal.'"

"My heavens! -- can I say 'My heavens' without getting my head cut off like a bad Turk or aberrant Afghan woman not wearing her burka?" She took a deep breath and tried to maintain a supercilious dignity. "You certainly have been repressing your hatred of me, mister. I for one am certainly glad that you have had your little catharsis." She feigned a smile and spoke weakly. "Please! Leave me and my imagined sickness. You are hurting my head."

"I don't hate you. I love you. I sleep in the same bed with you."

"This grinding of sexual organs against each other, Mr. M.F. Quest is not the making of love."

"Grinding of sexual organs." He sniggered. "Well, thatO s a new one. Here we go. It's your perverse perspectives in your paintings and life in general that I object to. You arenO t always that way and you donO t have to be that way. The fact that you overcame obstacles to become such a successful artist was my initial attraction. I encourage your art -- still-life, portraits, landscapes, beautiful things. Those thing are a Catholic expression of God -- not the surreal I don't know what that you put to canvas. It sells. That's good. It's critically appraised. That's fine. But you need healthy expressions."

"Former professionE non-taxable incomeE somewhat illegal. I canO t

believe you are rubbing my nose in this. I had a son to raise. You were one of my clients. You aren't perfect either. I think we shouldn't say bad things. My head isn't too much"

"I'm sorry, Gabriele. That was--" He halted.

"Out of order," she filled in.

"Okay, a bit." Looking at the lifeless thing in the bed he spoke diffidently, unsure of his words. "I would be honored if you would marry me. Now, get out of bed and let's talk about it--take an Aspirin if your head hurts."

"That doesn't work with these things. What works you had me flush down the toilet like an ignoramus."

"Where did you get it from? One of your Johns?"

She laughed bitterly. "No, I don't want to marry someone this ignorant and insensitive."

"So what's this been if you don't love me."

"I care about you."

"What's the difference?"

"I'm tempted to say none, but that isn't it. Most people wouldn't agree with me but I'd say that being in love is psychosomatic and caring is real; so yes, I love you in a real way but I won't marry you. I won't be owned by a man and I won't feel lost to him."

She said it despite these urges within her continually to just nod to whatever he said and to cling to him as if family were the most concrete of life's illusions. It was only from being run over by a tank or two and having known the temporary nature of an insufferable family that she was saved from that illusion. She smiled. It was wry with a general look of confusion. As he walked away she found it mildly amusing that girlhood tragedies were delivering her from feminine predilections.

Thirty-Three

Spinning as she was in her own head with important short term memories that should have been for survival in her environment seeming so elusive, she questioned if she were now in Ithaca; but for the most part believing that she was, she wasn't sure whether she had driven or had flown there. She was not only spinning within her own head with facts about petty events which happened to her recently scurrying and absconding every time she tried to corner them (what she did yesterday and what she was doing now a mystery), but instinctual drives and fantasies of her subconscious were rife. They were at one moment spinning strobe lights and at another time like twirling maelstroms of dirt and trash flicking clockwise or counter-clockwise according to the caprice of winds. Each time she tried to ground herself within an idea, a thought, a memory of her life, it was futile. The winds would not allow it. If this spinning of a fragmented self were to stop she might be able to sense herself more fully. If only there was certain

knowledge of where she was at she would have a sense of a numb self existing someplace. But feelings and desires were amuck like a dust storm and so who she was and where she was at were unfathomable at certain moments. The drugs she was now beginning to believe Candyman had slipped into her drink were allowing her wanton subconscious to blow everywhere and nowhere now that they could escape from a fragmented container called self.

At one moment many of those inconsequential but darker and subconscious thoughts were of the wraith of Rita/Lily hovering around her with a countenance showing the consternation of being abandoned and forgotten, the yearning to kiss Candyman and founder into the black silk of his body, the virulent idea of rollerblading through the held hands of couples so beautifully and speciously linked together in their little eager walks along shopping areas near Cornell University, and the voracious, hedonistic wish for anything that could feed her with pleasure. In another moment she had an outright hatred of self-centered lovers who would frolic together as if the world were conceived as nothing but the orange glow of a sunset for everyone, an indifference toward others who seemed so atavistic and unworthy of her company, the image of people being breathed in and out of her life with as little conscious regard as one's own breath, fantasies of women passing the romanticism of love to her like an Olympic torch, the fantasies of young men as juicy to look at as the Candyman, and the general hunger to merge with beauty. Still, in the next moment there was this strange hunger for people and company to pour into her vapid life, the wish to launch herself like a rocket, the trail of fire and heat from burning fuel roaring from her vagina sending her to more intellectual realms where the needs of the body wouldn't sap one of mental purpose, and that desire for pleasure and adventure to escape her stagnant intellectualism that was stifling her from feeling alive. She believed that she was in some drug dealer's house in Ithaca and yet was beginning to believe that her beliefs were mad. Her only conclusion was that she couldn't conclude that either of these matters could be conclusive.

"He's spiked your drink with Ecstasy," said the higher authority. Gabriele formulated her question to Candyman in deference to her higher authority's promptings. "No, I didn't spike your drink none so relax there, Snowflake. I just prepared my special." "What is in this special of yours?" she demanded as she unbuttoned part of her shirt. "HmmE my own little recipe." "What is in this shit? IO'm fucking hot." "You sure are. Nobody'd say that a husky ain't sexy if he has any sense at all. Anybody does, he don't know the type of mama I got in here with me. Not much of a snowflake, are you? That's fine; so fine! No worry about that, Mamma. I like older chicks and husky women are better bed tackles."

Was Candyman a hallucination like Rita/Lily a few minutes ago? If not, wouldn't that mean that she was back in Ithaca? For what she knew she could be ill from a migraine and resting there on a bed in her home in Albany with her son bringing to her wet washcloths to counter the fever that burnt under the surface of her forehead. However, a hallucination was made up myriad transient images, and the sight of Candyman had constancy. Either by plane or by car she had gone there. That she knew. The Candyman was there before her face to face. She couldn't imagine or hallucinate anything so clearly. And he was the landmark for her knowing that she was at Cornell University in Ithaca, with its eternally young and often drug addicted specimens, as much as the World Trade Center towers, the Empire State Building and the Statue

of Liberty were landmarks of New York City. She anxiously tried to isolate what had happened to her ten minutes earlier for to be without some facts about this self would be like blocking the apertures of the senses with gauze and drifting in and out of consciousness with no self at all. Not a mutiny against the higher authority and the first mate by those with no navigable skills whatsoever; and as a bad omen from tossing the corpses off the stern, the ship being tossed around in toilet waters.

She more or less remembered knocking on his door and the ensuing conversation thirty or forty minutes earlier in a rather generalized impression. "Whadaya want, Snowflake," he said through the crack of the chained door. "I need some weed," she said. "Whydaya think we got somethin' like that in here?" "Because you're the Candyman," she said. "Is that a fact?" he said indifferently. "You a cop?" he asked. "No, of course not. I've been here before even if it was a couple years back. Don't you remember me?" "No, I don't." "Gabriele, the whore." "I don't have a thing for you." "Tunafish sent me the first time I came. He was your client and that of my own." "Whatzure job? How doya know Tunafish?" "I gave massages." "German massage?" "Yeah." "Oh, I remember. Almost went to you myself. You gave Tunafish blowjobs." "I serviced him upon occasion." "Come in Mama and get your weed." He unlocked the door and let her pass into his living room. Then he locked himself in again. He fixed her a drink and she drank it as one tends to do with drinks. "Master Card and Visa machines ain't workin' today so I'll assume you to have cash and you assume me to ask for it." "Any discount for me, Candyman? IN " She felt embarrassed that she had forgotten her ATM card and only had \$50.00 in her purse. She had come so far and now there was the fear that the lack of these bits of paper called currency had the possibility of being an obstacle to the procurement of her stash. He did not say anything for a while but just smiled and let her sip the lemonade. She felt a metamorphosis as if she were cracking out of the icy teddy bear with the stiff arms that the factory of the human race mutantly created and were now whimsical winds. At last he spoke. "O Cause I know you are a professional and be all the more serviceable with large and handsome black men like me so I'll make my body there in full availability for you taste buds. I'll let you tongue and lips give me a bath the way you did Tunafish and maybe there will be a discount for you." He chuckled. His teeth glittered green as the walls of nude centerfolds seemed to be turning around and the floor seemed a soggy mire. She was a game to him and so with all games he, the player, savored the moments, not wanting to delve into pleasures at full thrust lest they end too soon.

Now, when she concentrated as fully as she was capable of she remembered the drink and an imprecise replica of this initial conversation but there were some minutes (she wasn't sure how many) that she couldn't account for as if she had slipped and fallen into some vacuous abyss unawares and then had mysteriously gotten to the other side of the chasm, slapping off the mud that besmirched her clothing without being much more cognizant than this. Maybe she had serviced him during this period or maybe she had just fallen into a vacuous state of one who knew the state of the world: the multitudes who were calculative and disingenuous users; life as the frivolous extroverted game of using others to rack up points; a smile as an artifice; society as billiard balls slapping against each other and rebounding; they who were customers of that which was deleterious to them and were ready to use or be used to get it; and the few higher ones linked to compassion and empathy, whose intellect saw the world and yet had to give a cheerful

rendering of it as "life" because one did have to live in this world and celebrate it the best one was able to do. For the empathic ones, hidden beneath hardened facades, their sensitivities were under the scabs of hardened smiles.

"Can't figure out why you'd come all the way to Ithaca for some weed if you are living in Albany like there ain't drugs in other cities." "Don't know anybody else," she said. "Just the Candyman." Her fingers paused in this unbuttoning of the blouse as if a wave of sensibility had momentarily washed upon her. Obviously she hadn't serviced him yet but she could see that she was ready to do so. She detoured his eyes from staring at her breasts by asking him to show her his different brands of marijuana. She thought of Nathaniel to clog her urging to be intimate with Candyman but she couldn't remember many specifics about yesterday no matter how hard she tried. Still she unsuccessfully concentrated in the hope that her ponderings would pull back the memory. It was the following: Yesterday Nathaniel stepped off the school bus and went inside. She was seated on her white colonial chair as superciliously cold, hard, and beyond human frailties as the statue of Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial seen on a winter day. She was the throned Antarctic queen.

"Hey there. How was school?" she asked coldly

"Same."

"We need to talk!," she said.

"What's wrong?" he asked. He looked petrified as if she had discovered his secret relationship with the man who had made going into R-rated movies so easy for him (just the cost of showing his behind and letting those fingers graze on his two hills and this payment deferred until after a movie or movies were finished).

"Nothing she said. She smiled her haughty smile and spoke in her typical phlegmatic tone. "I'm wondering about taking another trip abroad."

"With or without me?"

"Hmm I love your subtlety. Maybe with you if you care to be a vagabond and don't get in the way of me painting."

"What is a vagabond?"

"No Four Star hotels. Not living in little dumps that look like closets with no air conditioning and a shared shower. Kind of like Boy Scouts, but no camping out in the forest and bad ventilation in the rooms. Hotels for back packers that are worthy of demolition."

"What's demolition?"

"Anyhow, ugly old buildings that if you were to look at them you would puke on sight."

"You can count me out of staying in slave rooms especially if there are shared bathrooms. That's nasty. I'd scratch my toes and feet every minute morning, day, and night. I scratch my toes and feet for an hour every time I shower in the locker room after gym classes. I like

four star hotels."

"You've never been to four star hotels. I just seen photographs of Rick staying in one while in Rome."

"I want to go. You need to let me go! But there will be no vagabombing."

"Aren't you the little male dictator. You sound like Michael. Do you like that guy?"

"Better than nothing, I guess."

"O Better than nothing, I guess, O " she mocked. "Glad to know that perspective. It makes it easier to know that you won't be upset when I tell you something. Well, how do I say this? There are 6 billion people on the planet each with his own personality, routine, and dreams to acquire this or that. Even lovers can't get along. It's an absolute miracle that we don't go around plucking each other's eyes out. It is good that we are smart enough to know that there would be ramifications for actions like that. Okay, here it is: better than nothing BEFORE, and NOW you have nothing. I've kicked out that rigid giraffe, Michael. At this house he is no more. Michael won't be living here any longer; and this trip to Euro-Asia, if I decide to do it, will be to celebrate not having that guy silently pull my strings any longer."

"And Rick?"

"And Rick." She sighed. "I guess he won't be here."

"You gonna kick me out next?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You are my son."

"If I was to burn down the house would you keep me then."

"If you were to burn down the house your butt would be as hot as the house but you would still be my son and no, I wouldn't throw you out of the house because there wouldn't be a house for either of us since you would have burnt it down."

He laughed hysterically. His mother's clever sallies enthralled him. Then he smirked hatefully. "Men don't like you very well."

She smiled widely. "It is a reciprocal thing. It goes both ways. I don't care what these self-centered little beasts like or don't like. Three cheers for men not liking me and going their merry ways. Hip hip hurray! Hip hip hurray! Hip hip hurray!"

"I think you are strange. You aren't like other moms at all, you know."

"What are they like?"

"I don't know. When I go over to my friends' parents' houses and stuff they don't say weird shit all the time."

"But weird shit is what it is all about. How can you be interesting without saying weird shit continually. It is impossible."

"Do I have to take care of both of those dogs out there?"

"I don't know. I guess someone will have to. We'll make it a joint chore. We'll share the burden and make the dogs feel loved and happy here. What do you say?"

"I say that is a crock of bull shit."

Her mind was preoccupied with this declaration of being called weird. "I'm not weird. I'm just clever. What is weird are moms whose brains change into rocks. Not probably from too many years of marriage."

"When I was in the second grade kids would say that you catch men outside your trailer, put spells on them, and then you drink their pee."

She looked at his earnest face. "Really? Is that what they said."

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you tell me that then."

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Oh, how sweet." She felt visibly touched that he should have thought of her feelings over those of his own. She felt more optimistic about him growing up into a decent individual. "Anyhow, I will be going someplace. Not maybe back to Bangkok. Who knows. Anywhere really from Tokyo to Tijuana."

"Without me?"

"Probably."

"I don't care where you go. Betty's here to take care of me. She's a better mother, really."

"Even if she takes up all the toilet paper you want to use on your precious butt?"

"Even then," he said. They heard the dog barking, an opening of the door, and a rush of footsteps.

"It's the favored one," said Nathaniel.

Rick rushed against Gabriele's body and this physical presence made her feel a sense of aversion to the boy. As much as she cared for him his grip was like a monkey upon her bark. Her niveous limbs just stood out awkwardly and she did not know what to do. But where thawing caused snow and ice to crack and fall to the ground, her thawing was a cold chill that caused her legs to begin to shake. Her arms embraced him in the desperate clinging of love and she began to cry. It was the first time she had cried since she was a little girl. It was the first time she had ever cried according to her memory.

"So the darker reefer is richer?," she asked. "You got it, Mama."

"I don't know the difference really. Maybe you just better mix it all together and we'll hope for the best." "Sounds sensible. All right, I can do but with a bunch of the cheap stuff since you are getting a

discount." "I want to know what is in this drink." "That's abitaO mountain dew with some lemon juice, abitaO water, tad bit of urine, and some truth serum. You feel that you want to tell the truth?" She was picked up and lifted off by a wind and it took him several minutes to call her back. "Gabriele? Gabriele? Gabriele?" "Who?" "You. I was wantinO to know if you are wantinO to be truthful and tell me your dark secrets." "Okay," she said. "Okay, start talking." "Okay, she said. "He slapped her cheeks with his fingertips. "Do you want to tell me all your secrets and be truthful with me?" His hands were now in her shirt unbuttoning the remaining buttons. "I am so inclined but have found the necessity of a facade." "Keep your dictionary closed, sister, and talk straight talk." "I like being honest even when it gets me into trouble unless I think it might be too disadvantageous. When I was a little girl I witnessed a beheading of a Turk in Istanbul." "Turk?" "In TurkeyN the countryE not the bird. Everyone was clapping and my parents were glad that justice had happened. I knew that justice was savagery and that crying about it wouldnO t accomplish anything but just get people to loathe me. Loathe meaning hate and not love. I decided that if I asked questions and looked like I wasnO t bothered by it all I would be left alone with my sensitivities intact. I did my consummate performance to look like an adult and appear as if I did not need them." "What would they have done to you if you cried?" "As IO ve said, they would have looked on it as weakness and they would have despised it. I didnO t want to be hated or loved. I wanted to be a graduate from childhood that could only come from an adult action of pompous stoicism. You donO t understand?" "Why did you become a whore with such fancy-dancy words?" "I wanted to know fancy-dancy words but I didnO t want to get a job using fancy-dancy words. I didnO t want to be one of those professional bureaucratic slaves. I decided that everything was a form of prostitution and that bodily prostitution was quicker than mental prostitution and with bodily prostitution I would never have to relinquish my thoughts. Does that make sense?" "Weird, Sister, but go on." "I didnO t want to be there behind a desk working for an agency that represented societal interests. If all of societyO s institutions were a refined form of atavistic savagery I didnO t want to be there contributing to any bit of it: writing documentation, red tape, bureaucracy of this and that sucking up my ideas." "You are one heavy, twisted sister." "YouO ve got that right Candyman." The two began to kiss to et cetera.

Candyman, to his own astonishment and hers, got a second erection a minute after their intimacies were completed; and so Gabriele went to the car for her sketchbook, and drew him nude. A few minutes after she was done she was again in a confused state of not knowing if she had flown to Ithaca or had driven there. She was fading fast. All earlier utterances that she had to make to Candyman, where she had to pull down some ethereal sense of self in order to have some coherent conversation and some degree of rationality behind her situation, had exhausted her more than the sex act itself. She fell asleep. And when she woke up she smelled cooking and went into the kitchen. Candyman was frying bacon in the skillet and she knew that he was thinking about their experience together as he watched the hardening bacon shrink on a paper towel bedding.. "Well, I guess I need to pay you, Candyman." "Yeah, whatO d we sayN forty so that you could have ten bucks for gas money." "ThatO s what was said." "IO m wondering something there, Husky. WhyO d you come all this ways when you could get drugs anyplace." "DidnO t know where to go there, Candyman, and I needed to get out and think about things, you know."

She paid Candy Man his forty dollars N a discount price for the sexual services she rendered unto him, and the two shook hands. "Going back to your son?" "Oh, did I tell you about him?" "Sure N you were tellinO to me lots you donO t know nothinO about. One time you were spacing out and talkinO O bout your son and a Russian boy, packing and coming here." She remembered: shortly before she went to bed last night, Nathaniel came into her room. She was packing at the time. He looked at her maliciously.

"You bored?" she asked.

"Maybe," he said.

"Do you miss Rick?" she asked. He didnO t answer. "Will you sleep with Cat tonight?"

"I hate the smell of that dog."

"HmmE maybe you should give a friend a call."

"I donO t have any. I donO t like people and they donO t like me."

"I canO t believe that. Is there no one at St. Michaels whom you play with?"

"It isnO t called St. Michaels."

"Whatever. Answer my question."

"There is a Russian kid who pesters me."

"Well, donO t look at it as pestering. IO d say that since his language is different than yours and the nuance of the meanings of words would be different he might make a good friend. I donO t know him but as nerdy as he might be, his perspective of life would be slightly different than an American and so you might learn about the world anew through exchanging ideas with him. Do the two of you do anything together?"

"He plays in the same baseball team."

"WhatO s his name?"

"DonO t know. It is too hard to remember."

"A Russian boy with an unmemorable name?"

"Yes."

"Do you have his telephone number?"

"No. I want to know were you are going.."

"DonO t know. I wonO t leave for anyplace far away. I think IO ll go to Ithaca for a day or two and see a friend."

"Rita/Lily?"

"No, not her."

"Who?"

"You don't know him. Candyman is his nickname."

"A boyfriend?"

"No. He is a potential customer. Maybe he will buy a painting."
She threw in some lies. "I'll be back in a few days. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried about you," he said in an indifferent tone with a sotto voce of disgust.

"When is your game?"

"Tomorrow"

"What time?"

"6:30."

"You and Betty can take a taxi there; but you'll see me on the bleachers when the balls start flying."

She remembered her promise because of the serendipitous ramblings of Candyman; and vomiting once on the edge of the road, she journeyed back to Albany. Sick to her stomach and dazed when she arrived back at her home, she went to sleep on the nearest couch for a half hour before going out to buy some groceries. She spent an hour or two of the afternoon interminably lost in aisles of food. She kept thinking about Rick and how the two of them used to bump their carts into each other as they raced through the aisles. It depressed her to think that this would never happen again, and yet she didn't see why relationships should end in such an all or nothing cessation as if differences in outlook among changing beings meant a broken contract of quid pro quo. Had their relationship been nothing but a bartering of services the whole time. She supposed that this was the concept of a relationship to most people.

At this moment her life was a foolish quandary of being unable to figure out if there was more salience in trying to reestablish family ties or independent strivings at all cost. She filled her cart, took out items, and then replaced them with others of different labels and equivalent prices. She couldn't figure out how many people she should be shopping for even though she had each person's tastes in mind in making selections. The closer she got to the cash register the more exacerbated were her doubts about buying most of her products, so before she purchased anything she abandoned most of it in a vacant cart and shoved it off once into the oblivion. When she got to the trunk of her car she had only one meager bag of groceries. She thrust it into the trunk, slammed down the lid of the trunk in vexation, and then buckled herself into the coolness of the vinyl seat. She passed a bridal boutique many times in the car and then spontaneously parked in front of the building that she had been rotating around. The saleswomen there could not find happiness in dressing the strangely sullen woman with monosyllabic mendacities of date and place for this celebratory solemnization. Under the lattice inside the store, staring at herself in a tripartite mirror, she didn't like the trains of the wedding dresses she was trying on. They were too short, florid to the point of

gaudy, or not as ornate as she thought they should be. When she drove down to the end of the drive at the junction of the house she noticed that Nathaniel's dog was the only one that was chained up on the side of the house and that Michael's sailboat and motorcycle were conspicuously missing. She wasn't sure how she felt. In her room she took off some expensive, gaudy earrings and slipped out of her dress. The closet was now hers. His clothes were missing. Only the toes of her myriad shoes

were within this capsule confronting her naked feet. Gracefully, with the highest poise, she swaggered from room to room to counter an inclination to stagger. Rick's room was vacuous space making her life unbearably vivid. She mourned the loss of her other son before going to the ball game.

She was spread out on a bleacher resting her eyes into the intricate mosaic of the silhouette of leaves and taking a break from her sketch (myriad tiny nude candymen having sex with various women, the women having candymen babies in their arms, and each copulation and baby scene wrapped in its own circle or monad; these monads making up total planets, and ultimately the planets composing the cellular outline of a long fanged beast that was the lonely universe) when the man with the unmemorable name looked down upon her.

"Hello, Gabriele, do you remember me?"

Startled, she turned to him. "Yes, but I'd never be able to say your name."

He laughed. No one outside of the immediate family would be able to do that. What an intricate sketch!"

"Do you like art?"

"I love it." He said it so simply with such sincerity that the breath of his idea went up her nostrils titillating her with pleasure. "After you finish your sketch I think you should paint it onto an enormous canvas with a dismal red and black background."

"Yes, I like that idea, even if being so large it is never sold."

"Oh, it would fit over the staircase of a millionaire's old home perfectly. You'll sell it in time."

"I was sitting here not knowing how to apply this thing really and was becoming annoyed at myself on different levels."

"For what reason?"

"For lots of reasons: a personal life that is shit, an idea I wasn't sure what to do with until you came along, annoyed at being annoyed by this large crowd as if they need to be quiet for me."

Sang Huin had been on the bleachers at a stadium with his new Pocket PC when a foreigner looked down upon him.

"Anyong Haseyo," said the man.

"English, please. I'm an American still getting used to kimchee

with every meal."

The man chuckled. "So am I. From what state?"

"The Midwest mostly but I've been all over. Not born in Missouri but my father had to travel a lot."

"You look a bit agitated."

"I'm trying to write on my book. I guess I am annoyed at feeling annoyed."

"About what?"

"The noise, I guess. I was trying to get away from noise. That's why I came here initially."

"To a ball game?"

"Strange, huh? Well the bleachers weren't full when I came."

"It isn't exactly a library. So are you saying that your feelings are mostly agitation or being agitated about being agitated?"

"The latter. Have you ever felt that mood where you just want to slap total strangers on their heads for not being introverts. There are just too many of them and none of them are doing anything constructive with their time. And then you sit there in this crazy mood you begin to blame them for being a bunch of mice breeding in a small cage and causing everybody to walk on top of each other."

He laughed. "Well, nothing exactly like that but we all have weird ideas going through our heads."

"That's exactly right. One minute a guy might see a woman in red pass by and for some reason he doesn't like her because she is wearing red. It is really pathetic. It is like a given guy is built with a primitive impulse to judge people instantly and to dislike someone for not being more like himself lest they be of a different belligerent tribe. I imagine the Lees and the Parks in ancient Korean history hated each other and back then they would be able to distinguish physical traits that were the least little bit different and judge friend or foe instantly."

"Maybe back then there was a use for that type of thinking but now belligerent ideas just come and go if we don't try to catch them. If you just let them pass they won't define you."

"I like that. Thanks. Maybe it is from not knowing the Korean language well enough. I hear their babble and it sometimes sounds like a drill in my eardrums."

The man laughed. "You are cute."

"Thanks. So are you."

"What do you do here?"

"Just teach English."

"What about you."

"Work for the Korean Herald."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Candymen copulating everywhere, their women and their offspring rife, each family wrapped in its monad, and each monad making up the celled outline of the lonely fervor of the monstrous universe as her febrile imagination conceptualized it; and there she was defying her wish to run away from an obsession to paint something seemingly important that was as enzymes on the hours of her life. She stood on a small ladder slavishly painting on the gigantic canvas in her garage as if this one obsessive idea could finally hold the elusive truth once and for all on why she, her 6 billion contemporaries, and all previous generations had bodies so easily worn away and existed so briefly within this recycling of life and as to why they rotated about the sun like hostages in a driverless bus that incessantly moved around the city square without any purpose. As she stared at her creation she ruminated that nature was so foolishly wasteful in formulating these tenuous beings who spent a fourth or more of their lives trying to acquire sufficient knowledge so that they could begin to think for themselves, and thereafter most of their energies in copulatory obsessions so that they could replicate new know-nothings. And yet if we were just cells in this mad, growing universe, she thought, none of it mattered anyway.

But at 2:30 p.m. she took her usual respite from her creative labors to meet the man with the unmemorable name at one of the less bourgeois coffee shops, not within the Starbuck franchise. She knew that in part she came here regularly not so much because she wanted to understand a Russian man's mentality or friendship, but to summersault from the diving board of another's ideas. For it was by this that she could free herself from lonely stagnation and the frustration of attempting to find genius from within. This sense of being alive was only possible when two or more were present (action being the body of all things) and so she came here to spring into life that was only in consort with another. After sipping her marginally bourgeois coffee gained from the exploitation of poor South American mountain farmers and their factory worker counterparts, she showed him a slide that she had taken of her inchoate work but then interrupted him as he tried to view it against the brightest part of the shop's light. "Do you think Michael knows you meet me here?" she asked sheepishly. They had been meeting there for a month without straying away from issues but now here she was focusing on their friendship like a weak female who went under the label of a woman. She felt that her question was a petty one formed by those who could not see themselves beyond their relationships and, embarrassed by inclinations that lowered her to mere mortals, she had been barely able to ask her question.

"Do you want him to not know?" he asked.

Her face cringed. "You mean, would I care to keep him from knowing this. Oh, I don't know." She shook her head indifferently and then smiled. "It isn't an issue for me -- just wondering."

"It's not, it isn't important for me either. I'm nobody -- just an investor. I didn't even invest all that much. I only go to his

fitness center to lift weights. I am -- how do you say -- one of his more silent of silent partners; and I involve myself -- I don't involve myself in his business or his personal business and hope he isn't involving himself in mine. My life for now is a lot of books in my graduate studies and not so many dates. "

"Good for you -- I mean for both things" she said. "Women and business might make a man look good on the outside but it's cancer on the real human being inside. You don't need a woman."

He was sullen for a moment. "You and I are just friends anyway," he said irritably and avoided looking into her face.

"Yes, but there is no 'just.' Friendship is the only thing that has the possibility of being pure--people who enjoy being in each other's company and admire each other without thinking about the advantages and opportunities to be gained in a merger, people who aren't needing the presence of some partner to get the addictive high of this love rush, and all the rest of it." She looked toward the front of the coffee shop where a teenager was squeaking the soles of his tennis shoes against the floor while he waited for his order.

"That's a god awful sound," she said.

"Do you think God is awful?" he asked.

"I said that the squeaking sound that guy is making is god awful- 'God awful' is a colloquial expression. It just means very bad. The noise of those shoes is incessant." She smiled awkwardly at her irascibility, her innate peculiarities that weren't so pleasant and difficult to part from. "I'll turn the tables on you if I can. Do you think God is awful?"

"I do, if He exists!"

"You go to church."

"With my sister, brother-in-law, and their family. We go on occasion. We aren't believers. Catholic Mass is similar to Russian Orthodox services and it makes my sister feel like she is back in St. Petersburg."

"Not Christian or atheist, but a devout church going non-believer." She inadvertently mumbled the assessment of the man that she had meant to be an internal summary. She paused for a second and then decided to disclose the rest. "And one with a penchant for investments despite being one of the last vestiges of Russian communism."

He didn't grasp her concept since it was muddled in large vocabulary that he did not understand; but he felt that he was being criticized. "Do you not like something about me?"

"No, why would you think I'd feel that way? I like the mix. Still, let me be the Devil's advocate and ask what right you, a man, have in judging this potential God."

"What?"

"You said that you think God is awful if he exists. Tell me, now

that you are in this one nation under god, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all and the rest of this gunk how you, a mortal, indict this god. I mean you are a myopic person as we all are so what right have you or I to judge this bigger entity whom we presume to have created the two of us and everything else. Surely this God envisions a greater picture? Am I making sense--what right has a little man in judging a God who might understand the bigger picture on why things are the way that they are. Also, as a sociable animal, don't you feel the need to follow the herd? In this country the herd eats from the Christianity trough--the Bible is like ground up bone marrow and the least edible parts of already decayed carcasses but these Americans devour it nonetheless. Don't you want to follow this God unquestioningly and eat the fables that are thrown in your trough?"

He guessed what she meant and laughed. "Not really. I am a human being, a rational creature, a creature that looks at evidence and thinks about it...I assess it."

"Yes, yes; I agree. Only by turning off our intelligence do we actually believe in such things."

"I don't understand. Are you a believer or a non-believer?"

"Well, certainly a non-believer; but I don't adhere to anything including non-believing. I let ideas whisk across me, weathering my obdurate convictions. What I am today is me now and what I am tomorrow is me then. There may be a God that is the cause of it all or some large thing that a human brain can't conceptualize enough to peg it with a label and if so I want an impression of the real one as much as I can and not the anthropomorphic god that society is trying to install into my head."

"I see," he said.

"Do you?" She giggled.

He smiled and then sunk morosely within deep contemplation. "I was quickly looking through a Newsweek at a newsstand while I came here -- sorry, while I was coming here. Let me start again. While I was coming here I glanced at a Newsweek."

"Bravo. Finally, good grammar!," she bantered.

He smiled morosely. "The article said that in the Democratic Republic of Congo a door of a cargo plane fell open. The article said that most of the soldiers and their families who were inside were-" He could not think of the words so he used a gesture.

"Sucked out?" said Gabriele colloquially.

"Did you learn of it?"

She thought of it for a few seconds: the consternation and yet cognizant beings nonetheless understanding what was happening to them and their families as they freefell into the abyss, the wailing and the flailing of limbs, the sense of being a morsel swallowed into an atmosphere that was so smothering in its vastness, the sense of complete hopelessness, the horrific winds, the passing through layers of clouds with the specious illusion of nets, falling concurrent with the rain,

each human being hopefully experiencing a heart attack or stroke before the stroke of death, and the plops of red raindrops flying into the air at impact. She knew that the world had not been gently patted together and shaped like a piece of clay. It had been smelted in violence and chance. This being so, so it was with an individual life. "How horrible!" she gasped. "No, I didn't read anything about it." She slowly lifted her face and resurrected her sunken eyes. She even feigned a smile. "I am bad that way: I'd rather listen to classical music and read a book than know the news. Knowing how violent the world is does violence to one's need to believe that life is essentially good."

"If God didn't care about those people why should I think that he cares about me?"

"Absolutely. I agree." She tried to extricate herself from morbid thoughts by altering back to a more frivolous topic. "Do you agree that that squeaking is God awful!"

"I do. My nephew does that all the time, you know, squeaking his tennis shoes. You can scold him but he doesn't stop it. Squeaking tennis shoes, playing with balls all day and most of the night, running around -- I think motion gives him and all boys self-confidence."

"So this kid is squeaking -- "

"To prove to himself that he exists."

"Yes; but if a boy never stands still -- and this one would annoy virtually anyone he encounters with feet like fingernails on a blackboard -- he will never think beyond his own little movements in the movements and changes of this world. Furthermore he'll never conceptualize permanence and truth and his ideas will be myopic and short term. Even if there aren't solid Platonic ideas out in Never-Never land and all ideas are just attempts at understanding what passes through the senses, standing back and contemplating life at least allows a person to think about the various perspectives of an issue before making a decision. It improves the ability to make good decisions. My theory is that for every twenty minutes of inordinate movement that a boy or a teenage boy carries out he should be put in shackles and fetters in a closet for the other forty."

He smiled admiringly at her words despite not understanding many of them.

She simplified her flurry of words. "Maybe movement gives a boy self-confidence that he exists but unless he is put in chains and kept in a closet half the day, he will think that there is nothing else beyond movement."

"Is there?" he asked.

"I don't know," she confessed.

"Do you do that to your son -- put him in chains?" He chuckled.

"Coming soon," she kidded. "Aren't I right to contain males and movement?" she nudged him with her fist and then tucked his hand into her own.

"As our Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin says it -- if I can quote what I memorized in an English translation, 'How smoothly, rapidly, and freely the sleigh glides in the moonlight when you are with a friend and when, warm and fresh beneath her sable fur, flushed and trembling, she squeezes your hand.'"

"Lovely sweet talk but it won't help you. You know what I want to do? I want to put you in chains too. Come on." She put their mugs into his hands and led him to an outside table. There, she had him put the mugs down and led him into a luscious and verdant yard mixed with yellow dandelions. Even though it was late autumn, the climate was arraying the landscape with warm rains and the dandelions of April. Seated on the ground she tied together a makeshift flower bracelet that soon became handcuffs.

"And what is that supposed to do to me," he asked

"Maybe slow you down a bit. Nothing much since it is made from flowers. It is just a reminder that there are flowers out there to be seen."

"As Dostoevsky's character, Razumikhin says 'You can talk the most mistaken rubbish to me and if it is your own, I will embrace it. It is better to tell your own lies than somebody else's truth.'"

She laughed, put the back of her hand thoughtfully under her chin, and compressed her lips into a smile. She felt rejuvenated in this exchange of ideas that were as tangible, palpable, and succulent as sucking on lemon drops. They left and walked into a nearby park where the fountains splashed water into the air making a rainbow.

"Are you still planning to go back to St. Petersburg?" she asked.

"Yes, just for a couple months."

"Are you still planning to go back next week?"

"Actually, I changed the date to tomorrow."

"So soon? Well, I'm sure you will be glad to see your family."

Yes, but I'll miss our times together. I'll hurry back as quickly as I can."

When she finally left the coffee shop she headed toward the nearest Wal-Mart, the shopping oasis for the underdeveloped bourgeois. Within this desert oasis she bought some sheets and, in an aisle for Halloween products, a witch's hat and some green gunk from which to soil her face. In the car she applied the paint and cut holes in one of the sheets. When she drove up to the house, she honked on the horn repeatedly until the boy finally came out of the house begrudgingly.

She rolled down the window. "Did you lock the door?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, and got in the car lethargically.

"All of them?"

"All of them. They're locked," he said petulantly.

"Do I need to check?"

"No, quit bothering me!" he said insolently.

"Poor Mr. Petulant--always doubted and examined in these unjust inquisitions. Okay, I won't doubt you this time; but I must tell you this: in the event that we are robbed I will hand you over to the man with the unmemorable name with an unburdened conscience. He has connections with slave labor camps in Siberia from the way I understand things."

"I know that you don't understand anything. You are lying. There aren't any of these connections."

"Lying, never! Fibbing, maybe or maybe not. How do you, Mr. Petulant, know what I know?"

"How do you know that I don't know what you know?" he countered. It was an old argument that she had excavated from one of the many miscellaneous parables in the thickets of pages that comprised a Chinese literature anthology; however, she had never radiated the enlightenment of her findings onto him. Such was the brilliance of an original thought; and so her hope for him was restored. Strangely, this argument seemed like a means to a new dimension albeit a golden key to the nihilistic abyss; and she was a radiating mommy for the fact that he had coughed up such an instrument out of the static charge of one thought banging against another one--the being incessantly comparing, contrasting, and categorizing various thoughts silently inside itself. "To think that Benjamin Franklin brought down lightning with a key and Nathaniel has made a key out of lightening!" she thought facetiously. She smiled and reprimanded him banteringly. "Well, Adagio, you didn't tell me what you wanted to be or I would have bought a costume."

"I don't want to BE anything. Trick or treating is for kids and I don't want any of that stuff anymore."

"So, because you didn't make your request, all we have for you is a tacky sheet. You will be a ghost; and you see that I'm a witch--always have been and always will be." She ignored his complaint. She knew that a ten year old stood on the back of his nine year old carcass and that a being's development involved using all former selves of earlier ages as steps toward these adult pleasures of lust, greed, movement, and conquest. She knew that condemning the innate discontent within her son, society, or to some degree within herself seemed as mad and railing ramblings of a madwoman and so she chose to have no reaction whatsoever. As an artist she believed that her mission was to thread a new logical relationship of old ideas or facts if not formulate new ideas themselves, and to add some flash and color to the ordinary. Whether or not she was marginally successful at altering perspectives, one thing was certainly not within her power at all. She could never adjust the base instincts of one's physiognomy. All she could do with the latter would be to accept it as if it were the third, dragging leg. Cutting off this limb, with its major artery, would be certain death if done to another or society at large. Base instincts were the guardians of the species. Selfishness to suck out the bone marrow of life, survive, and fulfill one's pleasures were the means by which this species perpetuated.

"I just want to finish my video game."

"Your brain will do some serious rotting with much more of that shoot and kill stuff. With this outing only your teeth will rot."

She was reminded of a few weeks ago when she had taken him to a professional baseball game which Michael had promised to him before this dissolution of family. She barely managed to acquire tickets by offering to pay exorbitant sums if the ticket office were able to get them into a couple seats; and yet this Adagio, Nathaniel, this Mr. Petulant, was saturnine the whole time. "What's your problem?" she asked as they were leaving the parking lot following the game. "You shouldn't be the one I go with. You don't even like these games," he said; and, true as it was, there was nothing for her to do but stuff the remainder of the hot dog into her mouth and drive home.

She drove him into more affluent areas and took him from door to door as if he were five years old, and as if she were trying to make herself that age in the process. She too had a plastic jack-o-lantern pail. She too got chocolate thrust into the pile within her pail. Experiences accompanying him in a childhood that had been robbed from her, for whatever embarrassment they caused him, were a million times better than being a mother waiting on the sidelines with vicarious yearnings. The quest of a chocolate mendicant, a ghoulish monk seeking alms, was leading her into the simple pleasures that were the foundation for appreciating life, from disengaging out of one's limited perspectives and hopeful adult futuristic conquests, and to be in awe of the entity. And yet with each new house his aversion to say, "Trick or treat?" increased as with his tacit animadversion of his mother. House after house there were chocolate benefactors and benefactresses with similar wisecracks: "You are a little big and old to be trick or treating, aren't you -- I can't see how old your ghost friend is but he seems a bit tall too." As much as he tried to suppress it, his loathing of her was ready to disgorge from his mouth like vomit.

An hour into this childish foray, she still did not have any Reese's Peanut Butter Cups and so she told him that with ten or fifteen more houses there would be a probability of acquiring her favorite brand of candy. Somewhere after the fifth extra house he felt a full abhorrence for the witch who put spells on men, drank their pee, had men, lost men, made a family by abandoning him when she went off to Europe, lost a family, found him an irritant when she was acting the part of the artist, suffocated him in embarrassments like this when she was trying to act the part of a mother, who never connected him to outside relatives like his real father or Peggy, and when he finally had some semblance of a father she caused his departure.

"I'm sick of you," he said. I want to go someplace else but I don't have an aunt, an uncle, or anybody to go to. Nobody cares about me."

"What is your problem?" she asked.

"You taking me to trick or treating like I am six years old is pathetic. That's my problem. Pull it over. I'm getting out and walking home."

"Christ, why can't you just be happy?"

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain," he said.

"Don't bore me in Michaelish babble," she told him.

"I want to go see Aunt Peggy."

"Go then," she told him. "She's in Kansas. The walk should be good for you. Be careful not to take the detour to Timbuktu." She pulled off the side of the road and let him out; waited in dismay for a while as he went some blocks within a premature bout of independence; and then stalked him for another six blocks despite the fact that he was trying to make himself stealth through the yards of homeowners. At last, tiring, he got inside the car. She laughed hysterically, slipped a wad of chewing tobacco into her mouth, and continued on her quest for Reese's Peanut Butter Cups.

Despite genuinely believing that his sullen hatred toward her would go on forever in obdurate wordlessness, the need to dig himself out of the coffin and dirt of silence exhumed him. "I want to go see Aunt Peggy," he said in an exasperated monotone.

"Well, you see her every time you open those Christmas cards of hers and those scary photographs of her fall from her flowery notes of love as well as all those exotic European stamps and paper currency from her trips here and there."

"I never meet her. She wants to meet me and yet I never meet her."

"We live kind of far away."

"You have money. I want you to put me on an airplane and fly me to Kansas."

"I don't have much money anymore. I won't until I sell some paintings; but you are a child. What do you know of any of that? Your concerns are keeping a kite sailing in the breeze. What do you know of finances and paying bills? What do you care about it?"

"I want to go there for Thanksgiving."

"You, my dear, are free to want whatever you please but getting it is another matter."

He fell into his morose ruminations. "What about my father?"

"I wouldn't know anything of him." It was a preposterous claim; and to think that such an easily scaled wall would stop the besiegement was even more absurd. Quickly recognizing her underestimate she fortified the wall. "Some cowboy intellectual who mounted me or I mounted him one time. I don't remember which. I don't remember anything about him."

"Mounted?"

"Sex. Do you understand what sex is?"

"Of course."

"You know only the word--you can't define it and have yet to

experience it."

"I know more than the word--a guy wanting some fun from rubbing his smelly penis against somebody else's naked body--white liquid comes out."

She was surprised to hear such a perfectly barbaric definition that few adults would care to espouse and she looked on him admiringly. "Did one of your friends say that?"

"Yes," he lied.

"Out of the mouths of babes," she said. "Come on. Just cheer up and let's enjoy our time together."

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"I don't know. I'm just looking at houses. If there is one shaped like a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup let me know and we'll go inside."

As she began to hum a tune on the radio random ideas pillaged through her perspectives like unwanted guests her belongings: she wondered why it had so far been a futile prospect to get her son to befriend the boy with the unmemorable name; she thought that since both boys were champion sneaker squeakers little else was needed beyond imagination and good will for children to declare friendship; she pondered how despite the disposition of Mr. Petulant and the forthcoming departure of the man with the unmemorable name, she was still glowing from her time in the coffee shop; how her painting needed some feral red brush strokes to increase its beauty and complexity; how each night her exalted ideas imploded to recurrent nightly dreams of Candyman riding in the white silk of her bare skin; how her recurrent dreams of Candyman were not only of his physical touch but ones in which he made her perceptions coruscate in the gleam of moonlight; mornings wondering whether the real truth of her life was just those meager sordid yearnings for sexual intimacies; that potential conclusion that intellectualism was nothing but one's own pretentious wish to appear to herself as more than motion and rampageous sexual urgings, hatreds, and fears that were vital to the survival of the species -- this all flitted through her mind a second before she struggled to regain control of her car.

Nathaniel's hands were grasping the steering wheel and there she was trying to counter this jerk of the car to the right and contend against his Freudian death wish. The memories of the many versions of Nathaniel at various ages fled through her mind. What he was doing now was clear. Why he was doing it was unfathomable in her consternation. A couple of seconds later the car darted over a triangular cement slab and onto a yield sign. Like the car beaten down in inertia, they were as sedentary as death and as inanimate as rocks. They stayed this way for half a moment and then, when meaning to ask him if he was all right, she reached over and slammed him hard on his face with one of her strong German polar bear paws and his head slammed against the door. He took the knock with tacit defiance and locked in whatever whimpering existed within. It was one of his last Halloweens as a boy and perhaps his last time dressed for trick or treat and it had come to this.

With the car towed off to the mechanic, she hated him for a week

and then it slowly abated, lost and tangled within new neurons, new electronic circuits with thoughts successfully attempting to understand his bitterness, and with new emphasis to forgive and forget. But he, on the other hand, hated her for her 7 days of cold Antarctic ponderings at the dining room table and in her director's chair. Betty wouldn't even talk to him by the orders of General Sangroid and, finding it hard to swallow food or understand anything on the television beside images running amuck, he hated his mother with incremental emphasis and duration. Knowing this, she began to consider taking him to the airport to send him away.

One cold day she was on the roof nailing a border for the wires of Christmas lights to lean on securely. She was looking out over her acres of land like a lonely Martha Stewart when she felt the need to stretch her cramped legs. She tried to call him on her cellular telephone to have him come out and hold the ladder so that she could get down. It was only after the fourth time that he bothered to answer. "Is Betty busy cooking lunch?"

"Yeah, shit on a shingle."

"Could you ask her to come out and hold the ladder?"

"No, I couldn't. I don't want my food burnt."

"You don't want your food burnt," she mocked.

"That's what she was hired for: to keep my food from burning."

"Your food?"

"Yours too."

"Well, there's got to be a reason for me having your ass around so you come out here and help me get down from here," she said. But when he finally came out and she looked down upon him she saw virulence in his sunken eyes and she wondered if he could be trusted to hold the ladder safely. She wanted to call Betty to have her come out but she knew that she would never pick up a telephone no matter how many times it rang.

"Get Betty over here to hold the ladder."

"No, she's busy," he said. She was surprised that he was impudent enough to address her this way in person.

"Get her now!" she commanded. "Get her and then, maybeE maybe I'll come down to get you your airline ticket to Kansas."

"You'll buy one?"

"It is already bought. If you are eager to get rid of me I am eager to get rid of you."

"Okay," he said happily.

"Sure," she said acrimoniously, "if that is what you want. And if that is what you want why should I put these lights up for you?"

"Yes, why do it when I don't care," he said.

"Well good we agree on something. I'll look forward to hearing the results of the experiment: paradise or penitentiary in Kansas. Feel free to email me through the process. Go on and get Betty." As he left she knew that fear had motivated her to mention the plane ticket. The thought of cajoling a response from a child by appeasing him, and doing it from a legitimate fear or, worse, perhaps a baseless one, appalled her. Her will and her foundation of motherhood seemed to be collapsing. She could no longer move him by her words any more than an old woman could twist a lid off of a jar; and for the first time in her life she was losing confidence in her own will.

Betty came out to her.

"You gotted all of the lights up there, Miss?"

"Yeah, well...enough. I guess too much, Hispanic Betty. Todo las luces para esto ano de navidad estara poco y yo tengo miedo que poco esta demasiado. We will be the only people who will enjoy them. Nathaniel is going to visit his aunt in a few days."

"Miss, we need to talk orita. You pay for me for to have my own apartment but I never go there. Nunca, nunca! No tengo una vida. I'm illegal but I should not a slave. There should more to my life than the two of you. Quiero permiso para un vacacion pagado para dos meses."

"Dos meses? Do I look mad? Dos semanas okay."

"And where you will get other slave? There are many masters to be gotted and not many slaves." Gabriele thought about this crucial fact: Indeed, there were many masters to be had but few slaves. The idea resonated off the inner walls of her brain.

"Y entonces tu volveres a nuestra hogar?"

"Si."

"Okay, Hispanic Betty, stay until Christmas Eve and then you are free as a bird hasta luego Febrero. 2 months of paid vacation. Here, hold the ladder so that I can get down."

Soon Nathaniel, as well as the man with the unmemorable name, was gone; and seeing the vacuous ruts that they had made in spinning away from her she was reminded of the fact that the outside world was changeable and that only weaklings and fools placed happiness on others. And yet with Michael out of her life, and worse, Rick and Nathaniel who were as much as lost to her now, her world was unsettled in a four-fold loss.

She tried to avoid this feeling of loss for as long as she could. She first coerced an interest in Russian literature to be interested in something. She became fixated on drawing two sketches each morning and two each evening as if the world required myriad more still lives of apples in charcoal; and as if all that paper for the redundant work in drawing her owls was justified by the infinite variety of their poses. She suddenly became preoccupied with the pleasure and health of her hound. She felt that by feeding, walking, and washing it with more responsibility and care she could extend the life of this big German

shepherd that they still called "Cat." She occupied herself with its pleasure (an ice cube habitually given for it to munch on as she was preparing breakfast, and an extra dog walk in the mid-afternoon). She viewed her actions as a humane gesture as if from the first attempts to domesticate the canine, securing the contentment or felicity of so many temporary generations of dying beasts, had been a constructive use of their masters' precious moments of life.

And yet as buried as she was in the rubble of family, where shoddy and experimental construction was done without the mathematical formulas of engineers, her hobbies were natural. They were diversions and she knew that her diversions were a means to stop the pain.

Suffocating as she was in that rubble, she could have come alive in a diminished form like all other creatures of chemosynthesis. Such translucent beings never considered their unhappiness. They never considered anything at all but just engaged in their habits, instincts, preoccupation, and general movement. She was just beginning to get the knack of avoiding her stray thoughts through Gin Rummy games, and winning some of them too, but then Hispanic Betty also left. Gabriele was surprised that she, an anti-social person who had mixed, gyrated, and blended with such aversion, had become such mush. She was a bit like one of the herd. She did not know fully what to do with herself or who she was. Most people might be that way indefinitely, but for her the few days that this lasted was an appalling time. It was made all the worse by a temptation to find herself in her former boyfriend within fantasies of him running toward her and sheltering her under his umbrella and within one of his arms. Eager for sanity, she decided upon another trip abroad.

At first she yearned to return to Buddhism and saffron or deep dirt-orange robed monks to find an equilibrium and harmony within herself. She thought about going to Laos. From photographs on the Internet it looked like a little bit of Paris and a lot of dirt. She believed that its simplicity would be to her liking. She was eager to visit its communist museum and experience its photographs denouncing the French and American imperialists (the former having recuperated from the fever that caused delusions of grandeur, but the latter so delusional to think that it was God that granted such dominion). But as she was sitting in the travel agency ready to buy a ticket to Bangkok with the expectation of taking the train to Nongkai, the sister city of Vientiane Laos, she suddenly changed her mind and decided to buy an airline ticket to Jakarta.

Arriving on a Garuda (GA flight 543), she ensconced herself in a hotel room long enough to take a shower for five minutes and look presentable with an additional three. Then she wandered streets like a dog following novel scents, and quickly became elated in a puff of sound and sight of hawkers stretching out into a street and causing the traffic to squeeze through a narrow area that was still not annexed under their squalid occupation. In a little park where all areas of grass were fenced off, near Pasaraya Grande, the shopping mall of the truly affluent on Blok M, she sketched Moslem women wearing their Haji or jilbab and glossed in beautiful makeup or not wearing headscarves and makeup at all but allowed to toss long and beautiful hair. She contrasted the two and was fascinated by this attempt of Indonesian society to allow women to be modern as long as they stayed demure, and how an individual was dangled by the invisible gossamer strings of this great puppeteer, society. Maybe, she thought, when encountered anew

most cultural traits were romantically virtuous. She also sketched conservative men wearing their little oval shaped hats called kopias as they went to a little mosque near the department store; but mostly she sketched the throngs of park people whom she mingled with: guitar boys who, when not on buses, practiced versions of their beggarly tunes in the concrete park; a transsexual dancer with bizarre movements; the umbrella shelterers who eagerly extended an aegis against celestial darts; and that area seen with myriad candles from the nighttime hawkers who sold their goods on blankets and sheets, each with its own candle.

Finally finding her way back to her hotel room, she was amused and puzzled by this Christopher Columbus syndrome of adoration toward her white flesh. Had she been a superstar instead of an obscure artist, she told herself, she would not have been accosted any more than this. Having a good night's sleep, she woke ready to start it all again. On buses that took her through the streets of Jakarta and in the company of the musician/beggars who always boarded for a couple minutes, she was impressed by how remarkably talented some of them were even though the majority were as discordant as the howling of wolves. She almost wished that she were a talent scout to deliver the best of them from the streets. Then it occurred to her that by choosing winners for prizes she would be as vile as nature itself with its stance of survival of the fittest. She saw a 5 and 6 year old brother and sister team--the girl doing the most sensuous dance and then her brother turning off the tape recorder and collecting the Rupiah after the dance. In all, the children might have collected a tiny 500 Rupiah in loose change no differently than the guitar boys or the adult poetic orators who gave renditions of their tragic lives to extort sympathy and a bit of loose change. 8000 Rupiah were equivalent to a dollar and those who sold drinks and pens could at least get this sum if assiduous for a period of hours.

Over a period of weeks she became enamored of long back-alley vegetable markets and ghettos of the night. Here, like in Thailand, it seemed that those who had little resources were more interconnected and, from their makeshift huts they would smile to just see the presence of her makeshift life. And yet the Christopher Columbus syndrome was from a discontent and an eagerness to pass out of one's own domain to that archetype of American wealth and prowess that bedazzled the entire denizens of the world no matter how much they hated the hegemony of the American government and its people. Even here, she thought, children probably yearned to grow out of their age and adults dreamed of business empires, a corporate legacy from which to defy mortality. She knew that in this sense it was probably no different than anyplace else for even here discontent had to be in everything since all were creatures of movement. These ghettoers in particular were spewed around bridges and railroad tracks; and she boldly walked into their throngs in the fullness of night, intrigued and enticed within the mysteries of life, that black and white which were the rich hue of gray enlightenment. And, were it not for the serendipitous beckoning of two hedonistic smiles, she would have foolishly continued this way (potentially to a lethal end as a mugged and raped female lying bludgeoned along the train tracks, obscure in the thickets of an oblique area of weeds). This dual smiling was too conspicuous. With one man's smile an ordinary woman might fall prey but never with two of them; and she was tiers beyond the ordinary.

Self-declared as a female who was not a woman, Gabriele was a hard block of ice to thaw. Even an exceptional Adonis with a coruscating and speciously ingenuous smile did not have a chance with her. Only such an

Adonis as Michael, with a familiar and sweet son whom she had already thought of fondly, had the potential to do the worst damage to her pristine Antarctic surface; but such happenings were rare indeed. The two strangers instantly made her circumspect and guarded by accosting her with their sexual innuendos, which she did not even have to understand in words. The nuances were rife like the sounds of locusts in the unfolding and draping blanket of night. They were there to be extrapolated in the intensity of lust-filled, hungry-hound looks and the flippant glances and general levity of the two males toward each other. And she knew that, as adept as she might be at defending herself with a bit of judo and karate, that she could never ward off an army of rapists. That being the case, she backed away to belong only to the day.

By day she was enamored by all of the mom-and-pop shops cobbled together from wood and tin and the activity that was bustling around them including the orange cockroach tricycle motor taxis a bit like Thailand's tuc tucs. She wanted to sink into the skin of those whom she encountered and to know of their lives intimately. The thought even occurred to her that she should get her boy from the provincial rednecks of Kansas and transform him with exposure to the world; and she would have done just that had there not been such a cloying and bitter after-taste to all this enlightenment amassing itself within her. It was a sickeningly aggrandizing clump that was exacerbating itself within her stomach; and it made her doubt the efficacy of the plan. It was getting so large that she, who grazed on the weeds and fodder of stark reality like a wild mare, was finding what she saw and her ruminations of it virtually unbearable.

In Buddhism good actions perpetuated good outcomes for the giver and motivated goodness in the receiver. And yet as important as it was for fools and the ignorant to believe in this replicating of virtue when with each new century mankind moved the world closer to the abyss, the reality was that they who had education and wealth gave both to their children for that accrued competitive advantage, that the poor floundered about trying to free themselves from a vortex, that suffering did not propitiate any god, that the meek did not inherit anything, and that they who were literal throwaways as children would sell themselves as prostitutes, get AIDS, and die hideously in the streets, emaciated incrementally like starving dogs. She could see the prostitutes near the National Monument with its hard rockish flame like the torch of the Statue of Liberty. She felt empathy for them as deep as the gods and it was a torturous perspective indeed. When she saw a bare-breasted homeless woman running down the sidewalk outside the monument, all depraved from wandering around aimlessly, screaming and looking behind her as if chased, Gabriele had a mixed reaction. In a small way, she saw sanity in this defying of convention that a woman's boobs were erotic armaments which, unless locked away in a blouse and a brassiere, would thwart assiduous man to recidivistic patterns where his amorous instincts would cause him to malingering from work. But there was nothing sane in this woman's plight, and any thought suggesting that there was such had been from a desire to fortify herself from the perspective that the world was a bad place. She imagined her face on this woman and wanted to abscond from Jakarta and life as a whole. She just wanted to rest her head thoughtlessly against a man's chest. She wanted to close her eyes to the injustices and the inequality of life and to float in the levity of dreams this way. Lonely as she was, the net was pulling her back home to America and New York State.

Left in the discontent of her own thoughts and finding the gift of

solitude equivalent with insanity, she sensed a major polarization of her ideas and she knew that her own civil war was in the making. Two opposing armies were deployed around the frontline under the scalp of her own head, and each was trying to intimidate the other in the hope of gaining a painless victory within the dominion of thoughts. Either from consciousness absconding in a self-imposed exile in order to avoid conflict, or from finding her true self usurped by impulses, willlessly she drove up to the home of Michael's parents as lovingly as a Moony. She told them that she was Michael's girlfriend even though she could have as easily meant the man with the unmemorable name. After requesting to see Michael, she awkwardly offered the whole family her love even though none had wished for it. The sentiment had been contrived for the purpose of breaking the cold silence but thinking onto it now with chagrin she felt that this foolishness had surpassed any she had done in the past. By her own estimation she hadn't been foolish since early childhood and the consternation of it all seemed like being tortured in the pits of hell. This torture lasted for a couple minutes and then she didn't care about what others had thought or were now thinking about her. Her life, she told herself, was her own and poised or plodding, flying or floundering it was her own and no one was worthy of scrutinizing it. She waited in their living room for nearly two hours until he at last drove in.

"This woman wants to talk with you Michael," said his mother.

"I know. You called me."

"She wouldn't leave. I didn't want to call the police. I didn't want a scene."

"You told me that," said Michael. "That's fine. Can we have some privacy?"

"Well -- " She then spoke fervently in Italian.

"That's not going to happen," he said in English and then switched to Italian. Gabriele had already understood little words from the entreaty of Michael's mother like "money" and "bad women" and could extrapolate that mama was worried about a potential extortion and blackmail of her baby.

"Whatever! I give up," said the exasperated woman in English and then started to leave.

"I'm pleased to have met you," said Gabriele. "I hope that we can become further acquainted and that I may one day secure your trust." Her words were formal and archaic like a nineteenth century novel. If subconsciously done to impress others, they impressed no one. The woman stared at her with that apathetic and supercilious hardness that they, who identified wealth as a unique DNA of a more developed species, always did.

When his mother had left the room he closed the door, and then tried to camouflage the obdurate hardness of his apathetic eyes with a contrived smile. Closure was nonetheless in those eyes. They were hard and hallowed and they were permanently enclosed like tintured and opaque glass windows. How, she remonstrated against herself, had she debased herself by knocking on a door of this family home and why did she stay here with him whose orbs were like slammed doors in one's face.

How was it that she continued to knock? He smiled since there was every chance that she could rectify herself in his eyes through discomfort and contrition. Seated with this nemesis, he gained pleasure at the thought that she had been allowed to squirm in a seat for over an hour the way her son had waited and squirmed in the principal's office while dreading the forthcoming paddling.

"I tried to call you," said Gabriele, "but I think you were trying to avoid me."

"Possibly," he said. He could have told her lies that his mobile telephone was not functional or he could have prevaricated beyond the emphatic use of perhaps. Instead, he had made a truthful statement. She thought that she had to give him points for at least that; but as she pondered this he pulled out a cigar, lit it, and blew the smoldering flames into her face. That face turned red in anger and hate. It just bit a lower lip as an arm fanned away the smoke. These were hard gestures that were in part flailing against the personal life sucking her into its vortex of winds, and in part a protest of a man's insolence toward this womanly weakness that he correctly presumed to ooze within her. He saw hate in eyes harder than his own and finding not only them erotic but also the breath that was trying to extricate itself from the inhalation of smoke, he wanted to exercise against her will. He wanted to use her as if she were the gravity and the bar by which he might do pull-ups to claim masculine strength and virile complacency. He wanted to toss her onto a mattress and rape her like any gentleman.

She feigned a smile unsuccessfully. It was a hateful smile of hubris against him and all his male counterparts to whom a woman, and a female to a lesser degree, supplicated herself. Even more, it was a hateful distorted smile against herself who, no matter how hard she tried, could not fully exit the trivial sphere of the personal domain any more than an obese woman could easily leave her apartment.

"Monogamy, what a premier virtue, it is!" she thought sardonically. This denunciation was a defense against her feelings of guilt over the sexcapade with Candyman. She knew that it was so, for the guilt was spraying out onto consciousness with that constancy of a fizz of breakers on a beach. She knew that it was so, for there was a feeling disgorging within her that was a nasty flair of a warm shaken can of beer oozing from between the closed tab.

She wasn't married or engaged to Michael--matter of fact, hating her as she knew that he no doubt did, she wasn't in any type of relationship with him unless that envisaged by an overactive imagination off and spinning downhill like a rolling wheel of a flipped car-- and yet society's prudish stipulation that a woman be faithful to the partner she was with, or had been with, nonetheless had some sway of her movement and thought as it had at previous times when they lived together. Back then she would always try to restrain herself from those cans of beer that preceded her chewing tobacco snacks in order to be spared from his scowling, to continue to seem attractive to him, and to appear less extreme and headstrong than what she really was. Such was the influence of this mixing intimately: this blending of pathos and petulance blurring boundaries; this nastiness of prudish society inflicting one with guilt for pursuing more than the allotted share of the love it had espoused; and these incessant compromises of herself in order to keep a relationship with a man.

She was but a tiny shadow of original and independent thought that was dwarfed and absorbed by the massive conservative shadow of America. Her shadow was poised like the Statue of Liberty -- the liberty which had inadvertently created her unorthodox perspectives, but hers was an inconsequential adumbration. Americans were a provincial people as all bullies of the world were provincial, and the thought of mixing with an American (even one as Italian as Michael) seemed nasty indeed. The nastiness of being here in his home came upon her like the sticky wetness of a man's semen. The nastiness of debasing herself from loneliness by coming here was to walk on the same spit and urine evaporating pavements within the swaths of mankind.

Her ideas rambled on fervently. "The whole thing is a laugh. If where one aims body fluids determines a relationship and love, this sorry world is in for more gory times....How on Earth is being faithful or not being faithful a measurement of this amorphous, multi-definable emotion called 'love?' How is it, or lack of it, relevant to anything at all? Hedonism causes one to accidentally fall into the obligations of child rearing and a marriage certificate is society's glossy endorsement of contained hedonism to perpetuate the species....Confinement is not compassion; hunger for that other one to stop the pangs of loneliness is no different than a hunger compelling one to eat...any hunger really-- hunger is just there to motivate one to clog an emptiness....Empty heads need to be filled with empty people. Even if they are only speciously tangible and as impermanent as gusts of wind, they need them like the air they breathe....Mortal bits of dust feel more solid in a family unit.... And although I don't believe in being faithful as the measurement of a caring relationship I can't see what I'd replace it with. I'm not even sold that love exists...I mean outside of compassion and this nurturing-of-the-young thing, I think that this medley of different selfish emotions hiding themselves under the guise of love don't have anything good in them. And if I can't believe in the measurement of love as being faithful or that the thing proposed for measurement is lovely I might as well shoot for the moon by denouncing relationships altogether. This adulteration of oneself in these incessant compromises and mixing never enlarge a person. They mitigate a being." She was thinking about her tree planting days with particular abhorrence, and hardly thought of the old duties of being a home teacher, an errand wife/mom, and a wall decorator for Michael's school since now, when assessed from a distance, they were trivial discomforts by comparison. "Infatuations in fatuous humans foster the illusion that great things can come from human coupling as if hitching can concoct the Orient Express...Am I the only person who believes this way? I am. It is no wonder that most people I encounter think of me as a bitch.... Can't blame it on menstruation every day of the month. No, I take pride in my bitchiness. I relish having such an accolade. No, I can't blame it on a period every day of the month.... What am I doing here? Am I just wanting to wear a white wedding dress with my tampon the way little girls are conditioned to believe that marriage in a white dress is the portal to an epiphany? This ceremony of holy matrimony is ludicrous as if a god, if He were to exist, didn't have bigger things on his agenda than to sanctify the act of disgorging liquids on this one spouse....this crazy aiming of body fluids at this targeted spouse...Oh, this monogamy is sickeningly unnatural! As if signing a name on a piece of paper can contain or clean out the filth of a thousand daily fantasies and instinctual hungers....And then there are all these primitive jealousies to this pleasure bonding: monkey woman not wanting to lose her hunter who brings her and the children their meat; and monkey man needing to ensure that there is a female possession as loyal

as a domesticated hound to satisfy him on evenings when his erotic hunts have eluded him, and that one who would not burden him with caring for children not of his own genetic transfer."

He had gone into the kitchen to fix some coffee so, alone, her ideas spun quickly on the axial of ruminations.

"Love, love--the means to everything! The things we are taught in music television videos and Hollywood movies. And then we emulate them in monkey see, monkey do....Okay, my perspective is strange but strange things have half a chance of being right. At least it isn't the stuff of idiotic masses. Am I such a libertine--I don't really think so--well, probably not. I am just an old fashioned, conventional girl who believes that sex only happens on a mattress of a bed and have never once used a car's gearshift as a dill-dough--I cannot even spell the word."

For all her cynicism that long-term relationships were of individuals who stymied and quelled their thoughts to live numbly with their partners and took on joint tree growing activities to have something in common with them, she did know that there were some happy marriages out there. Such marriages were unions of individuals who sought to edify the world meaningfully with their contributions and admired this trait in their partners. They were more than ordinary but not as extraordinary or extraordinarily peculiar in quite the way that she was. She felt that she was without a similar peer in the world and that from some snowy mountaintop closer to the sun she was peering onto the world and deigning her thoughts upon those who were less peculiar than she was. Her weirdness droned on: "For those less extraordinary/more than ordinary couples who believe in their oxymoron of a happy monogamy, I tell them it can only be had provided they do a bit of front seat/back seat sexcrobaties in a car and some rape role playing once or twice each week within the comforts of their bedrooms. Excitement allows for longevity--it isn't the love of Buddha that the better-than-the-masses (hereafter called the Betthams) are after, but excitement. They, the Betthams, are no different than any of the wallowing pigs in that respect."

Only briefly did it fleet through her mind how ludicrous it was for the damaged monkey that she was to define love at all. With not even a residue of "real love" there to her observation early in life, these speculations now were merely word play in her brain. They were the mere friction of cold, solid sounds and the static of them slapping against each other in their empty abstractions as she juggled them in her ennui and rained her sour stoic perspective down on them like tears of knives. To her she was a bored goddess making lightning and her unique take on love was the rightful striking of Zeus.

Still there were doubts. She did wonder whether the smudge of light penetrating her consciousness was enlightenment or peering onto the stars with damaged retinas. To be laconic, she wondered if her judgment calls were merely the moody caprices of her imagination. For in Houston, that Houston of long ago with a Gabriele that was a spasm then of myriad spasms in the lost dimensions of a changing life, hadn't she seen a fellow student as small as a boy and as limp as a sack of potatoes being picked up by his father, taken from his classroom at Rice University, lowered into a wheelchair, pushed toward a vehicle, and then driven off to the next classroom in a different part of the campus? She had; and it was only from her own obdurate bitchiness that she concocted a barrier to keep herself from consciously recalling this

father's spending of money and time to enlighten the dying. It was love in the best gesture mortals could do, and it went contrary to her assumption that human society was a loveless "hell-hole" that was beneath her.

Yearning to depart from the bathos of contemporary society for the sublime colors of Titian, the circular idealism of Raphael, the ugly angular and emaciated forms of El Greco in that complex inner intensity that rendered beauty, the mysterious shaded faces of Caravaggio, and the true internal lives captured in the words of Shakespeare and Hardy, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Melville and James, Plato, Parmenides, and all dead contemplatives, she snobbishly wished to remove herself from the masses of men. Her contemporaries seemed to be moving like that loose downward tire of a flipped car and she seemed to only favor the stagnancy of deceased enlightenment. For a moment, she was as much as wishing to die to be raptured into their thoughts, and they into hers, the way a normal person yearned for shared physical and emotional intimacies. Dying young might be preferable to decades of being pinned into a stall hearing the shallow grunting of one of those male members of the porcine herd. Isolation in Antarctica without seals and penguins would be a hundred times better than that indelible connection of producing for him more grunting piglets; however death was not rapture but rupture.

"How is Rick?" she asked after he was seated and she had sipped a bit of the coffee that he had prepared for them.

"The same. Growing."

"And the dog?"

"Growing more quickly. He shits a lot, too. Thanks for asking. What do you want?"

She smiled bashfully as if she were an errant child whose laziness or mischievousness had been exposed. She noted the peculiarity of her erroneous reaction: a fixated response that she had comported in girlhood. Back then it had always preceded an impetus to be diligent so that she might propitiate a teacher's wrath and regain favor with one of those rare individuals whom she admired in her more credulous days. "I hate how this ended," she suddenly confessed in womanly neediness. "I don't know why you just pulled out like that."

"Pulled out like what? I proposed and you said no, so that was it. I decided I needed a wife who would be supportive and that you were right all along: it wasn't you."

"I think I was supportive."

"Why would you think that? You were never interested in any of my plans--at least not in the later stage of things. Maybe you just aren't interested in the business aspects of life, although I at least thought you were about selling those paintings of yours--at least at the beginning of knowing you. Maybe nobody changes. It is just what we know of them at different stages of expressing themselves--that changes. Just ideas of people at different stages...ideas changing."

She now felt that being here had not been such a mistake after all. Even though she repudiated superstition in all of its derivative forms

from anthropomorphism to destined fate still she couldn't help but feel that she was meant to be here hearing his profound utterances and perceiving him anew.

"Yes, how can it be anything else? An individual is too large. So what were these ideas of yours about me in my many stages?" She really meant, "...my many stages as perceived by you in your stages" but she cut it short.

"I don't know. At the time I admired your ability to rise up in the world...the business savvy to do that, and how people were interested in your strangeness. Before that I thought of you as a caring mother and before that -- "

"A disgusting whore?"

"No, not disgusting."

"Why not?"

"I liked it -- the thought of you with many men. I imagined the smell of your skin afterwards ...I don't know. It was sexy."

"Hmm," she thought, "latent homosexuality. His river is not damned for it flows both ways." She spoke, "What am I now -- this sexy art mom weirdo -- this idea of yours now at this stage?"

"I don't know that I have one. I don't know who you are now."

"No, you don't know who you are being without a woman all these months. Men need women, you know." The words belied the womanly slime oozing within her. "They put on women. Just like you needing symbols of importance as that attachZ case of yours, those flashing appointments in that PDA of yours, and that cellular telephone of yours. If you did not have money and things to flash at others how different would you be from any naked Etruscan savage apart from not being dead and living in America?"

"I don't need a damn thing," he said coldly. "You are the one who's here. You are the needy one." He laughed at her. She knew that to him she looked foolish even though that time of the Turk's execution in early girlhood had made her immune to the opinions of others.

"You're here," he repeated.

"So I am," she said in her cold hubris.

He blew his smoke into her face. "Well, with the gender factor alone no man and woman are interested in the same things nor are they all that compatible. That's for sure." His voice drifted slowly on the stream of smoke flowing from his mouth and from the effluvia of his lackadaisical scorn. "But to make any type of relationship work -- even the most pathetic -- neither of them can just stare at the walls day-in and day-out. One has to be interested in something -- business, rearing kids, teaching, arts and crafts stuff, something. I'd say it was me, that you didn't care to live with me, and that's what made you so moody and useless in a sense; but it wouldn't explain your unwillingness to paint, would it? -- You who just sort of sit around claiming that you are an artist all hours. I guess you can sell some of that stuff -- what

little you do so I guess somebody likes it. It is a shame that you don't draw more still life. Your artsiness was really beginning to have something in it." He stopped for he knew that he had run over her with maximum efficacy since gratuitous plowing through flesh and blood would not make it any more contrite.

Knowing how a hurt, rejected, and emasculated ego sought to maim others in speech, wisps of air, like a diffident eunuch brandishing a butcher knife, she let him disgorge his acrimonious sound. What was it to her? It was an amusing psychological study and only this. The petty utterances he would try to use to inflict misery commensurate with a rejected proposal intrigued her. He was no more dangerous than a child running around in an Indian costume and brandishing his rubber blade.

"Go on. No need to be bashful. We can't work on problems if we are ignorant of them." She meant "Go on. No need to be civil, you hateful bastard." But this would be repressed to a dream and there it would be in the flames of enactment and reenactment until the combustion was complete.

He continued. "Anyhow, you just looked bored all the time toward everyone including your own son. We were your headaches; and I looked like I was wasting my time with you."

The trivial bits and pieces of a personal life projected in acrimonious speech were often expressions of anger toward that other one whom these intense shared pleasures were dependent and the whole thing disgusted her. Cast from the two parties, the personal life was not merely a mosaic of selfish inconsequentialities of bad off-moments nor a heavy shadow of two lighter shadows but, together, were the adumbration of the entire scaffolding of a being: the contorted and disgusting skeleton of instinctual drives to gain pleasure, to hate those who might hinder pleasure, to hunt, to harm, to eat, and to possess. This was the personal domain and as disgusted as she was with it, her disgust was not as solid as she had wished it to be. It was weakened and attenuated by the pleasure of having a significant other know insignificant things about her like where she hung her bra. To have him know such things made her feel a little less cryptic. She had scoffed at his proposal so it was no wonder that his bitterness disgorged upon her. She understood male pride and excused his caustic utterances. "I think I put aside myself for everyone," she said. "It was all new to me, you know, and it took some adjusting. I've always been a rather independent being. Still the family that we were was the only family I and Nat have had besides each other. I even went to your church, you know. How supportive did you want me to be outside of becoming you? As you say, no two people are alike--not even if you were to meet some docile little Betty Crocker Helen homemaker type with her certificates in cooking and ductility."

"Ductility? No woman could ever come as well prepared in big word armament as you. You are one of a kind for sure."

She smiled. It was the first dubious compliment that he had extended to her for so long.

"As for Mass, it is important to Italian American families and you only went when you were forced to go--those times that it was too apparent that there were none of these headaches of yours and that faking one at the last moment would have looked ridiculous." She tightened her lips in consternation. His ignorance was that of the

droves of men who believed that migraines were feigned. Even if she were to enlighten him there would be myriad others yet to step out of themselves. She couldn't change them all. She told herself that society's reaction to those like herself was no different than how the government treated Gulf War veterans. But in fact there was a major difference: when it came to going to church, those headaches were really feigned unless all unpleasant situations were headaches, which they were in a sense. He went on: "I wouldn't know. Maybe you did go once in a while and maybe you did help me plant a tree or two. Still that doesn't exactly make or break a relationship, does it?" She would have reminded him of their bedroom intimacies but she knew that he, a man, was already thinking of that which he most revered; and by mentioning it she would be opening herself up to a comment that one couldn't expect anything else from a professional. She nearly reminded him of those intimacies anyway just to taunt a response from him and thus free the hubris that she was barely able to contain within her. "-- You know, there is no point in going into any of this."

"I'm beginning to draw again. I believe I'm painting some works that will outdo anything I've accomplished before. I feel so creative now like I'm about ready to produce something that could be my magnum opus. Before, I was just going through a phase where I couldn't draw and didn't know what I was all about. It wasn't you. It was me."

"I don't know that we are a good match, to tell you the truth."

"Why do people have to match? Why can't they just love each other and appreciate their differences?" She said this while knowing that finding a perfect match for herself might be impossible and that in her present mood any man was better than none. Now with her youth waning she knew that sexual liaisons with beautiful forms would become more and more like hunting for mushrooms in an area with a worsening annual rainfall. "I don't know if you have a new girlfriend now but -- "

"I don't have one."

He blew more smoke into her face. "So what are you wanting?"

"Let's do it now, Sweetheart. Let's just get married -- no fancy, pretentious stuff, just a quick run to the justice of the peace E maybe today or tomorrowE the sooner the better."

They were married in the early afternoon and a day later he moved many of his things back into her home. Since the wedding had been as bland as she had requested it (a justice of the peace and a couple of Michael's employees who acted the part of witnesses), she told herself that a permanently delayed honeymoon would be a matchingly dull complement. To her this honey and moon composed a word that was no misnomer: it implied a bee addicted to a nectar-induced high and she knew that even a minute of that unreality would have cloyed her sanity. Being with that same man 24 hours a day at a Kentucky Derby, an Indianapolis 500 or other non-Parmenidetic activity that was paradise to the masses and vile to philosophers and contemplatives would have caused her to grab the nearest Time or Newsweek as quickly as most women reached for sanitary napkins. Still the human goddess who once dressed Barbie dolls for imaginary weddings couldn't help but yearn for a honeymoon all the same. She was mystified why Michael did not move Rick's belongings with his own; and yet partly assuming that this would happen after the honeymoon and partly from a desire to not know, she did

not ask. Then the saturnine groom took her to the airport to watch the airplanes come and go. They looked through the glass cages at these volant pterosaurs with American Airlines branded on their skins. At first she thought that he who was so parsimonious about the amount of water that could flow from a tap had decided upon this watching of the airplanes as the honeymoon but then he left and came back with something worse than nothing: tickets to Little Rock, Arkansas. She had no luggage but he told her that they would pick up some clothes in the capital city and she smiled. She told him that it had been a long time since she had flown in a plane as if Jakarta had been nothing but a dream.

The first day after their arrival they took a small plane to Bentonville, Arkansas and then walked through the Wal-Mart museum witnessing different possessions of Sam Walton's humble beginnings and listening to the story of his ambition to become a multimillionaire. She disparaged her disparaging thoughts. She blocked the formulation of negative ideas and smiled at each new exhibit.

"To think that he addressed the first consumer inquiries on a manual typewriter like this," she said at the typewriter exhibit.

"Isn't that the truth," he told her. "A man who in later life could have bought a factory to manufacture the most sophisticated supercomputers used by the government and here he was in younger days pecking on that old thing."

They spent the second day of the honeymoon in a rented car going up snowy, mountainous hills through forests of dangling icicles as thick as stalactites and as lush as its lost verdant facade, traveling by the most winding and treacherous roads until they were at last in Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

On the third day of Christmas he gave to her the reverberating cacophony of country music, torturing an already queasy stomach that had just experienced car-sickness earlier that afternoon. From the front row of the concert she managed to smile without wincing noticeably from this howling through nostrils via song. The discomfort from her own disingenuousness in maintaining this coerced smile was as reprehensible as the sound; and yet it was nothing to her who had seen a decapitation in early girlhood and spoke of it like an inquisitive little scholar. The bombardment of senseless noise was the stuff migraines were made of; although fortunately for her none ensued.

On the fourth day of Christmas they were at this new business "of his." There was a ribbon cutting for this international gourmet supermarket which would soon be replicated in Japan. He showed her through the aisles and pointed out every item on the shelves as if the stuff one crammed down his or her gullet needed such elaboration.

On the fifth day it was Christmas and so they decided to travel around the area of Eureka Springs. They drove up and down the niveous and tortuous hills in and out of the town. Tree gazing from the more scenic back roads was his truth beyond the corporeal greed and ambition of financial enterprises (this world) and unempirical religion (the make believe world), and she was pleased that he had it. As his woman, she wanted to nurture a greater purpose in him. As a somewhat solipsistic being she wanted to stake a purpose in being with him beyond more intense pleasures of shared experiences which she knew were erroneously

pinned on mutable others instead of the constancy of self. During this car-bound time she held her loose stomach successfully, stifling its rebellion through the exertion of will. She again smiled: It was a complaisant facade of any common soldier.

Then he took her to the town's shoddy replica of the statue of Jesus that was meant to duplicate the one that stood over Rio de Janeiro. The diminished Christ didn't have the efficacy of the original since it lacked omnipotent and sturdy immutability over the natural world and beauty. Still, with a hand pressed into his, she couldn't help but feel that specious illusion of God being up there in the sky caring about the ethical decisions of her little life. Of course, it was all conditioning: the warmth and strength of a man's hand being transmitted into her own, the sun upon her skin, and, from them, a glazed, ethereal staring at the statue as if it were radiating blessings upon her.

Side by side with her man in their warm winter coats, both like little furry animals against the kneecaps of this stone or fiberglass man-god, she did not mind succumbing to religious delusions. She was married now and all other suppositions and attempts to make her stance, her sense of the world, were nothing. All ideas that went contrary to his expectations were dust that her mind needed to sweep away. Marriage was reality. It was the psychological and physiological completeness of two people, and as such there was a necessity for compromise no differently than the appetites of the body being catered to by the brain that developed pleasure receptors to tolerate this incompatible coexistence. She argued to herself that it was an incontrovertible truth that a man's bedtime dominion transferred to all else. A woman, by getting married, either gave her tacit approval of this natural inclination or gained enjoyment from the ongoing challenge to minimize it.

An idea trespassed through the meadows of her mind that he had taken her here to force upon her a spiritual awakening and to test her obsequiousness to him and his god in action if not thought (she who, when logic domineered over all else was a lone, frigid polar bear who didn't even care that much for the sexual awakenings). Then another idea encroached upon her. She wondered whether having been awakened so often sexually had put her in a coma to all other forms of awakening. She disparaged the fleeting thought. It was a mere caprice, she argued, like disliking a passing woman for wearing the color, pink, or wanting to make love to all sailors for wearing their clean, white, and neatly pressed uniforms. Heretofore such whims had not defined her despite the harmony of her solitary meadow being continually littered in the blowing of these deciduous scraps. Heretofore she had been able to find that higher authority that willed to know a self outside of winds and blowing rubbish; a self that would gain immediate and indelible awareness from the cookie cutter of his or her experience, and only this. Heretofore she had been impervious to the intensity of the hot sandstorms of raw emotion and the blizzards of refined emotion, thought.

But now all was different. She, an American, had knocked off her insular American shell (the little she had possessed) while in Jakarta. She had gone there thinking, according to her culture, that Moslems were extremists who hated Americans; but never believing the ideas that she was brought up with or the ones spewing out of this invisible mouth, society, she had disregarded the idiocy of fear and bias for the splendor of reviving truth. There she had met a gentle people; there she had been naked with easily torn skin; and there she had felt the hurt

and the injustice of the masses, compassion and enlightenment seeming a great and insufferable travail. Then and now she needed to go to him in the hope of forgetting life's injustices within the softness of his skin massaging her own.

Since, subtly within her compromises, she was now emulating him for an "understanding" of religion and was now beginning to reflect upon her Aunt Peggy as a paragon of marital sustainability, somehow following the herd seemed less reprehensible. A being was born, grew up to reproduce, and then died. How could she, the maverick that she might be, add more purpose to the state of mankind than this? Could she be so supercilious as to think that the common experiences of those normal or normal acting people counted for nothing? These actions existed since the beginning of time so who was she to disabuse pragmatic, time-tested ideas that were passed down through the generations?

She maintained her glazed, ethereal stare at the statue; wanted to rapture herself from discomfort equivalent to those pews in a chapel; felt the mistake of being here with him bury her in the fragments of herself like the rubble of the Afghan Buddha; and yet feigned a glowing ember of yearning within this contrived display of contentment. She played the part well enough to believe it herself. She did not want to upset him as she had before, for not only would it suggest to him that he should not have married her but it would aver to herself her own intransigence and a social ineptness that was of damaged whores and spinsters. She argued that marriage was a union built on incessant compromise and flexibility and that she wanted to be as adroit at it as she was in spitting chewing tobacco. She could have gone through a ceremony of marrying herself as the more outlandish Dutch women did. She could have rented out a large area for the ceremony and paid for a lavish, catered banquet, a wedding dress, and confetti. The recurrent idea of it was tantalizing. Even if marriage to oneself would lack some sexual exhilaration it would be a singular form of epiphany. The publicity would have been good for the sales of her art and there were days, upon her return from Jakarta that she taunted herself with this possibility as a viable way to keep herself from showing up onto the doorstep at the home of Michael's parents. But she ended up telling herself that she wasn't Dutch enough for such libertine experiments.

And so she believed in a religious delusion that was no different than all other delusional zealots. She believed the way one might well believe that cavemen were devoured by dinosaurs, that Shirley McClain was god as proven by having written it in a book, that out-of-body experiences for near-deathers were proof that there was a soul, and that people were actually napped by aliens into these fancy UFO space shuttles.

In a cheap hotel room in Eureka Springs, they sat on a bed and watched television. Sedentary as he was staring into the box, he was animated in his mesmerized state. But for her, it almost seemed that he and his television gained their animation from sapping away her energy. Boredom was so enervating that it wouldn't have been preposterous to think of one's energy being snatched and diverted elsewhere. Money, ownership, tax loopholes, investments, televised games, tree planting, and this, watching the Tonight Show, were the same recurrent life themes of this man.

She sat there as listlessly as a catatonic. Images from the television trodden here and there on the surface of her brain but the

earth underneath did not register the burden of these fleeting forms. Looking at the cramped room, which exacerbated her discomfort, she tried the best that she could to wrestle and pin to the floor her critical thoughts. She was married now so surely she should try. Still, she couldn't help but think that he was just an ordinary male in his obsession with ownership, his unwavering interest in action or jokes in a box, and his pursuit of other innocuous pleasures that became the man. Furthermore, she couldn't help but think that he was parsimonious, like now as evident by the cheap hotel room, and thriftless like in Rome, all at the wrong times. But for a year now she accepted the inevitable conclusion that showing to him her books on art or dragging him to symphonies or exhibitions would never deliver him to urbane habits that could be mutually shared. If he dabbled with the arts enough to attend an exhibition it was as one of the rich who gained an enhanced status from rubbing against its colors. He did not gain it by being a patron of artistic merit through a scholarship or foundation in his name or by spending inordinate sums at art auctions (after all, as rich as his family was, it was not as rich as this) but by copulating with an artist and owning one in marriage. And yet he was the person that he was, and, within the little womanly weakness she possessed (this love/this neediness that flared up in even females like her to entice breeding) she half believed that true love was accepting him for better or for worse because this was who he was. She no longer believed that changing someone was love or that the environmental spark of love (in her case going with him through art museums in Rome or witnessing his bold reflection come into the bathroom of her hotel room and urinate as she was applying makeup in front of a mirror) had much legitimacy. Love was a commitment toward compromise and sacrifice.

So, while the thick cloud of his flatulent odor was beginning to dissipate and a steak sauce commercial was interrupting the Tonight Show, she became drowsy. At one moment she heard him say, "That steak sure looks good on the TV, doesn't it Honey?" and then in the next she fell off a precipice into a vacuum of wind that made up dreams. Like women who when experiencing prenuptial jitters have nightmares of their wedding ceremonies being interrupted by dark revelations, she dreamed something similar to this belatedly. She dreamed that she and Michael were at a diner in the John F Kennedy International Airport. They were getting married there before departing to Tokyo. Suddenly the airport security guards, all of whom were Japanese, interrupted the ceremony, whispered something to the potential groom, and gave Polaroid photographs to the Catholic priest. She wasn't sure what they said but she did hear the words "airport bathroom graffiti" which made her grimace not for the ignorance of those who were part of this consensus (she didn't "give a flying fuck" about what they thought in the slightest) but that these bereft hollow heads epitomized what the droves of men would think. It didn't depress or upset her: it was just like being a sole life form on Mars. It was uncomfortable as hell but she was quite used to it. MF, after being shown the photographs, asked the priest if he should go through with a marriage to a woman who had drawn such unregenerate images on the doors of the women's toilet but the priest ignored his maudlin whining as if annoyed by any distraction that would delay his inquisition. Gabriele could sense this priest's yearning to put his fangs into her for she knew that the taste of blood was sweet and that the blood of a unique being would be envisaged by such savages as the sweetest yet. "Tell me, did you do this?" he asked the dark veiled woman but he did not give her time to respond. "Who is this black man that makes up the face and body of a savage God in this grotesque and blasphemous mural?" demanded the priest.

Gabriele lifted the veil on her burka. "There isn't anything depraved or unregenerate in it," she averred. "I don't know who he is. It is just my imagination." Her lie was phlegmatic. She would have willingly given the truth but she wouldn't be goaded into it or humble herself to such pernicious and puritanical Taleban. She wouldn't even humble herself to God if she were to see him. She and God would just have to introduce themselves as two strangers, neither one better or worse than the other. "The larger image is whatever one wishes the larger image to be, I suppose."

"What I want it to be?" mocked the priest acrimoniously. So, I suppose, if I want it to be the Virgin, Mary -- "

"Then it is Mary."

"Mary sure has a lot of naked images of black men with grotesquely large genitalia running through her head," said the priest.

She smiled. "Of course she does, as all women do. Have you never heard of Masters and Johnson? Surely Kinsey could not have eluded a person of your type. If I were to dig up the foundation under that hairy grandfatherly veneer of yours who knows what I'd find."

"Aren't you smart? To think that we could have naively put your name in holy matrimony. But do tell me, now that God is generously revealing all of your perverted ideas, what you think is in my heart!"

"I wouldn't know. I don't read minds or hearts. I imagine it is the same stinky muck that is in all men's cravings. If you pay me money, I wouldn't oppose letting you confess your sins to me. Now the price to absolve sins and blowjobs are both the same: 500 dollars -- US, of course. With handsome Adonises, it is a packaged set but not with old goats like you."

He shook his head. "To think that I would have married this fine gentleman to such a blasphemous whore."

"Maybe I can read minds, hearts, or what-not. I'm reading big breasted women there washing each other's bodies as they do onstage in makeshift showers at Go-go bars in Bangkok; but only because you are too scared of burning in hell for your homosexual inclinations. Rivers run both ways, you know, but socialization on a teenager can alter how it flows. For old goats like you, nobody built your dam when you were young so now there is only cobbled will. Your will tries to redirect the flow since. You know that you cannot stop it entirely. Say 100 Haila Gabrielas and pay me my money."

The priest shook his head at the foul fiend and turned away. "Bangkok?" asked the priest. He was directing his question to Michael.

"She went there once," he told the priest. "She is always making contrasts of Thailand to Western civilization."

"Did she meet this black man there?"

"Who knows?" said Michael.

Gabriele guffawed. "Why not address me?" she asked.

"Then answer for yourself, you disgusting tramp," said Michael.

"Maybe I did or didn't," she prevaricated. "Maybe I don't need to meet anyone or do anything. I witness life. If I read something or see something that is happening in my world (even if from a distance) it touches me and I'm inspired by it. I'm not afraid of it no matter what it is."

"She's your betrothed," said the priest. "What do you want done."

"Let His will be done. She hides her profanity, promiscuity, and obscenities behind art. She never admits anything," he whined sobbingly. "I don't know what to do with her."

"Apple her?" asked the security guards.

"Apple her!" reiterated the priest.

The cooking staff, under their burkas, began to fire apples and soon everyone within the room appled her skull.

"Why couldn't you have just drawn still-life or landscapes?" whined Michael.

"Join your Turkish friend from long ago!" shouted the Ayatollah-garbed priest.

Gabriele was now lying on the floor with her forehead bleeding profusely. Still she could eke out faint utterances and so she projected her words like a song. "You wouldn't have loved me if I hadn't been somebody-- you thought it was a thrill to see one of whoredom reach stardom. It was like being in the Astrodome. Like any carnal male, a woman's glitter is to your liking--it is your pleasure dome but to me it is not striking."

Then she dreamed that there was an anniversary party, which Michael held to commemorate himself and the longevity of his schools and stores. There, in her home on the day of the party, she noticed that blonde-headed, frosty-pigmented man with the unmemorable name sitting there in his own separate space within her living room. He had large, thoughtful, eyes; and to her he was exotic and unpretentiously wholesome like latent mushrooms in a vast field. He was silent in the noise; and she loved this superhuman trait as she had loved it of her father--he who used to part from her on the beach and pursue the silent wading of his nothingness into the vastness of the entity, he who had been her Parmenides despite having long ago abandoned her as one who had indifferently tossed out grass seed. Having fought in war and having foolishly devoted his life to contrived ideals of patriotism, these life scatterings nonetheless made her father into the pensive German that he was. She had silently abhorred him all these years for his neglect and for severing her innocence in the coerced witnessing of the Turk's execution; and yet everyday she was grateful to him. Not only had her time in Turkey made her a snug albeit hurting occupant of self-containment within Fort Gabriele but his hard high browed arrogance had inspired the high stain glass windows of her facade from which she observed all earthly creatures below. Also it was from him that these sanguine characteristics had been hers. As she looked over the guests to that serene bit of nature within the smoke and voices, she saw

eccentric greatness within him. She knew that his philosophy was hers: for those individuals who could accept silence and not cling to others they would never be lost from themselves; and that whoever gained the bliss that was there in solitude, descending within one's own fathoms without inordinate hungers and movement, he or she would be one of the savants who moved perception. An insect moving on an ambulatory man in ignorance of his movements; a moving universe that does not jolt the self-centered movement of its ignorant beings--so the savants seemed not to move while they carried all these insectual entities with them.

She dreamed that because of the potential inaccuracy of first impressions, she was reluctant to instantly accept her own favorable preliminary conclusions and yet the frosty man with the unmemorable name seemed to her as so ingenuous. Within the cigarette smoke, the wine, and the smiles, he was not eager to take his turn in the continual sallies of one monkey-man attempting to conquer another one by being the wittiest of all Neanderthals. He just smiled a contrived smile onto the games that these barbarians played with each other. He smiled the way all brilliant people had to do.

While she was stripping a head of lettuce he escaped to the kitchen and got some fresh air on the balcony. She pulled him in to chop carrots. She asked where he was from initially. He told her that he was from everywhere. She probed this concept of an everywhere man in German but then changed to Spanish. In both languages he told her that everywhere was a concept that wasn't necessarily linked to a place. Later on in the evening when everyone had gone she found a note on top of a stack of dishes that he had washed for her. She looked at the scribble of a telephone number. "Please, my Miss, call my mobile or send me an SMS." She did, and then they met at the zoo in front of the spider monkeys. From there they went to the ballet. At the ballet he spoke to her in Russian. She thought of it as the preferred world language because it was nonsense to her. Had it been sensible it no doubt would have reflected a language of ordinary minds and so she preferred languages of the nonsensical variety.

Then she dreamed that she and Michael had never been linked together, and as such neither union nor separation with and from each other was engraved indelibly upon either of their brains. As such, she was an enlarging puddle being fed the rain. She was an innocent girl in goulashes feeling the vibrations of ripples and stir caused by her feet, and watching the ambulatory movements of birds feeding in the respites of a shower. She was all of these birds scavenging in the dirt for their prey for she herself had scavenged in demeaning mental and physical prostitution before becoming one of the rare goddesses of men whose novel ideas were a commodity.

The dream became one of a Gabriele who was an even younger girl. Enthralled with the rain, the rainbow, and the reflections of branches in the puddles, she was nonetheless distraught over not finding the cracks of ant corridors in what was once the parched earth. It did not occur to her that avalanche and drowning were the natural order imposed by merciless creation against these superfluous breeders. She kept looking for the cracks within the dirt but it was to no avail.

Since she did not know many words, she didn't have any critical judgments and, inept at linking words together, she was not thrust on that one-way track of probable outcomes for the future. Still free from being socialized and not having sexual drive that equated being with

others as appetites, she was more inclined to mourn a few days of not climbing trees than someone's absence from her life. Cared for, she was not fixated on survival so she stayed in the present moment where smallness percolated through the orifices and oracles of the senses. Scavenging on pink and yellow-stick legs like the birds, and flooded out with stunned worms and insects, she was these things. She was a Piaget child. Then she was as an adult form. The man with the unmemorable name was posing nude for her paintings; and when she was ready to pack up the canvas and paints one evening, he brooded charmingly. "When will I see you again?" he asked like a pensive and hurt child at the thought of her leaving him.

She felt irritated that he could ask such a question even if the female within her coruscated within a man's neediness for a woman no differently than it would within the light of flattery.

"When?" he asked again.

"When Russia becomes a member of NATO or returns into the Soviet Union."

"Why don't you stay?"

"Why? It is a loaded question. Why?" and she kissed him and sucked in his breath as if it were needed more than her own. Then she pulled away. She thought, "To never know how to marry oneself in ideas and endeavors that bring new ideas into existence, to just claim another person's rotting flesh to not wander around lost and vertiginous--no I'm not one of the sorry herd!"

"You really won't stay?" he asked.

She was tempted. She thought about staying like a fat woman would chocolate in a grocery store. She rejoiced in the fact that she did not need to be any man's woman. Sex could be obtained without actually living with someone. Matter of fact it could be obtained all alone and she would have opted for it done in this solitary manner within her own privacy if fantasies could be developed for oneself and a fuller pleasure could be gained in masturbation.

"No, I'm afraid not," she replied. I want to think of things other than you. Besides, I sleep better alone. After all, sleep is a solo activity."

"Other men?"

"Probably," she chortled. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said.

"Meet me at the zoo and then we will walk over here--Meet me in front of the cage of the spider monkeys like before. Be prepared to know every obscure zoo animal by its scientific jargon in the Russian language," he told her.

And then the dream had her meeting him the next day near a baboons' cage. She could tell that her profound buffoon had only feigned this drowning in a sensitive abyss. There were no complaints, there was no rehashing of insignificant past events, and no attempt to demand more from her within a jealous male atavism that was instinct. They just touched each other's bodies like children the feel of their

grandmothers' panty hose.

She woke up, startled to find herself with Michael in a strange bed. She propped up her pillow and sat up. She thought about where she was at: here in this poorly paved state of Arkansas a little south of the middle of nowhere, the yodeling of bluegrass and country music reverberating off the Ozark mountains.

Ensnared with her man in a blanket that had southern flowers on it, she still felt cold; and part of the blanket was wrapped about her like a southern damsel's dress. "Good lord," she thought as she looked at her thick makeshift dress, "aren't I the Great Motel Lady, Belle Gaw-brE-el." She picked up her purse from the end table, took out some snuff, and lodged it into a cheek. "Belle Gabriele," she mumbled aloud, "the motel Belle."

"What'd you say?" he asked.

"Are you awake?" she prevaricated.

"Sort of," he said. "What time is it?"

"Five."

"You said something?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, it was nothing. Sorry, I guess I woke you--mumbling aloud as I was like an old woman."

"Wake me in a half hour. I forgot to set my alarm."

"PLEASE wake me up, don't you mean?"

He chuckled sleepily on the border of wakefulness. "Don't go back to sleep and forget." He rolled onto his side in a solitary departure, and now it was just a back that was before her. It didn't even seem to be his. It was just a man's back and it didn't have an owner.

She pushed back the curtains of the window and watched the heavy traffic moving along a narrow stretch of road. She knew that she was also just one of the horde moving up and down the streets searching for something while, in arrant foolishness or within august foibles, claiming others and being claimed by them.

She deliberated on sleep and dreams, that mysterious enigma which she had wondered about so often. It dawned on her that sleep was the burning of subconscious fuel--it was the burning of myriad crowding and conflicting whims within the confines of the brain so that some type of civil existence might prevail.

She thought of her dream in which she waited for the Russian near the monkeys. She wondered if she was like the specimens in Harlow's monkey experiments. From a German upbringing, had she not become the misfit monkey--the one that had been denied the touch of a mother or surrogate mother and so always kept herself at a distance in the social world. But she did not abuse her offspring like the misfit monkey. No, she had given to her child adequate enough touch even though touch, in her younger days had been so repugnant when imposed upon her without payment. She took a shower and went to work like all other mental prostitutes.

It was her sixth day as a replacement for a cashier in the foreign food store. The other cashier had been fired because of three consecutive days in which she had attended to a sick child instead of coming to work. Gabriele did this for 12 hours and then around 9:30 p.m. as she began to close down her cash register in the habitual manner of ringing up all sales Michael began to engage in small talk to pacify the other cashiers. He thanked them for their hard work. He told them that as indispensable as they were to the Arkansas mother company they were always welcome to be with the sprawling newborn in Sapporo. He said that the store in Sapporo would never shut down and it would eventually become triple the size of this one.

After the store was closed he and Gabriele were driving back to the hotel room when they stopped for a few minutes in a McDonald's Drive-thru. There, waiting at the window for their Big Macs, Michael asked her if she could mortgage her house and sell "that nude thing" in the garage to "offset" the expenses of the new business. For some seconds she was discomfited if not dumbfounded, and then she scowled at the thought of having been dumb enough to marry him.

For a moment, the consternation was incommunicable. All that she could do was to turn her high head away from him, and allow her neck to remain stiffly turned. She smiled contortedly in nominal pain before releasing it in a guffaw. She faced him directly. His absurdity as a being seemed to exist for her insolent jeering and only this.

"What are you laughing that way for?" he asked. She stared into his eyes rudely and laughed contemptuously at the absurd monkey that was sitting next to her. She knew: every relationship was a self-interested transaction. There was nothing new to her in this assessment. She had known it since early childhood when she found out that her aunt was being paid by her parents, and that this was the impetus for the love and generosity of letting her stay with this second family. Maybe recently she had pretended to not know. For a while there had been that repudiation, that obfuscation of self, so that she might fit into a wedding dress as well as marriage. But now she was back home within the real perceptions of her brain.

She again deigned the hard plastic eyes of her stuffed polar bear countenance down upon him. They glittered a hardness that was like those of sapphires. "When is this Sapporo thing going to happen?" she spitefully abraded the contumacious Earthling coldly.

"Well, soon," he said mildly. He feigned a diffident smile as if he should not be asking for such a favor but would do it nonetheless. She, the new wife, took notice of this. He almost seemed contrite and she wondered if his bashfulness was less contrived than what she might suppose. Soon her insular hubris of indomitability began to thaw like Arctic permafrost. Then he went on. "There won't be any difficulty in expediting this from what I see. I mean an agent could sell your paintings. One of my assistants could have power of attorney to go to the bank and try to obtain a mortgage--I mean if you want to help in that way. I know it is a lot to ask. Of course it is your choice. The way I see it we'll need that money as living expenses for a short while until everything starts moving. The cost of living in Honshu is notorious but it is worse on the northern Japanese islands like Hokkaido."

"Well, I'll give it some thought. I'll decide when Nathaniel gets back." She stressed "I'll decide" obdurately but she had in principle made up her mind. She had in theory (there was nothing but theory in this interrelating) decided that if she were to go with him she could sell off her Jakarta paintings as well as the huge one in the garage but this would be all. There was an institution called a bank and to her it should not be a spouse no matter what self-interested gunk was naturally in a man's calculative logic of advantageous maneuvers when proposing to a woman -- in this case an interest free loan to which even the capital amount might well be neglected; and in this case she had made the proposal.

"I was thinking that we might fly from Little Rock to San Francisco and then over that way." His hand pointed to the McDonalds arch and she smiled good-humoredly, careful not to insult the phlegmatic one by laughing at him because he just might scowl at her. "I mean without going back. Betty of course would pick up Nathaniel from the airport and she could help take care of both boys at my sister's estate. It might be better this way."

"Not see Nathaniel and Rick?" she roared incredulously.

"Good byes are messy," he said.

She thought for a moment. What did she know: Rick was well mannered and Nathaniel was restive if not intractable. Maybe Michael with his quick draw of the belt and his willingness to take his son on trips abroad was a better parent. A caring albeit phlegmatic male disciplinarian seemed to play the notes of fear and respect in male children with a greater sense of harmony if obedience to adult might were that one important anthem. She had to admit to herself that a sudden departure wasn't nonsense for she was ready to listen to the proposals of abandonment by a father of a well brought up boy when her own experiments in child rearing seemed effete and unsuccessful. She did not, for all her education, know anything much more than the average parent and what little she knew was theoretical. Ideas of child psychologists like Piaget were mere abstractions, premises like ghosts without flesh. Maybe, she thought to herself, Nathaniel needed a different influence since she was apparently not much of a role model. Maybe pursuing a floundering maternal role for the sake of a child, who would in a short space of years be engaged fully in instinctual and hedonistic pursuits, was foolishly myopic at best. At worst it might stunt her from any form of enlightenment and she would appear foolishly gauche and inept to herself. Was her reasoning so fallible? She knew that it was. She wondered whether she was just trying to justify the desire to jump on a tank with her mate and roll off into the sunset. Maybe she would be running over her child no differently than her craven and neglectful parents except that their rationale was to fulfill duties whereas hers would be less definable.

"But Rick is with your parents."

"They got fed up with him. Now he is with my sis."

"Fed up with gentle Rick?"

"Kids are dirty."

"We should take them with us." Her thought was of rescuing her

favorite from such in-laws to her and laws to him.

"Honey, we can't afford them initially. Do you know how much international schools cost?" She at last saw his point. She felt apologetic. Maybe his reason for this marriage had not been to get her money after all. "Besides," she thought, "whatever dilemma he might have in obtaining liquid assets, I'm a pauper in contrast. Maybe there is nothing to it at all but my own overactive imagination." She looked at him again. She saw the eyes of a man who yearned for money. She saw the eyes of Venus who would have said anything to woo Adonis, and she felt that his love for her, if it existed, was not good.

"Go by yourself then. I'll stay with the boys. When I sell what I have painted -- I can pull in 20,000 more or less--I'll send it to you. However, regarding the mortgage of my house you can get that out of your thoughts! The day I'm expected to mortgage my house is the day I file the divorce papers." She smiled malevolently.

"Of course. I shouldn't have asked that. Please come to Sapporo with me. It might be your only time to actually live outside America."

He was putting the taste for new experiences back within her palate, and to her the taste of it was uniquely tactile and sweet like a wad of chewing tobacco. The possibility of going elsewhere potentially out of the reach of America's long shadow made her soar as invincibly as an archaeopteryx departing from a tyrannosaurus, if indeed these two creatures were coeval.

Like a massive billowing wave of dark cloud overtaking the top stories of a skyscraper, the prospect of opaque drama in unknown foreign adventures animated her lofty imagination. She half believed that a time in Hokkaido would send a beautiful mix of color rushing like a torrent from her pallet. It would coruscate her in warm intimacy the way, to a swimmer, the 5:30 sun appears to immerse itself whole in a pool of water. America exported greed and violence in cinematography, had sovereignty in technological exports, dictated world affairs, overthrew leaders, craved for energy to give to its race horse economy despite its havoc on the environment, and believed with certainty that God gave hegemony in this superpower status to they who relentlessly pursued gluttonous freedoms in a world of misery ridden masses. If she were to live elsewhere experiencing other cultures fully she felt that the inhabitants would be a "totally different fish;" and being exposed to a different fish would be her mutation into something higher.

The idea kept reoccurring to her that children were temporary objects in her domain but experiences of this kind were transformational. For so long she had wistful thoughts of departing from America in a more permanent way than one could do as a mere tourist. She yearned to abscond from this country of sensationalized serial killers, child abductors, murderers in school yards, random shooters, Al Queida and Timothy McVeigh car bombers, and America's obsession with those of fame and power who lusted for more and more until plunging so fully in their passionate energies fell into jealous fits, white color crimes, or murder related to that above. Already the enemies were gathered outside the American gates and at any moment they would storm the Bastille. A war with such poor masses would siphon away the coffers of the US treasury to the point where the superpower status would be gone. There would just be mountainous rubble of debt on the great debtor country.

There came a day somewhere in the middle part of January when she called the man with the unmemorable name from Arkansas. She did not tell him of her marriage but she did tell him that Michael had asked her to go to Japan with him. He told her to go. He said that one should always use any opportunity that came along to be exposed to a new culture although both of them knew that there was little else in the world but America's capitalistic shadow and that little enlightenment could be gained from any other source than stagnant words and pages of the books written by the dead masters. He said this with such conviction that she almost loved him for not holding onto her.

Tijuana, Mexico September 17, 2001

It would be 90 degrees later that day and she had come to do her laundry earlier than usual. Her mind swished like her frothy socks that foamed and compressed, were locked in and were often lost. Somewhere, on one continent or another, something severed within her. She told herself that she would not blame Atsushi Kato, and especially at this late date. She tried not to think of this matter by watching the diving dances of her laundry, but it was not at all helpful. She imagined two men's socks of different colors and sizes intertwining within the fast movements of her wash. No, she again reminded herself as if needing to reiterate a truth so that feelings did not overtake her with their mendacities, Kato was not the source of her disconnection. He had merely been a stock boy for the foreign food store that was partially owned by her husband. Perhaps he was that still. Certainly he was more than that role.

His face always smiled widely when he saw her or her husband. He had an affinity for foreigners and she, in particular, needed his friendship. His English was excellent; and he finally brought life to their stagnation by getting them involved in an understanding of Oriental antiquities.

The weather was inordinately cold, and the city was so large and congested; but they nonetheless needed their outings, and he took them to museums and Japanese theatres within the inner city of Sapporo. He was so eager to use his English. He translated the signs under the artifacts and became aware of the styles of Japanese calligraphy. When they pelted snow from the soles of their shoes before entering the theaters, he seemed grateful that such experiences were resuscitating him from the continual repetition of counting and stocking inventory. From these invitations to escort the couple he began to see a newness within his ancient and isolated people on this one of myriad islands. He said that he studied the English language and had kept it within himself for so long; but it was really perceiving his race and culture anew that seemed to revive him with a real personality. Michael was not inclined to befriend a Buddhist this lifelessly innocuous and bereft of money and status so she pushed on her husband's association with him, this "subordinate." She asked Kato to accompany her husband in the barroom business meetings. He would just be a human speck in these overcrowded places. His shyness with those of his own race made them not pay attention to him. He would understand the implications to the meetings that her husband found opaque. She would not blame Kato. He might even be doing Michael's laundry right now as she pursued her own, but he was not her disconnection -- not really.

What did her disconnection matter at all in the scheme of things,

anyway? When she asked this question she was not able to concoct a truthful answer that was at all savory. In the scheme of things her disconnection was just more worthless tripe as insignificant as a gum wrapper blowing on a sidewalk. As intangible as a "state of mind" was, she knew that for all its intricate and fascinating complexity it was less significant to the outside world than a gum wrapper.

Thousands had lost their lives in the World Trade Center towers in New York City just days earlier. No one could ever know the panic and hopelessness that they felt at the travail of being cognizant and on fire or seeing someone else who was ablaze and being unable to do anything. If there were any continual evidence of those who had become a gas it would be the sounds of their panicked utterances of love and farewell or the light that made visible those horrified countenances leaning their ears as hard as they could into their cellular telephones. By this time, she supposed, those sights and sounds would be at the edges of the Milky Way before moving further into deeper space, the gray matter of this black god. She still thought about September Eleventh every few minutes: those repeating images of the two jets flying into the skyscrapers and people jumping from the upper stories. What did her disconnection matter to the gods, who if they existed at all, despised life?

She remembered: on the Eleventh (9-11) she sat on the bed in her little room. A bowl of vegetable soup from her crockpot was on an end table and a tofu taco was on a plate that was on her lap. She was just about ready to put some food in her mouth when she used the remote control to turn on the television. For a few moments she was incredulous and just stared motionlessly aghast. Then she suddenly stood up from the precipice of the mattress and rushed to the telephone to call Michael's sister. The line was disconnected as it had been the past few times she tried to call. She tried email but again her letters to her son came back to her. Nathaniel ("Adagio") still had too much email clogged into his Yahoo account--no doubt all the unopened letters she had emailed to him from Sapporo.

Somewhere something had severed. Was it here in Tijuana, in Tokyo or Hong Kong, Seoul or Sapporo, or a mezcla (mixture)? It was a gradual harvest of disconnection invisibly sewn and its fulfillment placed in her hands. She had accepted her divorce stunned and numb, but not disbelieving. She had been there throughout his travels. Her mind had been scrambled in different languages and her environment splintered like Kanji, Hirigana, and Katakana.

She was lost then, and she was lost now. People were temporary entities flitting around in her imagination as solid substance but it had been an illusion. Why she had come to Tijuana was even more difficult to isolate. It had less shape and size than even the divorce of intimate parties. It was a shirt of a distorted form. Here, she could more easily stretch the money that she had fully withdrawn from the "grocery and household account" which Michael had put in her name at Daiko Ginko (Daiko Bank). It was around 3000 dollars. Within Albany she had her real money and property but she had not seriously thought about those resources for nearly a year. The passbook and ATM were lost to her now and she could never access those resources from here.

It was a most mortifying fact that upon telling her he had filed for divorce and his reason for doing such that she just stood there so numbly like a driver witnessing a falling bridge. She had not laughed or

accepted it with a smile, which would have been her typical reaction--a reaction she had toward all absurd caprices of a human race that she still believed was beneath her. But within the daily work at managing the store and fighting along with him to secure a profit, she had unwittingly married him in her heart; and all those outings with Kato sealed the three in work and pleasure. It was her first time of really feeling as if she belonged to a group and the explosion of it wounded her in shrapnel.

Upon entering the states she was too fragile and too mortified by all that she had abandoned to go back to her son in New York State. She spent a few days in Los Angeles and a few more in San Diego. Then she pushed the rotating gate in San Ysidro and found herself in Tijuana. She had always wanted the chance to recall her college Spanish and to somehow use it. American cities seemed so large and so full of violent accosting figures; but she did not reason that this large south-of-the-border city that she had chosen to reside in, which had its toddler days as American military barrooms, had the crime level of LA and Chicago combined. She didn't really have a reason for her inability to acclimate. She told herself that Ithaca was too cold but Sapporo had been colder yet. The bench at the zoo before the spider monkeys had been her favorite spot in San Diego but the monkeys reminded her of the man with the unmemorable name.

For a few moments she hypnotically watched her towels and clothes through the window of the double-load machine. Washing clothes was a dollar and sixty-five cents per load. Most of the customers paid in dollars, but not all of them; so the machines needed special tokens to fall into the slots. To her knowledge doing laundry here was the only thing that was more expensive than in the states. A teenager was seated in a laundry cart. Her hand leaned on the lever of the dryer and she pulled and pushed herself in a gentle swinging movement as if it were a hammock. Two children on roller skates created a roller derby for themselves but they walked and stumbled more than they rolled and the force in which they ran into people was nominal.

Just as she was glad that her ex-lover, Candyman, had not been allowed into her body during one of her more fertile dates and had been kept as syrup on her tongue, she was glad that throughout the time of living together with Michael as lovers and then as husband and wife, that no daughter or son was conceived (for once conceived the embryo never would have been aborted since her principle of being humane would have been the overriding consideration at the expense of all else). She was also glad that she and her husband had not amassed any common property within their nine months of marriage. She liked a disconnection--a dismembering--that was made neatly in one quick motion of the knife. She felt that it was good even when the knife was not sterile.

She thought of the salient, life-changing conversation that she should have laughed off with the frivolity worthy of all human considerations. At the door of their room in the lodge Michael said to her, "Yesterday while we were snow skiing and Kato broke his foot, I lifted it and touched him in front of you without wanting to hide anything. Do you remember? You stood above us. You were wearing a cap and your bangs were in your eyes; still I could see that you understood fully. I knew that you had known all along. Can you really say that you haven't known anything all these months?" He asked her this as if she were the one who was culpable. He asked her this as if she were the one

who made him feel guilty by this contrived performance of consternation and shattered innocence.

The stoic that she was, she had not created a dramatic or melodramatic spectacle unless an ingenuous sense of confusion was a spectacle. There, in the hallway outside their rooms at the lodge, he condemned her, the victim. That which preceded it had been Michael rummaging through his pockets, handing her their key, and then announcing that he would stay with Kato. Naturally, she had been disconcerted; her feelings had been dominant and ineffable; and the scenario of them talking like this with their friend on his crutches gazing at them both in a horrified expression had been so surreal. Her true self would have laughed and relinquished him. She would have even bought the gay couple a housewarming gift of his and her bathrobes (maybe just his and his) with minimal bitterness that would have animated her in light-hearted mischief-making. Instead a bomb detonated.

Time moved by like a shell-shocked soldier and it dragged her along as a war prisoner tripping recklessly over landmines. She was battered in shrapnel but she knew that her wounds were figments of the imagination since they were merely psychological ones. With the right idea she knew that she could wedge herself from the microcosm of being a casualty of an imaginary war, escape from its hatch, and be herself once again. If she were just to open the hatch she would be out of jealous instincts and the pettiness of a personal life.

Whenever she got bored with reading Mexican newspapers and memorizing new Spanish vocabulary she would go into San Diego and take bus #9 from Broadway Avenue until she was in Old Town. Her favorite building was Casa De Miguel Pedona y Maria Antonia Estudillo. Maybe it had been restored long ago, but now it retained its tattered walls once again and no refurbished items cluttered the dense emptiness. It was time: empty and tattering. She felt less alone seeing it exhibit that, which in an abstract way, was in her own heart. To her the dilapidated structure was good.

She could easily enough replace a husband. When she was in Asia she had often sent e-mail to some of those whom she met in chat rooms. There were lonely males out there just as there were lonely females. She might find an exceptionally attractive man with responsibility, status, and initiative who would infatuate her and, if she were lucky, seem like a comfortable friend. Perhaps they would have a rapport even if their hobbies were different and the degree of seriousness that she gave her art disconcerted the domineering male who could not understand the independent fullness of self in ideas. She could find a man just as she could get rid of her old clothes and replace them with new ones.

She hadn't bought many new clothes for some time. Her budget wouldn't permit such purchases now--not even here. She could, however, give some English classes and with a few hundred dollars each month she could have been one of those common consumers in outdoor markets, the real people. However, it all, seemed as if it were clutter (tangible things like clothes and the intangible things of the mind like relationships).

Once, a musical group from Ecuador was playing in Old Town in front of the historic buildings, where inside them everything was sold from candles to homemade fudge. Three old ladies ran up to them before

leaving. They stood beside the musicians who were dressed in red and blue ponchos so that someone could take their photographs with them. They did not stay for here was proof that they had encountered another culture in passing. The picture was solid: more solid than months of experiences in a culture.

Two days before she left Sapparo, she spent hours in an exhausting search for her son, Nathaniel, the best one could from a distant continent. She called Michael's sister, Janet, several times but that line was disconnected. A couple of operators reaffirmed this fact. She went through people search engines for her ex-sister-in-law whom she never met but whom she believed to be keeping her son. Still these attempts were futile. She called the numbers of myriad businesses owned by Michael's parents in the hope that the managers and directors there might link her to these unlisted, affluent proprietors; but once she got the directors or operational managers of these organizations on the phone with trying effort, they would never disclose any information on the owners who had been her in-laws. She used email search engines in the hope that Nathaniel had a second account but all those individuals with his name lived in states other than New York and Kansas. At last she called her Aunt Peggy.

"Peggy, this is Gabriele. How are you?"

"What? Where have you been? We haven't been able to reach you for nearly a year."

"I have been living in Japan but I'm coming back home soon."

"How long have you been over there?"

"For nine months or so."

"Doing what?"

"Painting."

"Is Nathaniel with you?"

"No." Gabriele was disappointed.

"You haven't contacted that boy in all this time?"

"No. I've tried so many times but it gets me nowhere. I was hoping he would contact me on his own. Obviously he is not there with you, but maybe he has given you Janet's number."

"Janet?"

"It's a long story." This call was another dead end.

"He set fire to the house. We sent him back two weeks after he came. We don't want to see him back here again. I don't know where he is at--Janet or whoever he is with. No wonder he hates everybody with a mother abandoning him."

"I didn't abandon him; but since when were you so worried about condemning abandonment. My parents just went on a working trip forever and to you they are remarkable people; I was shipped off to you, and

your old fart of a husband."

"What did you call him?"

Gabriele laughed. "Let's forget the past. It shapes us but doesn't behead us, so to speak. You clothed me, sheltered me, and gave me food."

"That's right. We bothered with you when no one else would so how dare you call your uncle a bad name. We loved you."

"Your love for me, your niece, was to approach me like a servant girl. I dare because it is my telephone call at my expense and I'll call anyone I want and remind him, her, or them that they are old farts if they are indeed old farts." Gabriele chuckled. So easily did she amuse herself and how little did anyone else move her. "And if anyone tries to finger my clit the way your husband did they should be happy to be called old farts."

"Shut up! Shut up now! Shut that wicked mouth! This is my telephone and you talk to me respectfully or I'll hang up on you right now. Your son hates you, you know. Always talks of hating you everyday -- sickening but probably for good reason; and we got the effects of your unwed mothering experiment -- a kitchen in flames and one wall in the living room --"

Gabriele hung up the phone and paced the floors like a mad woman. She was infuriated and yet ecstatic to have at last treated her aunt to the contempt of words. Virtually all other times had merely been cold and supercilious looks. Still it was a hollow victory so she set about destroying all of her photographs--those that she had with her and those that she pulled out of a lock box at Daiko Ginko. She stripped away each plastic sheet that contained them -- relating to Michael and Nathaniel or not -- and threw them away. She did that for all but one. The exception was a close-up of herself and her mother. Her mother's eyes were sparkling and, within the middle-aged face, decades earlier could be seen. Gabriele, who was three, was standing next to her near their home in Bucyrus, Missouri. It was a link. It was a connection. It didn't exist any longer but she couldn't release it any more than if she had been an immortal proprietor of the heavens.

The washer began to spin and kick like a drowning animal caught and fighting to get out. Its squeaking was wild with its vibration but in tone alone it was similar to the calm, mechanical chirping sounds of pedestrian streetlights in Sapporo.

She had a child and yet a whole realm of connectedness had escaped her. There were only failed possibilities now. Nathaniel hated her throughout most of the year before she "abandoned" him. She had felt it. Now, he had all the reason in the world to hate her. She looked out to the distant machines--the medley of Mexican people folding dry clothes; putting wet ones in their carts, seated and bored; reading newspapers; watching the television that beamed over their heads or falling into the rhythms of dives that their clothes made in the dryers; and those purchasing the tokens, soap, and bleach that they would put into their washers. How human and divine they were! She felt cheered and soothed to see their distinct faces. They wandered around lost, too. They yearned for something more, as she did, if only an empty dryer. They yearned to hear the morning buses that would excrete their dark toxins and take

them to their agendas. They yearned to see the morning sun and the little barefoot boy in one of the distant colonias staring as the calafia (mini-bus) and the water truck with its men yelling "El Vagon!" moved up a gigantic hill in a pueblo of polvo and desert. They yearned for the exchange of ideas that would pull them out of the sense of being vanquished to the misery that was part of one's fate. But they were also, in their own limited ways, capable of being Bin Ladens responsible and exuberant about killing thousands of Americans. Maybe in just a thousand angry looks toward gringos who purportedly had better lives than themselves there might be something destructively vile in them. They, like all perfidious males, no doubt followed feelings of love (homosexual or heterosexual bliss) abandoning earlier partners who were no longer exotic dopamine inducers. Maybe, she thought, the vile was inside herself. If the English language had a word for hating men she felt it now and she knew it was vile.

She tried the best that she could to pull out of herself but the self needed to burn away both the past and the pain. Still she tried to ameliorate these feelings in reason. "So, my Ex has a gay lover...So I am dismissed...What of it?...The marriage wasn't real anyway; and Michael does not belong less to Kato just because I once had a signature on a marriage certificate." She couldn't see how anyone belonged to anyone else, anyhow; and recalled that throughout most of her life she had been glad it was that way. She tried to let the morning grace her with its fullness of life. She thought of Tijuana's tamale and hot chocolate vendors of early morning, the restaurant workers and the newsstand operators, the pharmacy managers and the street salesmen. They did not insatiably yearn for more to make themselves happy. They accepted reality's mandate that there would be no aspirations, no prosperity, and no urgency. There would just be standing alone seven days a week allowing the stimulus of sights, sounds, and smells to fill the senses and rescue the mind that tortured itself from the knowledge that there was deterioration and death, brutality and natural disasters, apathy and injustice, personal defects that were both mental and physical, and yearnings for closeness and permanency in the midst of void. She did not want to think of her husband--her ex-husband, the fact that she did not feel as if she had a last name (Quest or Sangfroid no longer suiting her, and "Bassete," the surname of Michael's family before his legal change of it for himself, not doing anything for her either), and that she was now ripped from the life of Kato and the imagery of the Orient.

She put her clothes in a cart; and then following her feelings of hunger, she pushed the cart in front of the row of stools that were near a counter. She ordered a quesadilla and glanced at the cylindrical twisting carcass on a spit that would be used for tacos. She listened to the sizzling savagery of pieces of meat dying a second death within their own grease and slow Mexican music that moved her like the blowing fronds of palms.

Still her redundant thoughts reeled across the screen of her brain like the repeated broadcasts of the two jets crashing into the towers. She had gone with him to Japan on the assumption that the boys would soon follow. She even made up her mind numerous times that she would obtain them regardless of Michael's objections and put them in an international school. She was planning to contact Rick's sister but the months went by so fast. It wasn't much of an excuse. She had to admit that. Had the two of them really neglected to contact the boys all this time --she with hers and he with his? They had; for they wanted to find

a part of themselves not linked to them. For him it was the success of this business enterprise and obviously to engage in the taunting of his untapped homosexual fantasies toward these boyish Asians. Such was done within this nice ostensible marriage and partnership with his wife. And for her it was the specious believability of that rush of energy that was the suppliant groping of love and to find a less lonely version of happiness in a group which together were humanity's greatest bondage. Such abandonment was done under the ostensible label of "demonstrating a creative and independent existence" to her son.

Seated at the counter she felt a contentedness in being near a beautiful woman around her age. She even found a contentedness in hearing the meat crackle as if behind the apparent truth of the injustice of the powerful overtaking the less-abled in the slaughtering of its life there was another truth that this was the design and essence of life with a cryptic purpose that perhaps she would know with a little bit more age and maturity.

The warmth of her mother's kitchen when she was a child as snow pelted against the windows; the smell of bacon in the skillet; the smell of coffee and the sight of her mother in a thin nightgown before the stove while her father coughed away, distant and withdrawn behind a newspaper--how beautiful her mother was in so many ways in that short time together. Her eyes watered slightly, and then she had control and the present moment. She excoriated her maudlin, womanly tendencies and worried that her refusal to fall apart in front of Michael was catching up with her now. Could the cold tacit hubris that she superciliously blasted onto Michael a day after the shock dissipated have just been the facade of a woman ready for a nervous breakdown?

She avoided such thoughts by telling the woman drinking coffee at the counter some jovial comment of how at this corner of the room the scent was a combination of soap and bleach blended with those of tortas and tacos. It was an introductory comment of the environment similar to parties experiencing it, and as she wished it, it invited a smile of that one individual. Certainly a conversation beginning with "Hello; how are you?" might die at the first moment of life. The woman responded with a trivial comment that such smells might help in digesting the barely digestible.

"I am a bit surprised by the amount of meat that is part of the Mexican diet. One torta has more meat than I could think of eating for a full month, although I have to admit I do have a grease addiction for the quesadillas." Aware that, in bits, her conversation was like an American snob who could not stand anything other than her own quick, thoughtless tripe of a culture, she wished that she had said something that was different than this. Then a minute later she didn't care quite as much. She told herself that having spoken her partial gripe in Spanish instead of English might have ameliorated any negative interpretation of her critique to some degree. As she was thinking this she suddenly realized that she had just taken a glimpse of this woman's larger breasts that bounced around in a V-neck shirt. She had done this in a subconscious but still intentional manner the way Kato might in the comparison of his penis size to that of his new husband whenever they were side by side at urinals in a public bathroom. Then she looked down at a plate with some leftover food on it from a previous customer. She scooted it away and then did not look up for some moments. She was amused and a little embarrassed by her earlier action. She tried to hide her latent grin. Had her repugnance for men caused this? She would

not be surprised if it were true: sexuality was just a river of energy that would move in areas where it was less impeded.

A minute later she was still concerned that she had come across as another snobbish American passing through one of the few cultures left that, for the most part, retained its essence despite being so near the superpower. She didn't give a damn what this stranger thought of her but the last thing that Americans needed were more people hating them.

"What does the H.E. Stand for?" Gabriele continued on to rectify what might have been a negative impression. She was making reference to the initials on the woman's blouse.

"Hilda Estrella." The stranger said her last name like she was a glamorous movie star.

"Are you a star?"

"In everything I do in my small way."

"In a family of stars or with a husband who is a star?"

"My husband is a fizzled firecracker with no bang. It is his name though. I robbed it from him. It should only belong to me. Don't you think so?" Gabriele laughed.

"American?"

"No, Gringo," said Gabriele.

Hilda laughed. "Your Spanish is excellent, as it is my English," said the woman in the world language that had been tossed from American hands out onto the denizens of the world like a net so as to pull all in one direction. She spoke in English because, although Gabriele's Spanish was functional, her vocabulary was callow with a thick American accent.

Gabriele introduced herself as Gabriela and the Mexican lady introduced herself as Hilda...de da la de Estrella. The whole name flashed before Gabriele like a Japanese bullet train (or Shinkansen). She couldn't catch much of it.

"Mucho gusto," said Gabriela.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," said Hilda.

"You are the first person in T.J. to speak to me in English.

"They don't know it very well. Most of them are poor so they don't go to universities none and English isn't taught so often in high schools--not well and nobody wants to learn it none. They want to know it and not know it. They don't want to lose their ways. Culture is language and they don't want Spanish to collapse like a pi-ata. In their ideas of things, the Gringos took away enough of their land--they don't want the culture to go--out would go mariachi, bull fights, Juarez Day with children in Indian feathers, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, and traditional Mexican ballads. In would come George Bush Jr. signs and the American navy ships. It is a choice like the people in Paris, France." Gabriele didn't think that there was much of a similarity between the

urbane Parisians and the dust city dwellers of Tijuana but what did she know? There might be some truth to it so she kept her opinion sealed.

Hilda explained the education which allowed for her fluency in a second language. Her father, a poorly paid public defender, didn't have the money to send the youngest to college so he paid for her to study at a language school.

"Did you resent your sister getting what you couldn't have?"

"No, I was very muy muy glad for her. She felt more bad than I did about it so she introduced me to her boss's bear friend--an old bear who was a friend of her boss--how ever you say it. That is another story. Where did you study Spanish?" Gabriele just said that she had dabbled in a few Spanish classes long ago in school but that she was now living here to give the language a try.

"An American living in Tijuana, asked Hilda.

"Stranger things have rocked the planet, I'm sure," said Gabriele coldly. She then ordered two quesadillas and two cokes for herself and her friend.

"You Americans are lucky. You can go here and there and stay as long as you want-- wherever you dream. Most Americans just step into Tijuana just to say they have been in Mexico but you dream about studying here and do it. It isn't much of a paradise--this place. Maybe you have gone to other places." Gabriele gave an abridged account of the places where she had lived.

"To travel is good; but if it was me to do something as this I think I would be dizzy to stay a long time in one place and then another place to meet and to lose people."

"Strangely, it has made me dizzy; but not from the travels really. Maybe a bit from the travels -- a combination of things. Before this I never needed anyone. I had my own convictions, my own ways, and my own mode of life. When I was younger I removed men like ticks a lot of the time, screwed and bit off their heads some of the time--not really but metaphorically, and thought of them -- everybody really -- as unwanted distractions on my studies and independence most of the time. I never felt lost and lonely until I was married and was living in Japan."

"There isn't a more lonely thing than this to live together with someone," commented Hilda. She changed to Spanish. "People don't grow together. They grow apart if they are capable of any growth at all-- especially if they started out as strangers." To Gabriele nothing could be said that was any truer. These ideas were identical to her own even if hers were as yet kept confined into the cellar of her thoughts (a place she restrained all ideas until they seemed more incontrovertible). To hear these secret ideas that still had not dispersed widely in her own brain come from someone else's mouth was startling. So rarely did Gabriele hear truth that she often imagined it as something that only she conceptualized or fabricated. Her muddy puddles of cynicism were evaporating under the light of the sun. Gabriele smiled her first real smile in months.

Hilda elaborated that this friend of the sister's boss, Stranger X, also from Guadalajara like her family, promised to her father that if

married to Hilda he would contribute to the family's household expenses and pay for Hilda's education. The father told him that if Hilda consented so would he.

"It was a practical decision, really."

Gabriele nodded distastefully. The calculative and the irrational were always in a woman's head when entertaining marriage. All people had to prostitute themselves a little to make a living but, according to Gabriele's assessment, women who contemplated marriage were complete whores. She almost felt sorry for men if it were not for loathing them so much. Hilda was a whore for knowledge and so this got Gabriele's approval. "Go on. I'm listening," said Gabriele.

Hilda told her that she had majored in health and physical fitness at the community college. She graduated but any plans to teach went awry in a pregnancy, a miscarriage, and then some years of housekeeping. But when her husband lost interest in her for her infertility and inability to carry a child when they had undergone such expense and effort to conceive one through a fertility clinic, she stopped taking care of the house and got a servant. This allowed her to teach aerobics.

Gabriele listened intently while her eyes glanced at the cart of wet clothes, which seemed to her like the great hills of Tijuana dirt but in a medley of colors and fabrics.

"Why are you really living here in Tijuana? Why not Puerta Vallarta or Mexico City?" Hilda suddenly asked.

Gabriele began spacing her words into fragments and some of the fragments contained space as if her mind were moving up and down those hills across all of the distant colonias, the ocean, and into the past. She said that for a few weeks, now, she had been staying in a room of a house owned by a "nice woman." She just wanted to learn her Spanish here and she wanted to learn of simplicity. "I thought moving here would improve me somehow-- Suppose it hasn't," she prevaricated. Hilda, who now doubted the sincerity of the conversation, was beginning to withdraw her attention; so sensing this Gabriele confessed. "The truth is that when I got married I lost myself to a wifely role. I domesticated Betty Crocker crap and being an unpaid cashier/assistant manager for my husband's business. When I wasn't at my shift I was learning how to cook regular western food since he hated Japanese food--sushi, mizu soup, soba, and all that stuff. Of course, washing his clothes and ironing his shirts. In the meantime he was seeing someone--a friend...an employee who was dear to us." She chuckled. "Not someone but the same gender -- a man. He was seeing a man. After the divorce I came back to the states. I didn't know where to go so I followed my own shadow and came here."

Hilda looked at her empathetically. She spoke softly. "So many people come to this ugly place for one reason or another. Some work in the American and Japanese factories. They often live in groups so they can afford rent. They earn 150 pesos each week, but what can they do? They tell themselves that a job like this is better than none. For others Tijuana is a place to sell souvenirs to the American gringos. They sell this and that on cardboard tables and they survive. It is a place for a young woman to hope that one of the American naval officers that she sells herself to will actually want more than a...como se dice... Anyhow, not being used for sex -- a real relationship. It is

where those lacking emotional resources can recover."

Gabriele caught the air before it came out of her mouth as rude chortling. "Lacking emotional resources" Even though she hadn't heard a more apt and erroneous phrase to describe herself; but she liked how artfully Hilda used such laconic sentences to show understanding, to make the two women's experiences cognate, and to pull the conversation out of the dead-end of the personal domain.

Gabriele smiled thoughtfully with her closed lips. She was pleased that the serendipitous heat so early in the morning had carried her here the way birds, without having to flap their wings, soared on waves of solar energy that were refracted from the ground. She now felt that she was soaring away from the flares of tortured memories--memories that if personified, seemed to think that she could somehow rescue them when the only rescue to be had was their own burial. She was at last leaving the pine trees and the snowy slopes where she had once skied with Kato and her husband. She was razing that raised foot to its burial pit and raising herself out of the inundations of yearning in the pools of Michael's retinas. She was no longer drowning in the deprivations that had fathered his unfulfilled pent-up yearnings or trapped in her own eyes and ideas for witnessing what she didn't care to see and, at that point, couldn't conclusively know. She was demolishing the ski lodge where her former self stood in front of that door of what was their room with mouth agape, key tightly clutched, and thoughts wandering lost here and there but aggravating her with recurrent questions of where she would "fit into the picture" should her husband's homosexual liaisons be more than a temporary and belated experimentation. For the first time in so long she no longer felt the inclination to pull a ski cap down over her face.

For Hilda sentiment had risen the previous year for warmth and stability and she clung to her husband's side, the old ogre that he was. She begged him to not leave each night and see this other woman or to see her but to not treat their marriage with such total indifference and contempt. If she had not loved him before she loved him desperately then; for to be rejected by an ogre made her feel uglier than the one rejecting her. She pontificated that love was a shared experience that could not be dropped one rainy Sunday when it was apparent from the first ten minutes of the televised soccer game who would be the winners, clearing the way for daily habitual liaisons thereafter.

She told Gabriele that, while they were living together that last year, she never knew who her husband saw. "It was probably a woman. I don't know. A Mexican man, when he is horny and bored, would get off in a hollow log but never his wife if she has disappointed him."

One night on the Guadalajara beltway, while she was returning to her empty home with her bags of groceries, there among distant lights in clusters like grounded stars, Hilda's headlights beamed on the sign "Tijuana." She felt that second where the new could not be avoided and that out there might be a little compassion toward her. She headed north to Baja California and then got a job as an aerobics teacher for the Municipal Sports and Cultural Center of Tijuana.

When their clothes were dry Gabriele invited Hilda to go to the movies. There in the darkness of the theatre she felt happy but uncomfortably pinned in by the wistful desire to touch the leathery silk of her friend's skin and this sense that to do so might bring on the

demise of the friendship. As strange as this yearning, the fear, and the polarity of these opposites experienced together, was this peculiar sensation of needing to be embraced in the cocoon of Hilda's arms whereby she might, in this unconditional love of compassion and understanding, more smoothly reconnect the ridged pieces of self that she had cobbled together from a fragmented state early in life. She did not know if clasping her hand would endanger the friendship so she sat there and sweated with her hand in between both seats. And yet, strangely somewhere in the middle of the movie she coalesced Gabrielishly. She was restored in shared experience and understanding and this was all that she required.

She had felt similar emotions of physical repugnance toward Michael. Often, in their bed, with the enjoyment of feeling her body again after sex as his motives, she shunned him like a picnic that was infested with ants. The need for autonomy, hegemony, and harmony that comprised self-containment became her.

Still, in the last moments of the movie she curled her hand on her chin, smiled, and absorbed herself in light and sound presented as form. She thought about how Hilda had waited around for her clothes to dry and had helped her put them in the back of her car. The mystery of possibilities and implications to subtle gestures dangled above her like a toy of a musical crib.

Chapter Thirty-Five

When considering how marginally educated he was ("bare-assed with a tie within this professional world of masters and doctors" as the words of such deliberations), Sang Huin would succumb to the undertow and founder in the myriad oceanic fathoms of the lugubrious self. Each of those times descending deep in this silent abyss, he would remember those times of being in his parents' garage. There as a boy with his broken bicycle, he, the maladroit, could only fumble a feigned semblance of competence with the alien tools of his father's screwdriver and wrench. Mixed in smells of oil stained concrete there would be a feeling of ineptitude slowly trickling through him like the numbing poison of hemlock. Then there would come those excoriations of his father telling him that his inability to fix things made him good for nothing and this poison would dart through the ventricles of his heart and finish what the subtleties of drowning in oily, nebulous despair could not immediately do. Now, as back then, he believed that the comments of him being good for nothing were true even if now the negative judgment calls were for a litany of other unrelated issues.

Lackadaisical or indifferent (the intense, wanton drifter never even insouciant when going on rendezvous with his true decadent cravings), the hours of his days were often extended no further than going from one private lesson to another, to one gay sauna or another, and then back home to Saeng Seob within a somewhat hidden malaise. Still they were nexuses; and as fulsomely inconsequential as they might seem to others if they were able to peer into his sordid domain and not be repulsed by these orgies on tatami mats, still they were human connections; and it was human connections that were a man's life raft and dinghy when floating in the empty effluvia of self, water, space, and time. For they who were endowed with the ability to see ideas, sense an endeavor within them, and not only know a reality beyond the personal domain but experience a personal genius in the mission of transferring

ideas to the world, they were their own buoyancy. And although Sang Huin could see that truth he was not of such an excellent make. His destiny would not be like those who were truly happy, they who knew felicity in themselves and that the outside world was inconsequential.

In meaning-seeking respites no different than at any other time of his Korean sojourn, he dabbled and danced with his Gabriele and, from buses, taxis, and subways, read the news about the U.S.A. (now in the thickets of guerrilla attacks from these liberated Iraqis who loathed the American intruders and devastators). He contemplated Americans' free expression of violent inclinations in movies, books, and life -- violent inclinations clearly within the self or at least in himself, and dwelled in a lonely neediness that was still motivating him to seek out others in a neediness more akin to ductility than deference.

He got a part-time job as a sales representative at Rosemary Cosmetics since his mind still yearned to give the amorphous blob contained therein form, purpose, vocation, and meaning which still eluded him. His life in its quest for meaning was like the Bush administration's groping for these weapons of mass destruction to disprove the obvious: that Bush's hallucinated epiphany was similar to the sun stroked and deranged Akhenaten. As this "Shawn" needed secular meaning not in the material world, they needed to believe that the bushes were God's executioners in Iraq and elsewhere.

Like all dirty bluish-white collared Koreans in search of a vocation as well as a job, he wanted to work for a big firm: the bigger the company the less small he would seem to others and himself. This was a typical East Asian reaction; and the concept that a man was no more than who he associated himself with was applicable even to one like Sang Huin ("Shawn"), as queer as he was. Rosemary Cosmetics was no Samsung in size nor did it have much merit in global commerce; but this was his only opportunity at present and from it he hoped it would be his mold making him into something solid and patterned or at least not a deciduous, tenuous leaf tossed erratically with every breeze. He wanted to be connected and to no longer be tortured by those discombobulated seconds when his self did not register itself-- a time (in his case usually on the bus between private lessons) when one's consciousness had a rupture, thoughts seemed even more evanescent, remembered heads of the people of the past (including his deceased father and sister) got tangled up on the wrong bodies or the features of those faces became effaced or alloyed with others' features, and not having the destination of meaning, the self thus tripped over itself directionlessly.

But a week into contacting long-term overseas customers to advertise new cosmetics, reestablish relationships by offering a substantial supply of free samples, and processing orders on the telephone in a rather menial position that had no guarantee of leading to something bigger he became less hopeful. Early into the job he knew that he was just one more cog in one more machine. Early into the job he knew that it would not make him into this vague, nebulous concept of a man that he only half-sensed even if fully and wistfully desired; so he was lost now as he was lost then. But, fortunately for him he was not entirely lost--almost entirely lost and ineluctably if not indelibly so but not entirely lost in the complex labyrinth of the thickets of darkness that was in society and nature as well as one's human nature.

He had his hallowed hobbies which always kept him from wanting to slit his wrist--solitary hobbies that in one form or another had saved

the oversensitive boy who had felt that his father was afraid of one-on-one contact with him just as they saved him now. Now the cello was abandoned for the melancholic sounds of the shokohachi but Gabriele remained steadfast. She was his attempt to find simple and innocuous pleasure and lasting truths that were not in sordid and temporarily enflaming raptures of ecstasy. She was his higher consciousness, his higher authority.

Sang Huin was a city boy designed for Seoul. He liked seeing dual soldiers guarding each portal of every underpass; the dark green military buses that waited in Chongno Sam Ga, at Yongsei University, and no doubt in countless sectors of this sprawling mega city; he liked the drama of tall skyscrapers undaunted by besieging clouds, traffic rushing here and there as if to foment the provincial sleepiness of Hanguk society, the variety of people he would encounter in what was on whole a rather homogenous group of kimchee-eating, child-rearing, follow-the-leader advocates, and especially passing belatedly through the remnants of tear gas that had been targeted on boisterous anti-US troop demonstrations. He liked window shopping through stores that had Buddhist icons; the sexy galaxy of city lights scintillating like stars; being in a city where differences were as inconspicuous as rolling pebbles in an avalanche; the random subway passengers who sometimes, after buying their tickets, would see him using an English map and ask him in English if he were lost; the exhilaration of speaking in English with a probable chance that someone in the immediate area would understand him; and the many American alternatives to Korean restaurants (shiktangs). He liked buying groceries--those few he got--beneath department stores; purchasing expensive clothes for Seong Seob who still resonated as his makeshift family even if he could not relate to him any more than anyone else; the big supply of English books in various bookstores; sex and deodorant. The sex was self-explanatory: he had a true weakness to touch beautiful things the way he used to stroke the legged panty-hose of his grandmother when sitting on her lap so as to feel the friction and static against his fingers. As much as he not only wanted to end his promiscuity but sever sexuality completely for the rationale that pleasure bonding was a selfish love that stunted his ability to care for someone altruistically, he was unable or unwilling to do it. The touch, smell, and taste of human flesh were inordinate delights that bypassed his abstemious and acetic intentions. And as for deodorant, he, a Korean, did not sweat much, but he, an American, needed it to feel as if he were not entirely naked. In Seoul, at least, deodorant was not impossible to find.

Maybe having lived in Umsong for half a year contributed to his metropolitan enthusiasm since there he was miserable with a malaise ameliorated a little only on rare occasions of discovering M&M chocolate candies, pancake mixes, Fruit Loops, and Fruit-of-the-Looms on store shelves. His stay in Umsong had been like a fearful boy scout in a tent on a camping expedition--a child looking at black clouds from his small portal, and wishing to again restake his homestead in the less ominous domain of his parents' back yard. Still, the isolation had its beauty: mountainous green hills near lush, green rice fields, and some good times such as when he and Yang Kwam made their way down a trail in the forest and then spent the night at the Umsong Stadium sleeping on the vast green AstroTurf in the midst of empty yellow seats and stars.

For some brief minutes one Saturday after waking in darkness Sang Huin did not know where he was at. He could not get his bearing. He was

still in the dream remake of an incident that happened to him immediately before he began to write Gabriele--a haunting memory in a dreamonized state. It was not unlike others he had experienced such as those of his mother's aloneness when going from the need to water one plant and then the next (an idea extrapolated consciously and repressed to his subconscious from the letters she sent to him), or dragging his sister by the hair and into a forest so that he could stand there and watch as she was gang raped to death. Dreams were, of many things, seeing the self's place in the environment and judging of itself as one cloud or part of the function of a group of clouds.

The dream of his sister was a major literal distortion of the reality it was based upon, but that was not the case with this one that he had just awakened from. It, like the plant-watering dream, had more of a literal base. It pertained to the Korean girlfriend whom he was involved with when he first came to Chongju. In the dream, as in reality, she said, "You can get a good job teaching at a private high school--I don't understand why you won't. If you do this, then with your money and my money we could have a good life together. We could make a family." He sensed that she would use him the way any woman studied pregnancies from infatuated man for children who would be her, the woman's, happiness. He sensed how a male slave was compelled to toil as a provider to an early demise because of the allure of a woman; and then he told her, "Living petty selfish lives tree hunting, investing money, house remodeling, complaining about taxes and the kids' dental bills. No thanks." It was the first time a thought so critical of his parents had materialized in his mind from all those repressed feelings that had been smashed under filial respect in accordance with Korean etiquette. If it weren't for this calculating feminine conniving, the thought of a normal life with her would have seemed at certain moments as pleasurable as having one's tongue slicing through ice cream. The sensation of eating the vanilla of a woman's cold skin might have obfuscated the knowledge of the forthcoming tonsillectomy. Her eyes were drawing him in. They were like the placid Great Lakes at night and they sparkled like the surface of the waters at the occasional passing of boats. The light from the traffic was her scheming thoughts. "I'm going to have your baby," she averred as if this solidified the relationship. "Abort it," he demanded. He hadn't been effete on that real occasion but the dream that awakened him had a more masculine firmness of will that was not his own; and hers was a mellifluous, inveigling sound surreal and harmonious as waves brushing against the beach. "Abort it!" he reiterated, "or I'll -
- "

Not able to shake off the dream for a few minutes it was as if he were a very old and one night the sleep that was supposed to sort his thoughts, feelings, and sensory details into files of meaning and dates of occurrence had been ransacked and here he was on his hands and knees groping about the room trying to pick up scattered paper that had once been the files of himself. It was as if he were crawling around scavenging for bits of himself, not heeding the horrified calls of his old wife who nervously maundered her concerns to him from the bed.

People had come and gone incessantly from his life (the most important being his sister--taken from him by American violence not the least of which was his own). Recently Sang Ki and Yang Kwam vanished from his life; but in all, these phantoms appeared and disappeared without rhyme or reason like the changeable fish in the small aquarium belonging to Seong Seob's cousin--there at a given time and then gone. He sat up in his bed only to become instantaneously albeit vaguely

cognizant that he was at home in Seoul even if he was not really sure what home was. He stared at that body next to him. It was the same body that was always there. In ways this gentle and cautious being of a few mundane habits was so known and yet it was alien in most respects. Sometimes he thought that Saeng Seob elected to be part of this relationship and sometimes it seemed as if this friend thought of himself as a victimized participant. The latter could be sensed there amidst tacit clues: a despondent sigh, a pleasant tone of voice belied by pressed angry lips, indifference to sexual pursuits, or rehashing his wish to study English literature in America if only he had the money to do it. The tacit, when discerned, was Saeng Seob's coming to terms with antithetical summations of the relationship. The compromise was a suggestion that when choosing between two disagreeable choices he preferred an unconventional relationship with Sang Huin to the weathering of belittling comments from the cousin. It wasn't much of a compliment for in all it was a complement that this relationship existed for whatever time it might last and nothing more than this. Also Saeng Seob's tepidity did not exactly engender within Sang Huin the wish to possess another: this "virtue" that was monogamy.

The water of his saliva -- warm, wet, and active -- barely squeezed down the empty hollows of a constricted area of his parched throat. He put on his bathrobe and went to the bathroom sink. He sipped some bottled water that was on the counter and splashed cold water across his face. He looked at his handsome face in the mirror. It was so fervid in its seriousness and intensity. Anything that bright had to go out fast. The idea of getting to be an old gay man like a crumbled old leaf scooting around aimlessly in the breezes was a thought hideous enough to trigger off random suicidal aspirations. He doubted that any man's life near completion constituted much but to be an old faggot without family and rootedness seemed to him a horror that he did not want to imagine. He was young now but he knew that the jesters of the years stuck their tongues out at mortality and ran off quickly to hide someplace. His childhood had absconded this way.

He remembered wishing to cut his wrist during the trial of his sister's murderer. The unwitting accomplice that he was, his body (even more than now) had ached in burdensome guilt. Now, with hindsight, he firmly believed that she would have run back to the power and virility of this successful, married man no matter what he would have done. Back then she plead for a sanctuary from the one who owned her in the pleasure of love; but even if he had locked her in her room, instead of dragging her back to him, on her own she would have gone to the greed, lust, and ambition that were her interpretation of the American dream. He knew this at the trial but it did not mitigate his guilt. Back then the horror, the senselessness, the rape and the slaughtering that were alleged but unproven with the rotting and effacing of time, the acquittal, and the general emptiness carried him off to a horror and disconcerted void worse than death. It was a disconcerted space of months as a walking mannequin with that one keen perception of seeing how the darkness of selfishness and destruction were there in all human pursuits. He walked around the living room. He looked at the clock. It was now 5:30. He stared out of the window onto the traffic of Seoul. He hoped that Seong Seob did not hate his life with him. He prayed that he didn't. There was no indication that he did although he was not blind to Sang Huin's promiscuity. Maybe, he thought, he should release Seong Seob: first experiences did not make any man entrapped in an embedded pattern. What they had was innocuous to him but to pursue it any further might distort the man that Seong Seob might become. Sang Huin

sighed and went back to their bedroom. His fingers slid through a lock of hair on his friend's head. After much effort he went to sleep.

There in his dreams was this Yang Lin/Shang Ah/"Lucky" character (He never knew what his name really was) whom he had met that time in Seoul. In ways it was him, that one who wanted to become a woman and had been envious of a bride posing for pictures at Toksugum Palace in the Chongno Sam-ga area of Seoul, but his features were more spread out, his nose more like a pig, and he had a dark brown Southeast Asian pigment. He was an emaciated "money boy" with a book bag swung onto a bony shoulder; and he was wearing torn jeans, a grey t-shirt and the rife stink of his rotting skin. He saw him but in Gabriele's eyes. He accosted her timidly as she was drawing the reflection of Wat Phra Kaeo (the Grand Palace): its golden cupolas, stupas, and high triangular roofs shimmering silver in a fountain that pigeons were using as a bath. She knew his and her plight instantly: suffering was there, pulling decades from his skin and misery was intruding on her contemplation of beauty. It was often that way for artists, for the jungle, beautiful as it might seem from the external view of its thickets, was a truculent horror for those with no special skills or who possessed unappreciated uniqueness; and she smiled painfully at ineluctable fate with its ensuing moral obligations. She asked if he would allow her to sketch him and he agreed. He said that he had been living on the streets for one year; that his mother and brother were living in Rattchaburi; that his father died when he was nine years old; that sleeping on the streets was "danger"; and that sometimes "nice" people would talk with him when he walked around the park, but not often.

This was all she knew of him from dearth, shaky, timid words of clogged superfluous emotion and the deep swallows of his saliva. She fed him and this ductile creature began to follow her from a distance after they said their goodbyes as if repudiating the meaning of the word lest it be too disconcerting. She had guessed that it would probably be as this. Repressing her contempt for Catholicism, she took him to St. Joseph's High School on Convent Road and the scrutinizing hope-builder of a nun there referred her to the Holy Redeemers and the hope-builder of a priest there re-inquisitioned him and told her to come the following day at 2:00 when the St. Vincent volunteers would arrive. The priest was unwilling to even give him a corner of a room for some hours leading to the interview so after taking him to Big C to buy him some clothes she then took him to her hotel room for she did not want to lose him to the streets. She mothered him to compensate for the lack of mothering she had done with her own son. He gave her the gesture of the "wai" [wh-l] and stammered his gentle "thank you very much" with every glass of water that she poured for him, the soap and towel which she handed to him, and the cushions and blankets that she laid out for him. The St. Vincent De Paul volunteers re-requisitioned him at the church but through polite reticence, a taciturn distrust of social services, or saturnine despondency from so much time alone on the streets he continued his polite statements that he didn't want any help. But she insisted that he did and went with him two hours through congested traffic, the bane of Bangkok, to this referral. When the Maryknoll brothers in the migrant workers' office reneged on their promise, they went the two hour ride back from whence they came even though she just wanted to reject the fragile creature into the thickets of buses, cars, motorcycles, tuc tucs, buses, and the heavy black trails of carbon monoxide. Tired and sick from a migraine, she returned to the priest at Holy Redeemer who had indifferently volleyed her to the St. Vincent charities. In the priest's office at the rectory she was supercilious

and fulminated her derision of those whose organizational name was a misnomer, they whose congregations were foreign capitalists whom the church establishment would never alienate, and they, these emissaries of the Pope, whose ideas of human worth was just the mimicking of their donors. She felt anguish for this Thai boy and all of the myriad throwaways of the planet who were volleyed here and there indiscriminately and if she had been more like a woman she would have cried even if the anguish was beyond tears. She decided to redeem him herself with her consistent presence even if he was AIDS ridden (a distinct possibility), their conversation was palaver (a certainty), and even if she had to stay in Bangkok another month or two for his sake (an inevitability). But one day at the swimming pool he stood there looking wistfully at those his age without stepping into the water. She saw what she had seen when she sketched him that day at the Grand Palace. Then, his wistful stare was directed toward untainted soccer players engaged, as boys, in simple pleasures which he would never be able to partake in. He twitched and stammered out to her that he needed drugs, men, and money, that the bruise on his arm wasn't really from a dog as if she had believed that it was, and that she should let him go. Fervent vacuums of passion were sucking him into the black hole within but when he packed his things he wouldn't leave. He just sat there on the floor near some rolled-up blankets in incessant dazed ambivalence until she at last told him to unpack. The next morning, from being weakened by the evening's migraine or from the restoration of common sense, she was insistent that he go begging like a monk and leave her alone. He kow-towed to her myriad times, began to cry, and said that she was too good for him. He averred that he would not return. She told him that was fine and that she wished him good luck but when he was gone she blamed herself for not giving him a few days of complete sanctuary from the streets. That evening, after a passing thunderstorm, he knocked and anxiously slid a card under the door. When she opened the door the elevator door had closed.

When he woke up again he could hear the gusts of wind and the movement of traffic through the open window. There were the smells of dogs beneath the tattered screen--the living as opposed to the cooked version thought by Koreans to rejuvenate the body as much as ginseng. There was also that peculiar amalgamation of odors which was of evaporating urine-on-sidewalk particles, and the faint exhaust of cars. There was the light of early morning and it all excited him. He became conscious of the slight snoring of his special friend and he knew that this sound was beautiful because he cared about him for otherwise it would have been an unbearable annoyance.

In mid-afternoon they went swimming. He watched Saeng Seob's dives which were more complex and aesthetic than any he would have been able to do. They were Saeng Seob's one action of bold maneuvers that always renewed Sang Huin's interest in him for creatures of motion like himself, he knew, could only admire base kinetic movements of the outside world. Movement outside moved the being within: fervid movement that flourished pleasurably in one's loins, harmonized with hormones amuck in the bloodstream, and revived dopamine that was to be as lightning through neurons and pleasure receptors of the brain.

When they returned the mail had come. The envelope of one letter had been forwarded from Chongju to Umsong and then Umsong to Seoul. It was from his mother who kept forgetting his address just as she forgot that he was living with a man to have a semblance of family the best that he was able to do. She wrote that she called the office of Shin Se

Gue in Chongju but the telephone line was disconnected. He knew that she was not thinking either that it had moved to Umsong or that he was now in Seoul. Small ideas seemed to easily blow from the posting on the surface of her memory. She was suppressed in busy habitual action in which thoughts would have trouble permeating through her hardened, desiccated surface. Her daughter and concept of the world at large had been mauled by the hungers of the night so of course she was not alive - -just a hollow ambulatory thing like the swift moving cockroach. There was no real content in the letter apart from the lack of content itself: a patio table and a hummingbird feeder that she had bought, the wallpapering of another room for the umpteenth time, trees, roses, and tree roses which she had planted. He kept folding, unfolding, and refolding the empty envelope into and from smaller rectangles, felt warm and flushed, and could only think how there were not any relatives for the two of them apart from each other. There never would be more than this; and there would be nothing at all of family with her passing. In a flare of emotions that were sensitive but callow he wanted to "go home"- -to abandon every reality that he knew here by jumping through a child's portal.

He couldn't think what to say when he tried to write back to her so he went with Saeng Seob and his dog for a walk. In a park at dusk they heard the sounds of birds and crickets and they felt the majestically warm day trail and descend into a gentle cloak of coolness.

"Did you write your mother?" asked Saeng Seob.

"Didn't know what to say. I'll mail a traditional Korean doll to her or something. Where would I find something like that?"

"Wouldn't know," said Saeng Seob. The world was America now so why would he.

"Something. It doesn't matter what it is. Some type of clutter-- things: she likes that sort of thing."

Chapter Thirty-Six

In one perspective she believed that these circumstances not so much governed by choice turned out to be quite liberating: the lackadaisical dereliction of motherhood which came about from that love of a man, and the divestiture of her life in Sapporo the result of a divorce from him. Within that perspective she was a child humbling herself to circumstance as if it were the mandate of a parent or god who would supply routine to process her directionless whims. In such a frame of mind she would think thoughts similar to this: "It doesn't have to be seen that way -- as child abandonment--that sort of thing. Only simpletons would judge me or any other thoughtful woman considering and doing the same. This taking off of a role that does not fit me is just a disrobing in dawn to take a shower -- and who is to say that my departure is not a predestined conclusion? I really didn't take off anything. Adagio is the one who took me off and took off to Kansas. Then I took the flight to Tokyo and then -- What does any of it matter anyway? I haven't bothered to put on the mother garb equating it as garbled garbage but who is to say that it is not better for the boy in the long term? I would need a lower IQ to

constrict myself in instinctual roles like a content biological robot. It is no more preposterous to believe in fate allowing me this contemplative time than it is to think that slipping \$50.00 in a homeless person's cup would release him from pain and vice, that altruism perpetuates good, or that a loving god allows planes to slam into the World Trade Center Towers. If I am bad the creator of time and the universe is worse. Maybe any being that thinks outside the box would be perceived as bad by these simpletons -- even God were these simpletons not so simple as to fear thinking Him evil." The failure of Her Vastness, Ms. Sangfroid, in motherhood and marriage the result of an adulteration in mixing, had been more than a bit discombobulating at the times when they occurred and they were even discombobulating now; but then and now she tried to address them as external details like an uncomfortable raincoat that she would wear for a time during a storm which she wouldn't be able to wait out. Since that time when she was a girl watching her reticent father's rejuvenation from a commune with himself in his solitary walks on the beach she had sought this acme of aloneness. Here it was, albeit in a warmer environment than the Antarctic camp she envisaged for herself, and she shouldn't have been happier.

In a sense this disconnection that had her abscond across the border like a fugitive at large was as harmonious as the breakers which she would watch for an hour each late afternoon on the Tijuana beach: harmonic and not missing a beat; the mesmerizing splashes cleansing the conscience; the optimistic fizz; and the inconsequence of her seemingly insouciant or reckless actions when measured against this seemingly infinite and permanent body of water. The solitary disconnection of the lonely sea was the reflection of her self and together they whispered inscrutable truths to her consciousness; and surely if she needed anything to comfort her, she needed the Pacific Ocean. But storm clouds often coalesced around her diurnal sunsets on the beach before dissipating into the desert city's heat, seagulls seemed to have a wailingly ominous sotto voce as they spiraled about in the winds, and her thoughts dwelled on this Berlin wall which sliced through the Mexican-American shore. The drab wall with its painted words of "El Mundo partido" reinforced by a picture of the broken egg shell of a world became uglier and more piercing as gigantic stakes or prison bars standing out of the water. Each time that she saw these divided territorial waters they constantly reminded her that the city and her departure -- really her quasi-belief that circumstances dictated her withdrawal -- were far from an oasis. She would recall the words of Herodotus that "No man steps into the same water twice" and this would aggravate a restlessness in her restfulness prompting her to arrange more frequent meetings with Hilda than she would have done otherwise. Through socializing, she hoped to get a reprieve from the bites of conscience that came upon her as stealth as a vampire.

Certainly Tokyo to Tijuana hadn't been a gentle transition with serendipitous fate disgorging onto a life the way that it did. The molten heat had changed the landscape of the self and as its only cartographer she, a divorcee who regretted having ever mixed with a man, was now beginning to map out who she was and it wasn't easy.

Now with Hilda at an outdoor table of a lesbian pub, both eating their nachos and cheese and drinking their tequila diluted in Sprite, her happy demeanor was a little bit affected. As Hilda renamed the food ("tomales" henceforth to be called "tofemales") it bordered on giddiness. Happy as she was or was not on this day of her birth, she

could not deny the fact that the ineluctable stirring of memory was scathing her. Some late nights in her solitary bed it was more of a lacerating pierce of claws. Before the divorce she would at times wake up from a dream of a tank running down her son and pulverizing him into layers of permafrost. After the divorce there were these same dreams but with him pulverized into dust; and they were mixed with those of finding herself naked in Isetan Department Store -- Japanese clerks, doormen, and beautiful bowing welcome-ladies all staring at her in consternation until an Ikebana instructor in the flower shop threw a blanket over her that was woven in American dandelions.

The dreams were not from guilt -- or at any rate not much conscious guilt. She told herself that a little responsible compunction was fine for it reminded her of others' unfulfilled wishes that in an ideal world she would have liked to see herself obtain for them but further guilt was unwarranted. She didn't even believe in guilt -- a goddess balancing so many perspectives and antithesis perspectives as she was. Sure, the ideal for her son would have been for her to be a Betty Crocker/Dr. Spock hybrid and to give herself exclusively to motherhood and child development. However, responsible as one should be to others how could she have disregarded the strange novel sounds that splashed in her imagination? If happiness was not in devouring sensual experiences that brought about pleasure but being a kind, contemplative juggler of human perspectives (watching, meditating, and loving all passerby) surely this realm of the divine that separated gods from self-centered beasts could not be willfully disregarded. Still, even she was a social creature. Despite her cold independent aloofness she could have had a self easily demarcated by others -- a self that to ever be real at all needed to see itself beyond others' use of it. For someone like her who was infinite and without parameters, pinning oneself onto a man's last name was the action of being Mrs. Nobody and so this Kato and Michael relationship had been the magic pill restoring her to herself after a bout of a needy illness called love.

That being the case she shouldn't have been happier. So the envisaged Antarctic seals and walruses were really myriad Mexicans wallowing languishingly in another overpopulated city. So, the only penguin she saw from the outdoor table of the lesbian pub was a green uniformed motorcycle cop trudging as quickly as he could in his boots toward a public restroom where he might lawfully urinate. So the unadulterated snowy landscape, untouched and untainted by human hands, was lucky to have very few palm trees as deeply rooted in hard clay soil as it was -- soil arid as desert sand. And peaceful Camp Gabriele in Antarctica turned out to be T.J., a city filled with drug addicts, drug lords and perhaps one or two intoxicated goddesses like herself.

Tonight with Hilda, shaking her booty in the pub's adjacent lesbo-disco hall as if both had anything outside of contempt for men in their minds, She drank more booze like all goddess predecessors from Hera and Aphrodite to Shirley McClain.

Her afternoon had been spent depicting miscellaneous individuals waiting in a queue in front of the immigration building which was the portal to their jobs in San Ysidro or San Diego; and from there, like a beggarly Indonesian caricature artist instead of the successful artist that she was, she would sell her paintings on the street "for nickels and dimes," (each a hundred pesos or some such sum if subtraction for policemen extorting money were figured into the calculation). She addressed such policemen in a taciturn manner with hard stony

supercilious eyes made all the harder by that male look of wanting to fuck the Gringa with the attitude.

Head and body spinning separately on the dance floor with a shot of pure tequila in her hands ready to be devoured so she could be devoured in its fire (the base instincts of mankind wanting to mutate an individual into flames), in one moment she was telling herself how relieved she was to no longer be the inane thing in this little box of the personal life and the next moment she was reminiscing about the past foolishly. She thought of romantic walks with Michael through cherry orchards; their long hours in partnership at the store; she, her husband, and Atsushi Kato eating sushi, soba, mizu soup, and okanimiyaki in museum restaurants; she and Kato making deformed sumo wrestlers out of ice; she and Kato's sister scrubbing each other's backs in a sento; and of course Kato leading them to sites and to her newly founded interest in the native people of Japan, the Ainu.

But her best memories of then, as with all sundry memories in general, were of being alone for she was always trying to squeeze her head and neck through a small portal to the entity. She was always trying to glimpse ideas and still depth beyond this world and deep within the self. Back then there were solitary ponderings in summer walks along the coast of the Sea of Japan. There, walking on prodigious cement slabs shaped like tacks, which stopped the erosion of the beach by high tide, she turned toward ocean pointing to America and contemplated all. She took long walks in street markets and along shipyards, each street of the metropolis smelling like fish. She was alone then and it had been good. Now it was dirt and pinatas; colina deserts and an eternal sun; and Mexican drunks, beggars, and vendors along the bridge that went over the contaminated river. As the cool air seductively concealed the breadth of its heat in the dirty desert called Tijuana, so she shrouded herself in a sense that she was free from the powers of men, sexuality, mythology, motherhood, and all human concern that gnawed into one's entrails.

They were returning to their apartments with the expectation that Hilda would, by tradition, dunk Gabriele's face in a birthday cake. In the car she thought of Nathaniel and her property with deep homesickness. She thought of her liquid assets that were mostly embezzled by her ex-husband but were in part tied up in stocks and bonds. Something was amiss.

Chapter 37

Her ongoing separation from her house, land, and financial resources could have made her succumb to an emotionally mutable perspective of feeling, for a time, as if she had lost everything and then to a feeling that she needed to hurry back to New York State before what little she had was all lost to her. She didn't even know for sure the name of this lawyer of the ex-in-laws--in-laws who in their own elusive way were also nebulous figures. This lawyer of these Bassetes (ex-husband going under the name of Quest) supposedly diverted some of the interest of her savings to property tax, the maintenance of the house, and no doubt whatever the legal expenses were. It was property that, by now, could be razed to the ground and paved with a highway for what she knew of it; and such neglect at being responsible for herself, an aberration from who she was, kept disturbing her equanimity.

Her placid state of mind could have easily been ravaged by maudlin brooding, homesickness, maternal stirrings of instinct, and multifarious emotionally fueled reasons to return to Albany. And it would have been so without determined supercilious will that rebounded her back to her stoic, rational, and insular existence. There in her supercilious brain, amidst the endless walls of tidy, barren, and ostensibly eternal gray matter, she would soar within curtailed bounty and the journey within would seem as an ongoing discovery on the edge of a non-spherical universe. But sometimes without warning the eternity would become a constricted little room and then she would be nothing but a claustrophobic black bird that one day years ago got trapped in the living room of her trailer in Ithaca when she was cleaning a window. Like that sight-trusting bird ready to window-bang itself into oblivion rather than accept the conclusion of pain, obsessed with thought she would crash repeatedly against the walls of her brain. In such migraines she almost felt locked away in her cold, impersonal thoughts-- locked away behind walls bigger than any the American government could envisage against Mexico. She would seem locked away in thoughts and only this, unable to conceptualize a higher and more unfathomable wall than this. Would not Parmenides have been abhorred to hear the "nous" so defiled. She didn't care. Heraclitus was now her unsung hero; and not even Plato or God himself, if there were one (which there wasn't), understood migraines except those who experienced them. And sicknesses of all types were exacerbated all the more in foreign countries even if one were lucky enough to have a native friend like Ms. Quest's Hilda who had held her head steady and tilted to the toilet on a couple occasions.

Property: she would define it as that claim on a person or thing to seem to oneself to be. It was like that idiot, Alan Shepard, putting an American flag on the moon; but it was from that idiot, Shepard, that, in girlhood one of her more original ideas was reinforced enough to become a calcified decision or at least a determined perpetual caprice. At the age of eight, seeing those rerun black and white images of this so-called "groovy" astronaut as he bounced around the moon with the stars and stripes (these declarative bounces of ownership and half expectations to encounter a whole host of mooners to pose his symbol to), and recently having learnt of a place on Earth not rife in human herds, she decided to stake her flag on Camp Gabriele, Antarctica in that self-declared city of one. Now, as then, she knew that she had never had anything but herself to begin with and that this was as she liked it.

Being divorced, she could have clung to these things that were hers, declaring them as such in her own mind to reiterate that she was a separate being from what was once her husband or was once believed to be her husband. She could have felt victimized and vulnerable from this chemical volatility of mixing with people and men, these two species that she might have enjoyed had she thought of them as pets. An emotional neediness could have rushed her back to motherhood and attempts at freshly burnt chocolate chip cookies. With less intelligence she might have even thought of it as her maternal calling to nurture him, her ungrateful son, and cater to his selfish whims under the guise of love and doing good. She could have feigned a contentment within the narrow parameters of this easily made/easily fumbled role without noting the hypocritical and selfish neediness that would have been therein especially for a woman like her, a returning child deserter. It would have been so had she believed in feeling something about anything and to allow feelings to drag her around; but for her even succumbing to numbness was a very peculiar state to be shaken off like a lint-ridden

blouse.

She was the one who had been barely able to embrace the favored one, Rick, on that first severing of Michael and herself. On that day of the first, less consummated, closure to specious romance she had, in a sense, embraced him albeit no differently than the fall of a metal bar at a toll road. Parting from Rick on that day, internally she had been more like the lachrymose stirring of a statue of Mary, Mother of God, but the boy would not have known that. For him, who had lost his first mother to breast cancer, he would only have that memory that her arms came down on him and then raised up like that bar at a tollbooth.

And if she were to continue in this quest to remove herself from this ownership mania of this self-proclaimed American brand of the common herd, she would continue to do so with the same dry, permanent logic. If the means of defining ownership of property were a mutual claim of ownership by the person to the land and the land to the person the most recent contracts would have taken place in the 19th century when the deceased was united in the ultimate act of consummation: the decay into that plot of land which had sustained him or her. That being true, she reasoned, she owned nothing. It seemed to her that if it were true of the land the mutuality of the contract would be even more of an imperative condition in human relations.

On weekends in Japan such an enormous exodus of people would come out to do their shopping; whereas for her, having had no firmly set schedule that enslaved her and not needing to release an enslaved being in the unbound weekend freedoms of malls, she had found a more internal brooding in the Hokkaido cold. She had feasted on poets and philosophers. She had learnt of Japanese history, art, and traditional mask carvings.

Here in TJ, impecunious as she was, she couldn't have bought anything major had she wanted to. A portable black and white television, which she aptly called the "noise box" or "noise companion," had been her most expensive purchase. But this matching of circumstances to a repudiation of ownership, far from being a grievance against fate, was liberation like that felt at being naked and under a hot shower. It was an ablution from soiled things sticking onto her and she was glad it was that way.

She found great creative energy from being here transposing the new environment to the permanency of color and theme that man's impermanent and mundane movements seemed to lack; and she almost believed that creativity lay within this country and culture instead of the omnipotent Self. It seemed to be there in this defiant city that despite being conjoined to San Ysidro, California, nonetheless maintained its distinct character: brains as blank slates to English, pinatas dangling from store awnings, and children wearing Indian feathers in celebrations of Juarez Day or running around in scanty rags in celebration of the day itself. But really TJ was not the cause of her creativity. It was just a reminder of her own defiance of stale, patterned existence--a defiance that expected and demanded novelty in Tijuana's warm sun and cool, piercing shadows. But it was more than the connection of land, artist, and paint. Here, within, was a tame volcanic oozing, frothy as waves, reshaping her clay landscape apposite to her liking. To wake up each morning anew in being exhilarated her: now an artist of a new land; recently a Spanish-babbling pseudo-lesbian consummated once via Hilda if sex were a consummation of anything; immediately upon arriving in TJ she

had been a remover of old bourgeois skin and a student of Spanish; and before that, she had been a ripped rag doll in such consternation about the "Kato thing"--that "kato thing" tearing out the seams of the fabric enclosing her stuffing in such apposite serendipity.

There on the city bus, her seated stiffness jiggling like jello no differently than the tacky homemade sign of " La Playa/Calle Linda Vista" dangling from its windshield, Gabriele again recalled the delusionary socialized will that had possessed her. She reassessed her time in Japan with the same results. She surmised once more that the doll that she had been or had pretended to be deserved to be unthreaded, destuffed, and remade. With her detached eyes ensconced in sunglasses, she glanced at the rear of the bus where Hilda sat. They had been separated at the time of stepping into it by a sparse availability of seats so now she could not see her very well in the throngs of those who were standing. Still there a corner of her was, a conspicuous being with quasi-blonde hair and an aloofness no less "unfriendly," as Michael spoke of her own "bitchiness," than herself.

Seated alone, she discerned that the separation at present was good for both of them. Earlier, when on the beach that they were now returning from, Gabriele had smote her friend with a cold stare. Considering that Hilda had repeatedly served the volleyball on the beach as if she were trying to make a slam dunk with it, of course this desperate attempt to win the game had annoyed and amused Gabriele. She would have laughed at the quasi-volley morality that defied the spirit of the game and she would have congratulated her, more or less, had a larger issue not preceded it.

"Fuck, don't tell me that little swim has pooped you out already, Hilda."

"No," said Hilda as if she were not sure whether to make her monosyllable into a statement or a question; nor if it should be positive or negative.

"We've just put up the net. Serve the fucking ball! "

"Gabriela, I was just thinking that -- "

" A positive thought or something quite negative?"

"My own brilliance. I can't see that it is either one."

"But, unlike you I foresee storm clouds ahead -- clouds of my friend's own making." Gabriele chortled but Hilda smiled malevolently, moved a few feet back, and sat on the sand to tie her loose shoelaces.

Hilda was feeling too loose (either too dissolute or too unwed and so not dissolute enough in the apparent absence of romance and absence of belonging that was part of a couple's merry-making), and this manifested itself to Gabriele's sagacious discernment. "You know, you should not laugh at your own jokes," Hilda criticized her. "You can be amused by yourself -- God knows you are so good at that anyhow, playing alone in your sterile ideas -- but that is as far as it should go."

"What is your problem?"

"I don't have any--just yours--what you don't concern yourself

with."

"Oh? Sorry. Like what? What don't I concern myself with? You?"

"No, not me. I don't need anyone. Forget it. None of it is my business."

Gabriele stuffed some snuff into her pallet and then scratched her head for a few seconds. "It's a beautiful late Monday morn, Hilda," she said in the hope that from placating words and prevarications the noxious mood would disperse and vanish into air like smoke. "I for one want to seize the day. All the mental prostitutes are being exploited, except for you and I who have some sense about such things and will probably live to be 120 years old as a consequence, God forbid!" She pulled out two cans of beer from a cooler and spit out the dark tactile saliva that had been littering her mouth in senseless mass and clutter no differently than planets in the void of space. As perspectives were always dictated by the demands of the body in those who were not in full control of their minds, Gabriele had a hunch that Hilda was experiencing menstruation and feeling resentful that their physical encounter was not followed by redundant ones. If so, she surmised, Hilda's mood was a combination of hormonal imbalances and withdrawal symptoms from dopamine not arriving in the pleasure receptors of her brain in quantities commensurate with that earlier experience.

Hilda feigned a more pleasant smile despite herself. "Engaged as we are in contemplative leisure." These were words she often heard from Gabriele and her bantering mocked them good-naturedly.

"Well said, and in English to boot." They had departed from the world of stress-ridden fools shifting their needs for pretty escape art and aerobic therapy onto them. They had departed from the imaginary world of believing oneself to have importance catering to others' wishes and had submitted themselves over to the salt inundations of the Pacific Ocean. They had submitted themselves over to the entity as much as tepid will allowed. For at present neither of them would drown themselves to be fully and foolishly part of the entity.

Seated beside her friend, Gabriele incrementally shaped a harder replica of her from the mold of the subject and the plaster of the dampened sand. In part it no longer looked like Hilda but an effigy of Akhenaten.

"So, what about me don't I take responsibility for? What is the source of this anxiety for my sake?"

"How am I to tell if you suffocate me?"

"I'll be extraordinarily careful when I get up to the face. Don't worry."

"I've rested enough. Let the games begin," Hilda giggled.

"Not right yet. Give me the answer to my query and this stiff mummy will rise again."

"I was thinking at the time that you shouldn't be with me. It isn't like we are a couple. I was thinking to myself that you should be playing volleyball with your son. I worry about him not having a

mother."

"Do you want me to leave you, Hilda?" Despite the withdrawn and impassive eyes her lips were compressed into a smile and she was ready for any answer. Any answer would have amused her, but she was betting on a particular muddled response. Having a keen enough discernment of human behavior that she could be flawlessly "scientific" in predictions remained Gabriele's goal, and she wanted it to be ongoing unlike all other forms of epiphany.

"I don't own you. Come, go, or stay for life. It's all the same to me. Well, all right not fully. Maybe I care some but to tell you the truth, I don't know what you think of me or what you want; and the reality is that you are a mother -- I'm not -- so do what you have to do."

Gabriele had predicted each meandering and sinuous thought with accuracy. Still she said, "No prevarications. Frankness, feeling comfortable to be such, doing it in respect, and measuring in other realities in as objective manner as possible -- a relationship is relating and we do it with the perfection that only goddesses can do in such matters." She knew that her positive summary was from the overall relationship rather than this moment in time. A more myopic perspective would not have produced a full rendering of truth. Reality in any sense was more than any conscious registering of it. It was more convoluted. Although perhaps no different than the jealous remarks of Hera to Zeus, Hilda's acrimonious tone seemed boringly uncelestial. She was to some degree saying that if it were the ending of their intimacy then she, Gabriele, might as well head across the border back to the wealthy of San Diego. One aspect of their relationship had been an appreciation of self-containment, but here Hilda was jealous of it. "About my son, I don't know where he is."

"That's never made any sense to me."

"Either he's still with my aunt and she doesn't want to admit this fact or he's with my untraceable sister-in-law in the domain of her maternal possessiveness; but he is okay wherever he is at, and by now not so keen to play games with me."

Gabriele had not been able to concentrate on the volleyball game with Hilda from thinking of her son; and exploiting this weakness through unscrupulous serves, Hilda had won the game. Now, riding on the bus, she was no less irritated than before. It was an irritation at being reminded of her own negligence. By bringing a being into the world one was contractually obligated to nature to care for him and to see that his life came to good. Such a woman was obligated to forfeit her own growth to grow offspring. This was her own moral code gained from contemplative reason and she had violated it.

Gabriele stared at a couple of college students dressed in their uniforms. The male was comparing his large dark hand to the female's smaller and lighter one. This hand-play caused Gabriele's face to cringe in repulsion. This rapacious need to extend beyond oneself in mergers with other persons violated human decency. To want to know more, be more, in all life's activities was the precept of Aristotle; and certainly this girl wanted to know what it would be like to wear the man, to share his thoughts, and to merge with him. And her body was

telling her there was intimacy in this most intense lowly pleasure and pain of him riding within her. Still, the lesser knowledge that it was, it was repugnant by being so void of anything wise. These human beings linked their cars so as to be declared a train as if a car alone really were so small. The linking of a series of defective cars running along on a defective track surely was not a successful attempt at extension; and from now on, she vowed, her caboose would not be banged into such links.

A woman who was standing with her child moved up to the front of the bus and sat the child on a padded hump of the transmission near the bus driver's gear shift. It was obviously difficult for her to keep the girl seated and the mother applied reasoning with admirable patience and self-restraint. Although Gabriele could not hear what the mother was whispering to the fidgeting child, she heard the child's responses of "Si" and this appeal to reason seemed lovely. It was the length of the talk and the delicacy by which the woman addressed the child's sensitivities that saturated Gabriele in beauty. She was beginning to see motherhood in a new light. She was beginning to think that these preconceived notions that housed her were houses of straw and could easily be blown away.

Perhaps, she thought, beyond conveniences, vaccines, and modern gadgets that often reduced "mental prostitution" to a 5 day affair, on rare occasions one stumbled across enlightenment in modern society that heretofore rested in voluminous, rarely read publications of deceased sages. Perhaps "God," this unfathomable entity who reacted indifferently to human affairs including thousands perishing hideously in the World Trade Center, was now sticking his tongue out at her and calling her a "know-it-all" in such an invigorating event; but it defied logic that a deity who would smash entire civilizations in the palms of its hands as if humans were mosquitoes would think her, this lone individual, worthy of the contempt and enlightenment of the tongue gesture. Even more, why should she believe that God sat her on the bus to see this mother and child as if she were the honored guest in the audience of a great symposium. Not being satisfied with her atheistic conclusions in this strange world, she was again left with the conclusion that something did exist out there, that permanent substance that was the entity or the prime mover, and it existed outside human logic.

A couple hours later, still in shorts and sunglasses (bathing suits worn underneath), she and Hilda sat down at an outdoor table of the lesbian pub. They were in the middle of dinner and a fourth shot of undiluted tequila when a woman uneventfully passed by their table and went inside. "Nice ass!" said Hilda.

"Huh? For Heaven's sake it is a padded seat and tool for excrement. Really, Hilda, is there nice and mean, nice and ugly, nice and not useful to such things unless a fluke happens where one was born without an ass." It was then that she decided to return to America.

In her sleep on an American Airlines flight from San Diego to Albany Gabriele dreamed that she was with Hilda once again on the beach. They were in front of a volleyball net witnessing the descending sun when Hilda broke the ineffable silence.

"You say bullshit all the time. The things you say are so true and so false. You are so profound about temporary families, selfish

children, marriage as weak people running away from the solitude that is part of inhabiting one's head, that work is prostitution, things as ball and chains to carry around, claiming one's essence, blah blah, but life isn't objective. It is subjective -- so you miss your husband, son, and things because being without them would make you naked."

Gabriele then took off her shirt in protest. With icy eyes, and bouncing boobs, she attempted successful counter maneuvers against Hilda's slam dunk serves. Her hardness crackled through the air beyond an impassively proud countenance; but she justified it in her own mind, the only mind that mattered in such petty but necessary judgment calls. She told herself that even if this wariness of social situations were an imperfect instinct of primitive man to quickly assess the danger of a given social situation its having persisted to present to free one of her social instinct was to its merit.

She woke up from a tray of food being passed unto her. She felt a peculiar sense of being unsettled and wanting to know what was real and what was unreal. She wanted to find out how to keep from being swept up into one illusion or another--she who in recreation flitted facts in her imagination from biographical profiles of the cabinet members of Germany and the names of successive presidents of Moldavia to the characteristics of albino frogs, myriad owls, and Henry and William James. Was the present moment best celebrated in thought and contemplation, in action, in study, a shot of tequila and glib, frivolous talk with Hilda at the lesbian pub, a swim, and a movement of limbs? Was it possible to live life without being in its illusions? Hilda began to fade away and Nathaniel ("Adagio") and the Man With the Unmemorable Name became stronger.

Chapter 38

When lacking that introspection which might conjure bits of a "real" destination and purpose little related to the external factors surrounding a life, a self can only seem to be such in its incessant spinning and preoccupation with movement. And so it is for him, glutton that he is for movement in his Fiat Coupe with its turbo engine, vibrating phallus of a gearshift, maximum legal carbon emissions spat into the chaotic world, the bruit of rap music (his reflection) blaring from the CD player, and the motor's cacophony flooding him with the sexual rhythms that cascade in his veins. Together the man and the machine are Descartes's concept of dualism. Together they are an expenditure of energy and only this.

That is not to say that Nathaniel has been without any contrived sense of destination and purpose in all these months of itinerant wandering. With the need to concoct reasons to justify one's movements as a condition of consciousness, he has feigned his share of plans, purposes, and agendas. The easiest contrived sense of destination compelled him to travel to San Antonio. There, for five months, he easily imposed himself into the bed in Hispanic Betty's one room efficiency since the need for enflaming pleasure and extension was so pivotal in both the callow man and the older woman. With Betty perfecting the role of sycophant, being there could have remained exciting to him for a few more months and tolerable for a great many more had she not absconded into the battered women's shelter leaving him to face the landlady and the unpaid rent on that emptied efficiency.

Now there is the long drive to Kansas, but it is only in having come so close to its borders that the idea of destination seems to be the spurious murmurings of a self-needing to aver its existence. It is in going so far, so close, that his mother's relative seems so unrelated to his life. He has no one. He feels that it has always been this way and that it has been good.

He turns off the engine and places the nozzle in the aperture of the gas tank triggering certain sexual associations that are part of his adolescent susceptibilities. Vague impressions of the violence he has imagined himself capable of perpetrating amalgamate loosely with others he has in fact perpetrated, making the distinctions less obvious than they should be. In his naps in the car earlier this day (naps on the side of the road the result of mesmerizing taps of rain on the car's face and chaise as well as the monotonous drag of the windshield wipers) both what happened and what could have happened connected together fully and strangely. Then what might have been was no different than what was. Each time waking up in his car he was startled by a fiendish nightmare of himself that was worse than he was; and he wondered if he could be a less deleterious force if he were to channel his misogyny in small actions against a woman, any marginally attractive woman, who would think of an occasional slap as a chastening tool and an aphrodisiac. To subtly ooze out caustic contempt on a tolerant loving woman instead of allowing it to be repressed and to foment underground like molten rock ready to disgorge seemed the kindest thing to do.

There in the rain he stares at a Laundromat, which is adjacent to the convenience store and the filling station. As he removes the nozzle the nerves in his neck begin to twitch like the bodies of crawdads when he used to snap off their heads. He remembers being in such a Laundromat as a young boy: there with his mother, both eating the French Cream sandwiches that she would order, and riding around in a cart. Having made the simile of his nerves being as decapitated crawdads, he remembers scoffing at Rick's horrified and demurred expressions to the point where the boy, who also had been cornered by circumstance into a cobbled family structured from two lone adults with their sexual urgencies and agendas, began to immolate Nathaniel's actions. He remembers his mother witnessing this snapping of the crawdad heads, and this, his corruptive influence on the favored one. He recalls how she attempted to embrace this lachrymose Rick in as much as she was capable of embracing anything in her hardened hubris walls, the merciless beatings of him alone with those bear paws of hers, and then taking that favored one shopping without him. He tries to stop himself from thinking of her, which is difficult for him since all his years are in some respect intertwined around her.

Gabriele sat at the computer in the bedroom of her house writing email. She had been in that house for nearly two months and had rarely communicated with anyone until the change that took place two weeks earlier. As laid back as she was in her lazy-boy recliner of solitude she was like any couch potato who had too much of a good thing and it had been like that for a score of days. She needed to stretch. She needed to extend outward.

Dear Hilda:

Hmm, blisters, cold sores and the like. Gee god. I'm no nurse so what would I know? Iodine for the former and staying off your feet

would be my only recommendation. Yes, I espouse the same anti-work themes intractably. Work less and contemplate more and then you can say that you actually lived some moments of each day instead of this unreal incessant moving, futuresque planning, and, akin to slavery, catering to the wishes of others to have a few pesos in one's pockets. All of it thwarts the present moment

Regarding this guy who asked you to the bullfight at the stadium a las playas you don't need my permission. You are my moon but I'm not Alan Shepherd staking my flag into your heart. I'm glad the pendulum swing to the same sex is now over and a more subtle and neutral momentum is beginning. Still if you are going to give up women why stop there? What's more revolting than a man? And not to deliberately make you happy, which it will, I am jealous albeit on a nominal scale as anchored as I am in reason. I must tell you that my happy month and a half of self-containment in my home, following my politely rude expulsion of the tenants, ended in a sojourn through hell as one might expect. This sister in law, Sharon is--well, I don't want to say anything negative. She has bona fide reasons to hate me so who am I to stop her? Needless to say I didn't score any points on the phone asking that she give me Rick too. She was justifiably irate and although the door did not slam in my face when I finally did go there (unlike the phone fiasco with the receiver slammed into my ear) being there was unpleasant. When I came there I didn't know whether I should play the disoriented ex-wife and the contrite transgressor as an expedient so I just stayed me throughout my time there opting for being true to myself and to let the dominoes fall all around me. It seems to me that all noble people project an image of a given thing to a listening recipient which shows it to be the way the thing really is regardless of the consequences. A cat can pretend to be stealth and invisible, but does that mean it is smart? How clever are disingenuous actions really? Aren't most problems on this planet due to this animalistic self-preserving cleverness? I think so.

The last thing I wanted to do was to score points with that snobbish hag ("My family often goes to art auctions to buy real modern European art") or to pull the kid into the car with sympathy. The idea of being contrite and ingratiating myself to a child for adult choices that are never ideal is not my way of spending a day.

Sharon was half way entertaining when it came to talking about Michael --parents pushing him into a marriage so he ran off to marry this old hag, yours truly. She thought it would disconcert me but I can't think of anything more intriguing--nay, not life on Mars or cosmology--nay, nay, nay, nay, but knowing an ex husband's petty psychological profile and dirty laundry. I asked her if Michael was always running around with his male friends a lot prior to my marriage. This shut her up.

She seems to take on and off men like her panties--now with a black candyman. They are the best sexually. I'd know. Seems to be searching for that man who will help her define herself and needing the consistency of 2 boys not her own in the meantime. Now as then I feel sorry for her. She was so lugubrious the whole time like taking Nathaniel would devastate her world. I told her that we would often arrange get-togethers with the two boys but this worsened things by making her despondent.

About Nathaniel, in this room of his with all its rebellious

musical noise and pop culture clutter in accordance with Maslow's hierarchy for adjusted and less well adjusted children alike, he just stared at me with dead eyes like a Jew about ready to be gassed. Then, he said, "One bitch is about the same as another." I had to laugh at first and then I grimaced. When I removed the arrow from my heart (pardon the cliché) I almost felt relieved to not be declared a "f--bitch" although he is quite young and surely with time this will no doubt be a forthcoming utterance of his lexicon. After all, boys are known for their ingenuity. I told him he could choose and once chosen he needed to own up to his choice like a man and make the best out of it. He said he hated Rick and for this reason he would go back with me. So this is my fate granted unto me for wanting a connection, my version of family, and yet not wanting its obligations to domineer over me.
--Always, your friend, Gabriele.

She deleted "always." It was a ludicrous word when probably the universe itself was temporary as all things within it that were unequivocally temporary. She changed it to "--your friend, Gabriele." But were they friends, more than friends, or less than friends? She couldn't decide so she made another deletion in favor of "--yours intractably, Gabriele."

P. S. Cold sores be damned should a person keep his/her own tongue in the happy domicile of his/her own mouth

P.S.S. (not piss even if it pisses you off, and I hope it doesn't) Do you remember me mentioning the man with an unmemorable name who wired me that money for my plane ticket? Well, of course I paid him back on the first day with interest (a 50 percent Gabriele gratuity), but a funny thing happened. I married him. Don't worry though. It means little beyond spilled ink. So, what then does it mean? It means what? It means that a child needs the specious illusion of permanency in family and an adult needs a friendship on paper that states a committed level of consistency beyond casual friendship. If women could sign an equivalent document I'd sign one with you, my beloved Hilda. Both of you are important to me in your own distinct ways.

She remembered an incident from a few days ago:

"Why should this be any different: this Unmemorable Russian guy, Michael, me, and even the favored one. You push us aside like crumbs on a table."

She laughed. "Crumbs you are not; and there has never been what you claim as the favored one unless it is you."

"That's a lie."

"No, it isn't. You've always said he is nicer than you so sometimes it is more pleasant to be with those who aren't so temperamental. But you are my son, and you are the favored one."

"O Have always. O You haven't seen me for two years so how would you know?"

"At least you used to admit that he was nicer than you are."

"You often took the favored one places."

"To the grocery store to pick out cereal and pop tarts. Unlike you he would never grab an item of canned food that was stacked like a pyramid. He would never cause an avalanche in a grocery store. I never had to worry about taking him anywhere."

"And Rita/Lily Lily/Rita?"

"Was that a question? What about her?"

"Yes, what about her?"

She could have said, "She was too crazy" or "She was too far way" but she opted for the largest acknowledgement of what seemed to her to be true. "I did care about her but I guess I did sweep her under her welcome mat."

Chapter 39

You are the favored one: this was what she had told her son. But the mendacity, now reverberating in memory, seemed more spurious than it had two weeks earlier when she had articulated it sotto voce within the wisps of her breath. Still it was true in the sense that most things were true in a sense, for in her malaise on that cold Christmas morning, shuddering before a vapid wall of canvas, she guessed that multifarious and antithetical points to propositions of truth were all there was.

A child, even this one, was a sensitive creature whom she, an adult, needed to emphasize certain points to while tiptoeing away from others. But, she argued in solitary inward dialogues within herself, which she found to be the most engaging form of companionship, that did not necessarily mean that her quiet tiptoeing prevarications were lies.

With words as the most viable means of projecting a given concept of one mind onto another and with them having to permeate the dense grey matter, unchanged, through the hard surface of experience and preference, it was a wonder that misunderstandings did not rule fully in all human concerns. A small lie here and there in place of misunderstood truth, she argued, was the expedient of presidents and kings. Even this Texan hick, George Jr., who seemed to her as abhorrent as a president was likely to become, was marginally justified in misleading the American populace the way she had been forced to deviate from truth for the sake of her son. The apocryphal president could not have averred his wish to contrive a war against any rogue state for any random reason even though that was his intention. He could not have declared that North Korea, the desired bombing target for setting this example of what hegemony could do, had been spared from war by Seoul's proximity to the DMZ and that Iraq had been chosen to be the favored ersatz. He needed an imminent threat to sell his war: these elusive weapons of mass destruction, which could always be argued as "out there," present but obscure.

Just as she could not have admitted to Nathaniel that Rick had been the favored one all along, now she was still reluctant to admit to herself that on that night when she brought him home she had fallen into such a deep depression. Only in her sleep were fictional distortions of this mortification sometimes coerced onto her memory. And every time that this happened she would wake up, get out of bed, and immediately engage herself in sundry activities which busy people devised to fortify

themselves from wild, disturbing thoughts that they were not able to successfully corral (of course always going to the bathroom first but you don't really need to know those specifics, do you?) Among them would be attempting to bake edible cookies and cakes which still had the hope of ingratiating herself to her son without making the obdurate Gabriele look repentant. Unorthodox she might be, the former whore, witch, and child deserter with her cookie stained hands, but she was not a propitiatory type. After considering the pros and cons of a given issue in its probable impact on others she executed her decisions as she should and never revisited them repentantly.

No one had witnessed her behavior at the blighted homecoming and yet she was mortified by her conduct all the same: the quick turning off of the engine; the turning of the house key to barricade herself from the lugubrious stillness of the car so that she might depart into the intimacy of ideas in a book read under the sheets; watching Nathaniel, an icy stranger to her, turn on lights in his descent into the pit of his bedroom; sensing an effete adumbration of herself, detached from her body, as it ascended the staircase to her bedroom pulling along a body that was as weak as an old woman; and then lifelessly collapsing onto her bed still in this out-of-body sensation.

Inanimate being that she was, for a minute she found peace. But then the next moment she was a petrous rural landscape shaking from a tremor and then there was this inexplicable tsunami of tears slapping against the rubble of her cheeks. She weltered her face in a pillow on her bed in the hope of suffocating her sobs and burying her tears that were shed for the loss of the favored son who had not come from her womb and from being hated by the other one who was supposed to be her and yet wasn't.

The melancholy that had overtaken her, replicated itself in the cracks of her rocks, and for a time fed off her tears, lived even when the water was exhausted. For a couple hours after her tears were all used up the thought that she hadn't even been allowed to see Rick for a few minutes continued to torture her as she lay immobile on her bed. But at last she was able to summon her strength: she was able to repudiate the nadir by attaching herself to objective philosophic wisdom that rejected any attachment to earthly ephemeral creatures in this mixing and diluting of herself.

Was the Earth a good place? For the species, man, who suffered the least it was for a good many and for most others it was not. Whether or not it was an efficacious use of stardust was both unknown and irrelevant when any assessment was stuck in the confines of changing perspectives influenced by innumerable combinations of travail and felicity in each moment of life. Was she right to have traveled the world, sought enlightenment, and shunned being in the confines of an ongoing maternal role and its ensuing responsibilities? It too was hard to measure. Her peregrinations were done quickly but with proper consideration so it never seemed to her that she should be apologetic.

But certainly she now had a belligerent child on her hands. Already she was attempting to counter his truancy, smoking habits, his returning home late into the early evenings, and his refusals to offer explanations for any of it. Early into his contempt she assumed that her failure at explaining herself to him had been the source of the problem; and so seeking a bridge of minds she once delineated a biographical profile of herself to him: her soldier-parents

dereliction of duties, the Turkish beheading, the church-going uncle and male cousins who tried "to finger" her in Peggy's home, her untoward will that shunned lies of family, God, and nation, her desire to raise a son who would be better than the herds of men, and her maternal neglect so that she might study, contemplate, and travel so as not to neglect herself. This only intensified his cold stares and these ideas, her profile, sank like an irrelevant stone that he threw into a lake.

Eleven days into the reunion with no sign that the contempt would burn out, in her exasperation she began floggings with a belt the way Michael had done; and for this pain to both parent and child all that she got for it was his contrived grinning and her chagrin that she had succumbed to barbaric, frustrated impulses and bullying savagery. Still, she could not be the contrite and effete parent who allowed a child's helter-skelter whims and contempt of the parent to tread victoriously onto the agenda of the day. Lacking the practice of self-discipline such a savage, when grown, would justifiably loathe the parent for not having gained that which would provide him with happiness.

Had she been there for him, fully engaged in motherhood from the beginning, she believed that his personality would not have been so recalcitrant and his behavior would not have been so petulant and flighty. Maybe, she fretted, her past peregrinations would aggravate the rest of her days in an opaque fog and malaise of her own making.

Instinct and social norm prompted her cousin in Kansas to become a statistic in suburbia: to get married immediately after high school; to have her 2.4 kids and a car in the garage; to daily doubt whether the 0.4 kid would "ever amount to anything;" to return from work at the cosmetic counter of Dillard's to greet her cat with "Are-U-Hungary" and laugh at the pseudo nation; and to darn her husband's underwear and iron his socks (items that should have been done with reverse actions).

Really Gabriele knew nothing about this cousin of hers. For her own agenda she continually relegated her to a theory. She enjoyed the caprice, which if not true of her cousin (and it probably was), was true of this bored housewifey type. And she wondered if this vaguely remembered woman might right now be opening the refrigerator door and envisaging probable dates of her demise N sometimes right side up and sometimes upside down N printed on milk cartons; who, finding her conversations with her spouse stale was nonetheless considering them an indispensable part of the routine of her perfunctory movements; and who was probably returning from the kitchen to watch most of the Rosanne or Cosby show before collapsing into sleep. Gabriele imagined that each night this cousin would wake up and realize that it was time to go to bed so that she could repeat the day's failure again. The true reality of her cousin's felicity or estranged plight was not anything Gabriele knew or cared to know. It seemed an apposite probability and this was the only thing about her that Gabriele cared to contemplate.

So sitting in her studio (now with the prostitute paintings of the "Women at Work" series of the burgeoning Thai artist, Nawin Biadklang, on her walls N paintings that she had put away and forgotten following her involvement with Michael), she painted her cousin, albeit of a Mexican appearance and something more like a mannequin than a human being, while her thoughts continued to run rampant.

Dream after dream; illusion upon illusion; everyone was forced to play the game of musical chairs in which the people changed as well as

the chairs but they all pretended that it was not happening. Not that everyone was stable and on stable ground. She did not want to rebel against the game. It was the indelible rules of nature thrust on man (this thing called change), and for most it was instrumental to their involvement. Most people would be worse than the complacent and mostly non-changeable rock of her Aunt Peggy unless shaken up a bit.

"What does death mean?" Nathaniel had asked on that inauspicious day years ago when Michael had run over the neighbor's child in the trailer park. Not one of many odd coincidences that had engendered their union. It was a day that was as inauspicious as having given birth to Nathaniel in the first Gulf War and then returning to him in the sequel.

Inauspicious events often seemed as a plan to rock the baby out of his cradle and then as now she vaguely sensed that something akin to doom would one day toss her from this bearable normalcy of a new husband and an old son that she seemed to return to like all other lost and clinging females. Was this malevolent rocker of the baby's body and soul God? Well, it certainly was not the gentle parental god devised by religion but there was indeed some coercer of change like Aristotle's concept of god without the god.

"Non-being. We wear our clothes for a time. Then they unravel and are made into something different."

"And heaven?"

"God, no! Not a make believe story for reality dodgers. When you play dodge ball you run away from being hit by the ball, don't you? It is the same for heaven believers. The neighbor boy, I am dreadfully sorry to say, is dead as a doornail and his body and brain are unraveling. You don't need to think twice about it. Trust me on this one. But if that is too much reality to swallow, and it is for almost everyone I guess, it is better to live in your own lie than live in someone else's. What if we were to say that he is like a beautiful leaf skidding on the sidewalk because of a breeze; but he is not the leaf anymore but the breeze. You can feel him but you will never see him again unless..."

"Unless what?"

"A possibility out of science but seeming as magical to us in our primitive time."

"Witches' magic?"

"No, superstitions and hocus pocus aren't in our lexicon. We are beyond that. Einstein's idea that time is relative. Anyway, we will be wind long before a means of traveling or transporting ourselves near the speed of light is devised."

Lost in all these thoughts she added onto the canvas a bit of vermilion, a color that may or may not have been that of the old Soviet flag, now fading from collective memory, but was the color of the bathrobe and lingerie that she was now wearing to appeal to his leftist tendencies. She stuffed some chewing tobacco into her mouth and entertained whimsical ideas of him, her husband. She and the man with the unmemorable name, as she still called him (sometimes Andrew), would in time live in different places. They would not be separated in the traditional sense of indifference or economic necessity but by the two

having their own interests (he undoubtedly having a job as a UN official if not assistant to the Secretary General within five or six years). They would live separately because they had been born into the world separately. Their union, their contract, would not be the floundering neediness of two minds who feared standing alone to face mortality in one's thoughts nor would it be like American soldiers guarding Iraqi oil pipelines nor the jealous sentinels over the source of a dopamine rush, that lover who gave to many their only defining component of themselves. It would be not she stopped herself not knowing what it would be. She was not sure whether or not to call such a freakish thing a marriage. If she had used this man by marrying him in the hope that he would be a male role model for her son wouldn't she be the same as one of the solipsistic herd. She hoped that her actions were not as calculating as this.

Putting away her paints, she then went into the bathroom to fall like a child through specious mountains and plains of crackling soap bubbles. There she would allow the steam to relax her to minimal consciousness of a self-contained Nirvana that could be gained in virtually no other way than in the bathtub. But as the hot water was falling into the tub filling it into a lake she changed her mind, turned off the tap, and went to him to seek Nirvana down and dirty.

Riveted in the carnal skin friction of sexual gluttony for the meat of human flesh, youth, and beauty, she climaxed with her man; and free nor totally free of all gnawing miscellaneous hungers outside of needing to urinate nor the couple smoked marijuana on the bed to elongate their brief, ethereal stay. They were silently watching clouds of smoke stretch out like steamers of confetti until silence broke like an old woman's hip.

He said, "I might get this one. It would be on a temporary basis nor just the extra sections that don't have teachers nor I guess benefits and full time status after probation if someone resigns nor little pay now. But maybe I should just stay here until I exhaust my possibilities."

She sensed how the petty and the mundane in the personal domain interfered, if not totally countered, any fulfillment of intimacy. This vexed her conceptualization of life; but for she who was so amused by grave ideas it was just one more intriguing fact to contemplate. "It's all exhausted," she at last responded. "There's nothing much here. You've gone to the first job interview at City College. You might as well see it through the second. Obviously they are interested in you if they want you to be interviewed twice. It's up to you but if it were me I would put my oars in the first wave that comes along."

"Yes, maybe."

"Out of curiosity, I've been wondering why you again made reservations in that hotel where the bellboys are the rats."

"Because hotels aren't cheap anywhere in New York City except exceptional ones"

"Exceptional? I was there, man nor one glorious night. Okay, marginally better than back packer guest houses in Bangkok and Jakarta with bare bunk mattresses and table fans without any tables in something less than closets. This one's more of a spacious closet --American style for beggars and Bolsheviks." She knew that her bantering had some

snobbishness in it as if she had never lived in a tiny little room with a crock-pot on the floor in Tijuana. She noted how perception was ensconced in one's environment and lifestyle and that an ensconced thing became the thing it was ensconced in. Even now, naked like she was, ostentatious diamond earrings bounced from her earlobes— an extreme pendulum shift from the days of painting caricatures for extra pesos in the pure dirt colonias and the man made waste of downtown "centro" Tijuana (TJ).

"I've offered to give you— I'll lend you, however you care to think of it— any money you need for expenses in the Big Apple."

"Thanks but I really didn't mind that room we stayed in last time."

"Okay," she sighed and threw up her hands. "But I can't see how that is possible."

"A little possible— like the sign in the bathroom. Remember? It said, O Dear guests, detergent harms the environment by going down the drain and ultimately killing the sea life of our oceans. Use fewer towels. O The message is warm like being with a beautiful woman." His mouth dived into her neck like a toothless vampire.

"God, I have married an imbecile," said Gabriele. She giggled in the sexual giddiness of a woman when intimate with a man; and yet thinking that the body was merely the crucible of feelings, and that thoughts, a refined and distancing appraisal of reality, were nonetheless feelings in origin, and that this was all there was.

"None of that baloney would work with me. I would only scoff at it— capitalists caring about the fishies of the sea. Give me a break! Give me brutal honesty anytime rather than tactics like this. If a business is honest, I might continue my patronage regardless of the type of service they provide or, in this case, the type of rat hole it is— honesty being in such short supply in the world that when someone gives it to me— even in rude doses— I am grateful for it. They would just need to say, "You wasteful fucks, we are niggardly corporate bastards eager to hoard any red cent we can get our hands on. Please note that we have a one shower a day policy here. Extra showers will incur extra charges should we see dripping from the shower nozzle. That being said, you will see that there are fewer towels on the rack. Don't make phone calls to the front desk demanding more towels and do not bribe cleaning ladies or make any sexual advances toward them. If you slyly take an extra shower at 2 a.m. or such ungodly times you will have to dry your wet butts by hanging them out the window. O Now if they conveyed this maybe— "

They heard two shells of petrous, ice-glazed snow simultaneously strike into a lower part of the facade of the house unlike a one-time thud of a bird or the distinct sounds of thawing ice when falling from the roof and gutter. The man with the unmemorable name got up, drew the curtain, and opened the window. Then he, the nude, dangled there staring at his stepson who sat on a limb in a tree that was a hundred yards from the house. The boy was holding a brassiere as his slingshot.

As more of a recurrent feeling rather than a philosophic framework, which he had constructed for himself on that silent car ride from Sharon's home to his own, he believed that subtle inconclusive looks

could help him extort that which he knew could never be gained in compensation, and that by it being something that could never be compensated and extorting it all the same, he had found the means to achieve power. Without really thinking so much as feeling it, for the past two weeks there was this notion that subtle looks without hostile words would make the hated propitiate to him with expensive gifts or at least a willingness to please him whereas to hate a person with the more conclusive medium of words would make the anathema hate him, and hate was a weapon that he did not care to hand over to his enemies. He cared to keep it in his domain.

The circumstances behind the slingshot were a peculiar thing: apprehension about knocking on their bedroom door for fear that his knocking would become pounding which might cause them to withhold his gifts; still early and no movement from above, the discarded black sheep, the piqued shadow, the cast away reunited with she who cast him out, leaving the clock and going into the yard to waste some time; the hunting of birds with a bb gun, feeling bored, and in places stomping out the obscene whiteness of the snow by grating it black, ever so often, with the heel of a boot; the return to the kitchen to again watch the incessantly slow turn of the second hand of the clock; still no sounds from above so deciding to burn bacon and to turn down the furnace in the hope of smoking or freezing them out; the pacing around a gigantic Christmas tree barren of gifts underneath; and then going into one of the bathrooms. Frustrated while "taking a leak" it was there that the brassier hanging on the wall had seemed like an unpatented snow boomerang there to show his misogyny.

"Comrade Sangfroid?" yelled the man into the tree. "What do you want?"

The boy put his hands around his mouth like a megaphone to facilitate the sound. "The queen of Antarctica, Comrade," he said. "Her gifts."

"Comrade of crude weapons," yelled the man. His voice was indistinct and garbled by the cough of saliva having rushed down his throat in his laughter. "Why shoot they who give freely?"

Gabriele nudged herself between the man and the window, dangling hers as the man did his. She saw the boy and the bra there at a bit of a distance. "Yes?" she yelled. She was amused, puzzled, and a little annoyed by the sight. She waited for words from a specimen unwilling to give them. Obviously, she noted to herself, smirking and laughter at the absurdity of talking to one's nude parents one Christmas morning from a tree would have been a natural proclivity for such a refreshingly or embarrassingly peculiar situation; but this smirking seemed a calm sadistic enjoyment of what she believed to seem to him as perverse. An enjoyment of the perverse seemed to drool in all orifices and he stared at them with virulent intensity. Didn't those eyes say, "What are you doing with that whore?" Didn't it bang around his mouth and peek loosely from his lips? She did not know. No, she told herself, this idea was perverse. Her imagination was a viral infection on her sound judgments and she told herself that she should be ashamed of her thoughts.

On this branch he once sat to gain a reprieve from Sharon and Rick and to make the former tenants of the house uncomfortable his composure was unperturbed. Having lived in Gabriele's experiment once before, it

was not new to him now. To be the specimen of her scrutinizing gaze was once an ossified aspect of his daily existence. Once the specifics of what it was like to be her son had been forgotten for a generalized feeling of revulsion; but now that he was here the forgetting was being forgotten and the revulsion was replaced by the need to adapt and thrive within his circumstances. Not wishing to provoke her to hate him, he put the brazier in his coat pocket and then descended from the tree.

And like any goddess from Hera to Athena she knew the sweet venom of empathy, could see the corroding batteries of Her specimen's heart without wincing, and would have stared that way indefatigably until he at last fell from the tree. But once he absconded she just returned to her side of the bed. She wanted to cry mutely into the pillow but her man was there so she stoically absconded into a book on Asian owls.

Chapter 40

Without much regard as to where he should sit, he just sat. It was a more remote spot in Seoul Grand Park that seemed to be directly under a kite slapped by distant winds. For he who sought to circumvent the scrutiny of others to pursue his strange stern ruminations his only wish was to be seated in solitude; and not having it, he accepted a more remote variation. Frustrated by his writing and unable to believe that he was doing anything but spinning around in his head, he tried to relax in the sunlight and within a Valium of smells such as the very dirt and weeds beneath him. He stared at the kite and the peculiar shaped clouds emerging into the sky until becoming bored with both, he turned to the ground. Withdrawn into nature and himself, he felt his energy and peace of mind begin to replenish. It fluttered weakly as the gray moth that he was watching; and it seemed to him that this spasm of optimism was as lithe as a soul was capable of being were one to have such a thing instead of damnable memories and words like walls in a maze of the mind which deluded one into thinking that he was advancing to someplace or another.

He imagined himself at a convocation of words in which he designated where each word should sit within the weeds and clumps of dirt. He imagined that when he did not like their arrangement, or their bickering amongst themselves, each obsequious word eagerly got up and changed to a different seat of his choosing with the snap of his fingers unlike their real obstinate and disgruntled nature; and when he said their names numerically according to their rows an invocation of truth would ensue. The guidebook, written by the subconscious, would have enough veracity to be a prototype for they who also squatted on the outskirts of normal existence, or at least a means for him to lose himself --if not find himself there, within his prose.

Writing granted a purpose, a connection beyond breeding to defy death for he who would never breed, he who would never be enslaved for ephemeral "family" and provide for children who were only a woman's pleasure --he who for not breeding had life and breath relegated to blowing dirt.

The word, "friendship" sat down beside him when the futile meeting was disbanded and all words were sent home; and as it sat there, it transformed itself into human form.

"Are you familiar with Camille Saint-Saens' *Macabre Dance*?"

said the word. It was Kim Yang Kwam, the friend who had labeled him as dirty and had abandoned him for that one touch, that one weak moment of wanting to celebrate the beauty of the friendship and the beauty of the man to its fruition. The two were in the bedroom of that apartment in Umsong as they had been before, and Yang Kwam was pulling out a CD from its plastic holder.

"Yes, lovely. I don't have any from that composer. Let's hear it. He is one of my favorites, you know. Well, you don't know. That is why it is so special. What are the chances of you liking it, liking the cello above other instruments, favoring your philosophic ponderings above everything, and now telling me that you are okay with me being gay."

"I'm here for you, Shawn."

"I'm living with someone now. Not maybe not long. He vitiates his mind with a Braille version of comics. They have Braille comics, you know. I mean, that is his business but he is so reticent to talk with anyone and I can't reach him much of the time. He is blind and seems content to cower himself in a corner someplace, pleased to have made it through another day. Not well, not always. I met him in a concert hall. I thought he liked classical music. I guess he does but not as much. He turns on too much pop music. I don't like it. It gives me headaches."

"It isn't important."

"Strange that I should be here without him."

"We are where we want to be in all things."

"There was another thing I was scared to tell you. I'm not sure how. Not listen, I killed my sister, my father hung himself, and I was struck down into such a depression like being slapped into a tsunami. Ever since this I've been drifting into the Pacific like a corpse."

"You want to eat salami?"

"No, are you listening to me?"

Yang Kwam chuckled. Then he looked at Sang Huin with intense confidence that refracted into the latter's perceptions as compassion. "I know that you did not do anything like this. You are a good person. You couldn't do something like that."

"They look on me as if I did kill her, as if I don't feel guilty enough without that. Well, I mean Dad is dead now so--anyhow, he looked at me like I murdered her. They both did really. Not really like a murderer but guilty of manslaughter, which I guess in a way I am."

"How people look at you is not something that you can control. It resides in them. When not true, it is a need to construct the world a certain way to remove guilt or pain by projecting it on others. Your family did not get the murderer and they blame you. Families often split up under such pressure."

"I took her there."

"You didn't know that he would kill her. Guilty of being too

Puritanical or too Korean, yes, but that is all."

"I want you as my best friend forever." There, the daydream, the word, the connection vanished.

It seemed to him that every few minutes or so there were passersby (usually as couples if not larger groups with civilization, merger, such an acute hunger in these pathetic lonely herds) who were more scrutinizing than all the others. These passersby saw the stationary posture of his body bereft of orders from the brain for substantial movement, and in instantaneous judgment calls, they believed, he supposed, that his mind was seemingly crazy or dysfunctional. They construed him, or he believed that they construed him, as dirty, unintelligible, and untoward. To them he was a homeless eyesore, a madman even if he looked benign from a distance. After all, seated alone in a fetal position as he was on a declivity of a hill sparse of grass, to them, he believed, this proclivity for disoriented stares into the wind-grazed dirt and inanimate purposelessness was an egregious aberration of being human. The fact that no family members were able to keep him restrained in their homes gave credence to the speculation that his intractability from psychosis had caused his transience. Not eating one's kimchee, refusing to pour hot water into a bowl to consume every grain of leftover rice in an insipid soup, or not taking off one's shoes at the door: these were slight infractions of cultural norms. The lone dirt-ridden stranger was prodigiously more repugnant than this for even retards and mild madmen chose to be clean. For one of this ethnicity to wallow his buttocks on a hill of dirt there could be no other rendered judgment than that his behavior was tantamount to a rejection of Hanguk civilization completely, which was indeed, to a Korean, a definite form of madness.

Sang Huin felt their cold Korean scrutiny excoriate him with their looks. The long glances and brief stares seemed to burn through his flesh in thin, cold lasers. And yet this Korean man, this American, continued nonetheless to sit on his hill of dirt all alone and, for the most part, lost in thought. He was pecking on a tiny virtual keyboard in his Pocket PC while reading aloud that which he pecked as if he were not an oddity and all others carried out activities like this.

He read out loud, "He was troubled by that one idea which kept running through his mind days later: he had given to her a nominal token of Christmas (a contemptuous one, perhaps, but a present nonetheless)N a plastic bag full of tea towels, and yet she had not given him anything in return. Still he was pleased that he had not mentioned anything about it and that his attempts at indifference had not degenerated in weak sulking.

A day later, no longer caring to wonder, as he had, whether these entitlements would at last be begrudgingly given to him should the walls of hubris fall from the scaffolding of his eyes, he was tempted to inveigh her with his contempt and be at last free; but throughout, he succeeded in occasional smiles and benign albeit reticent exchanges of ideas when compelled to talk with these parents (parents, or at any rate imposters claiming to be married, and were for all he knew). If only, he told himself, he could continue to control those eyes that he subconsciously wanted to impale into his mother in a long and unequivocal stare of hate, then he would have self-mastery and power.

Without really thinking about all these specifics so much, he felt

the need to restrain himself to multi-interpretable stares that would be doors of opaque translucency sealing off the fortress of his ideas while allowing shadows to permeate outward. Still, keeping the door shut was a hard thing to do."

Thoughts of his own mother kept intruding on Sang Huin's work: the mother/daughter sorority of Cathy and June (the American names that his mother and sister gave themselves); cacophonous, cryptic collusion of conversation that the two Korean sorority sisters had aside with each other in that damnable Hanguk-mal; the mother who valued her tree planting and property ownership with her husband as much as these feminine confidences with her daughter while he was supposed to be quiet as a mouse at home and especially in every public place so that she would not be ashamed of him; this woman who incessantly took him to one hospital after another seeking to have more than manageable ailments and who sat him on bleachers while the family went to June's basketball games.

"June" gave the Korean family a name, and the parents could now talk about their daughter and be part of the Caucasian club. But sick as he sometimes was, he gave them nothing and for it they relegated him to shadows N to shadows.

He thought of his childhood asthma. His father had the perception that the enervating condition of asthma emasculated the son to the point of making him "good for nothing." It was only a perception but no demon was harder to exorcise than perception. Philistines had feelings embedded harder than teeth: prejudices that were both intolerable and inextricable.

But then he checked himself and halted his thoughts about dead people and dead happenings. His thoughts focused on that journalist whom he had met weeks earlier at the sports stadium. "This guy could be the perfect one and yet I have brushed him aside. I don't know why." He pondered some more. "But I am involved with Saeng Seob and one doesn't just use someone until a better prospect arrives." This was his argument to himself made more to excuse his social ineptness than benevolence.

His queer relations were not affable and gay as withdrawn, anti-social, and hell bound in being bedazzled in shadows as he was. Ensconced cleanly from mixing thoughts with the physical realm it was shadows of texture he sought in saunas and the bathroom of the dirty movie theatre near Pagoda Park in Chongno Sam Ga. Clean of words, no hurt would ensue. The dirty movie theatre showed only normal R-rated films and sexual activity was restricted to bathroom stalls. Had it been otherwise it would have even seemed a major aberration to the queer folk there. The queer folk of Korea were Koreans too and no one was more conservative with cultural traditions than a Korean. The theatre people consciously acknowledged sex in the seats as illegal and morally repugnant albeit reprehensibly desired. "I could never do that to him." His thoughts were of course about Saeng Seob. "As long as he wants the relationship it will be there for him. I am many things but N " He was about to think, "but I don't hurt vulnerable people" but he checked his thoughts with the memory of his sister and how he had coerced his girlfriend into having an abortion. He told himself that to claim that he would always be there for the hurting and the vulnerable lacked veracity.

"He began to have a recurrent nightmare of sorts, replete in twisted skeletal boughs; and there he saw something like himself in adult form trying to glean movements of lissome shadows through the crevices around a board that went over one window. Boards were nailed over all windows and entrances in the condemned building that had been his home. Still, despite the sunrays of early morning impaling through the thickets of branches and into his eyes, he could see the copulative interlinking of shadows distinctly even though he could not see the forms projecting the shadows because they had long ago turned into wind. He shot a snowball and a sound of an owl screeching towards the woods flew past him if not the form of the bird itself. He noted how strange it was that the only snow was that on the tree and all other parts of his mother's acreage were part of the verdure of early summer.

O My little comrade, O said the man to the boy although he was not a man any longer but more like the murky translucency of a fog. As he flew near the tree what was left of the old leaves rustled and flattened. O The Bolsheviks have won. You can go ahead and leave Petrograd and return home to your wives.'

O Comrade, O Nathaniel said, O I have no wives and I don't want to abandon my platoon.O

O The war is over. Everyone is dead and gone. They have been so for some time N for years. You've done a fine job, Comrade. Now go in peace.O

O I know who you are but N O He swallowed deeply. O I don't know what you are.O

O The opposite of what I was I suppose. When you figure out what life is go 180 degrees counter to it and there you will be at death. It isn't all that much different N just different corners of the block.O

O Yes, I believe so Comrade Stalin.O

O Comrade Trotsky.O

O Yes, Comrade. Comrade Trotsky. Comrade Trotsky, I fear that the Queen of Antarctica, angered at my conquering abilities of her homeland, will blockade all supplies and let me perish out here with no Christmas.O

'Well, Adagio, at last here the two of us are all alone as you have always wanted it, as you have dreamed it even if it is so late and with a ghost...quality time we should have had more of if I hadn't been so preoccupied with trying to understand this marriage of mine with a woman who did not want to live with me. I think that she wanted me to be closer to you but how she thought that was possible with a husband and wife having separate lives is difficult to understand. She is difficult to understand but that is no excuse for not forgiving her. We all deserve to be forgiven. All humans deserve that, Adagio. Why can't you forgive her?'

'Because I hate her!'

'Hate? Here you are as a grown man and yet you sit in those branches as if nothing has changed. A few sharp movements and you will fall off with the limbs that once

cradled the sport of a boy. You spied on us a lot in those branches, if you remember. But now there is nothing to spy on. The house is old and in decay. Boards are nailed over the windows. The naked dance of a man with his wife that you thought was so intriguing has ended. The partners are separated and have withdrawn--one into old age to begin her own descent to the earth and me visiting you on top of a tree because of a Siberian wind happening to settle me here. Nothing is there now so there is nothing to hate. What possibly can you see up there at this point?'

'I see what I've always seen: shadows. Plenty of shadows--yours, hers, all the men she was with.' He was meaning love making in its full-animated obscenity of interlinked private parts and hedonism, the fundamentals of life."

Then in dreams like this he would wake up, think of this all too familiar presence, and doubt if she were his mother at all. As far as he knew she could just be an imposter after the other one's disappearance. And on his pillow he would again think about the flashlight in the cave and the hotdog in the bun jokes that he was beginning to hear in the locker rooms of adolescent and pre-adolescent boys. Precocious as he was in firsthand knowledge of some sexual issues he was still curious about more normal arenas.

Sang Huin told himself that incessantly telling himself things within the contemplation of his creation was a bit strange; that the facile, tangible thrusts of decadent titillation that he gained briefly in the shadows of the dark corridors of saunas instead of more tangible long-term relationships--even with their intangible emotions and invisible bridges of minds--was stranger yet; but strangest of all was how instead of being with a girlfriend on a roller coaster less than a kilometer away, he just stayed on his hill of dirt like any transient, the luftmensch that he was. He looked at his feet, then the dark approach of a mass of clouds and the kite. One chose any spot to sit in based upon comfort and security, and to him remoteness was both. Like his defunct father, who often sat silently in front of the Weather Channel, using this favored television station to facilitate a comatose withdraw after his daughter's death, so he watched the kite which seemed like a piece of himself drifting further and further into the unobtainable. Its erratic movements and the emergence of dark clouds with peculiar shapes seemed like a wordless oracle.

O For six long months she sensed Nathaniel's stares as eerie as a lone plastic cup rolling on an empty pavement in a breeze; and even when she went to sleep it was with her, often setting her forehead into a seat as she slept. For her, sometimes alone in her bed or with her man, it was an absurd and inexplicable feeling. But it was easy to repudiate the indecipherable. It was easy to be obtuse while pursuing her work and the occasional sZances with her higher authority, who often played hide and seek through clouds of the smoke of her burning weed. Furthermore, hostile glances and reticent words seemed of little consequence when awakened daily, despite herself, to dwindled resources dwindling further.

One morning at the dining room table, looking through the newly arrived mail half blinded in the dappled sunlight, Gabriele saw the numbers of her worsening fiscal state from a bank statement. The recent payments of her property tax and the school enrollment were just larger costs of myriad that in all, in time, would pillage a life; and her mind

felt numb in the mundane. Knowing that she had to do something, she approached the art museum of Albany that afternoon. The director was willing enough to exhibit a retrospective of her work with a few new paintings of Sapporo and Tijuana amalgamated into it all. The isolationist declaring her own frigid country of one, the frigid rationalist watching the movement of instinctual creatures of romance blowing like bits of trash caught in vortexes of wind, the nighttime whore advocate as opposed to the billions of daytime whores who espoused the Puritan work ethic: she was one of their PT Barnum freaks at the circus museum and the director welcomed back that which would spark a bit of public intrigue. The museum did not expedite it. Two months of planning went into the temporary exhibit; and the financial dilemma that seemed as potentially dire now shot within her more as flares of panic. What heretofore lacked immediacy became an uppercase word in bold letters, immediacy, spilling out and hardening as the black ink of the night.

At last it passed. And in the bathroom of a purchaser, at a party in his home, which had been arranged for the celebration of this singular purchase, the brief honeymoon period for the artist climaxed with a salient 15-minute copulation against a wall near the toilet. She needed this release from worries, this demonic sensation of pleasure that was the eddy contrary to what was rational. She hoped that it was that, an eddy, but she knew base instincts were the main force despite all her rational fortifications. From time to time she needed to stop thinking and to run into the storm, allowing any large gust to bang her.

"Can I see you again?" her partner, this black stranger, asked. Even now that their intimacies had come and gone like all specious mad frenzies, like the mating of dodo birds, she did not know his name, his connection to the purchaser, or his purpose at the party unless it were in having mounted and ridden her. Did man have a higher purpose than this? She had her doubts.

"Give me your address. I wanna see you again," he reiterated.

"Maybe in corners like this," she responded coldly. "Beyond that I think my husband would have problems with it, and most importantly I would."

"You're a sassy one," said this other candyman. "Squeeze a man of his juice and leave him dry." She knew that she was a sassy squeezer but she was hesitant to say anything for she wanted him marooned in his own silent realm. This way she could dress herself in peace and quickly abscond from sleazy predilections and proclivities that might have made up the baser components of one's nature but were puny in defining herself. She wanted to return to her paints in the hope of developing a template that if not mass-produced at least could speed up her production. The time of prolific painting from ideas sketched for so long had passed. Now ideas needed to be pinched and coerced to inch forward.

In her ride back home in her Ferrari she postponed the inevitable by driving further on the interstate than she needed to go. The goddess that she was, she liked watching things come and go as well as how she felt superior in this fancy moving shell. She thought of a new argument and she recited it in her mind. O I have decided to simplify our lives. What type of an example would I set if I were to cling to things, to relationships, never knowing myself? Are all people so at a loss of

identity that they grope in front of anything that has a chance of being less perishable than themselves? It is disgusting. Anyhow, we need money and I'm selling everything off of value including the house. We can live in cardboard shacks or tree houses but we don't need this type of shit cluttering up space and time. This was what she would say, or something more simplified that was along these lines."

Frustrated again from not liking his ideas, he forfeited words. Resting on his hill in the Valium of nature, it was as if he were coming down from all this spinning around in his own head because of a heaviness of words coalescing and jelling onto the walls of his brain. It seemed as though the twirling child were landing dizzy and drunk on life despite his morbid disposition from memories of family that scooted like a plastic cup blowing on an empty pavement. Abhorrent memories loving and still as a photograph.

Chapter 41

To the ancient Egyptians man died each night in this void absent of the sun god and then each morning was resurrected in daybreak. She thought of this; and it seemed to her as she was driving home at 3 a.m., hair blowing and mind mesmerized in prevailing darkness, that this particular myth was as all religious balderdash that justified one egregious proclivity or another in the natural state. In Christianity this was myriad: everything from man's god-given dominion over animals in any arbitrary whim to the Lord's omnipotent power to part the Nile one moment and turn someone to stone the next (indiscriminate aiding of some and annihilating others). As the deliverer who cared so much about individual man as to intrusively know the amount of hair strands on each head He was the perfect god; and his conspicuous absence or non-involvement on 9-11 and countless other occasions of inhumanity of man to man was merely his allowing free will to command human affairs.

The ancient and relatively forgotten myth of the Egyptians explained man's mysterious absconding from the night in seven or eight hours of sleep as a partial death when apart from the vanquished sun. Its innocence had charmed her for years, but now it just seemed as one more vapid fable with no redeeming qualities. Going home circuitously, the idea of sleeping away one more night seemed as a reprehensible closing of one's eyes to the night's gilded silence. Long hours of atavistic sleep to keep the body still and hidden from barely visible predators had been utile in prehistory but now it was an anachronistic vestige of adaptation. Thwarting nocturnal consciousness of this fragile animal, man, sleep inadvertently obstructed an appreciation for all that was black. And she did want to appreciate all that was black.

Outside of bubbling in champagne and a bit of public relations to secure a sale what had this party been, she asked herself, unless it were to reclaim the night; and what had this bathroom rendezvous been but to cease to abscond from that which was black? She laughed at her joke, which she mumbled aloud to herself. Half drunk, she was inexplicably pleased with herself. She told herself that her adulterous tryst with this twenty minute black friend had been her refutation against the notion of ugly-bodied darkness. She inanely told herself that by brushing naked against his skin this making herself one with what was black had made the intimacy a higher accomplishment than mere banging. She was even amused by how easily amused she was in her self-containment in the car. For her, happiness was not dependent on

external playmates although something vaguely similar to happiness was sometimes facilitated by them.

There was nothing like back roads so bare of automobiles. Driving made her feel as if she owned the night with the wide stretch of her headlights that were only deferentially dimmed at the encroachment of other automobiles on her terrain. She loved the peace and the vastness of these strips of road in the heart of unpretentious night; and if she had her way about it the universe would be purely black without the tawdry dappling of stars. It dawned on her that moving through night at sixty miles per hour her very movement was in opposition to what was splendid in the night. If Aristotle were right in saying that happiness was greatest in contemplating this non-changeable entity that had tossed the chemicals of inchoate matter, then cloistered artists, philosophers, and other contemplatives would be the dominant force on the planet. If contemplation were the highest pleasure in life wouldn't her canvas be more eagerly sought than her hedonistic flings or that which she was now pursuing: a sense of freedom by sipping a beer and riding around in a Ferrari. Being blown in all directions from the open windows of her car, she was half tempted to drive all the way into arctic Canada instead of returning to the odious smells of her paint chemicals that were no doubt carcinogens if the nose were to express its opinion on the matter paint once vibrant in her perceptions but now the mental strain of attempting to reestablish success.

She again contemplated the night. If only man had not had this fear of being eaten, sleep, if it were needed at all would be merely sporadic naps for the restoration of energy instead of this long withdrawal from the black of night. Then she thought about this twenty minute chocolate candyman, whom she named as Candyman II (Roman numerals giving him a sense of eminence). She told herself that she should have made him withdraw before being allowed to climax within her. He had worn a condom but it was doubtful that condoms were meant to stretch so far or be unbreakable when the long black horn was impaling with such force. How would she know whether or not it had ruptured? She would only know with the advent of symptoms from AIDS, syphilis, gonorrhoea, and that whole list of undesirables.

She and her husband had an "open" relationship so long as neither one of them fell in love with someone else but she didn't want to die for the periodic cravings of sex and more importantly she did not want to harm her husband with a lethal touch. Like a postulant at a convent, she might well have relinquished such meretricious spells of lust months ago had she not held two opinions in favor of this "open relationship" remaining such. This sauntering away from domestic life always brought newness to marital vows upon one's return; and being shaken up in promiscuous rendezvous made the brain more lithe in generating ideas. Ever so often a woman needed to remove a man like her dirty panties for the required laundering. Ever so often a woman needed to put on some fresh panties when allowing the old ones to spin around in the wash. It was an ablution in a sense this running barefoot in dirty fields to exorcise her demons of passion. When the exercise or exorcism was completed it allowed for domestic life there in its small space demarcated within drab walls. Sordid nights were a bit like wallpapering anew the old shack. But she did not think about the primary motivations for her adultery: the wish to not cling to this concept of a relationship as if it were an actual reality, the wish to debunk this notion of permanence in a mutable world, and that desperation to repudiate her vulnerability as one who would like to

cling to such things, to cling to her man.

Guilt there was none not even when arriving at the house. She was, of course, surprised to see her man's car parked in the drive but it was not a catalyst of guilt per se. While the solitary newlywed was getting out of her car she considered a half imagined societal measurement of her actions. It was from it that there was a mordant gnawing within that might be labeled as compunction. She doubted it at first, but then why should she doubt? She was not totally immune to others. As much as she might claim that feelings were her own self-manufactured car that she drove around in, she would be a veritable lunatic were she to have feelings that were little else than her own imagined whims. Also her art would not pertain to anyone if she were not to some degree a product of her world, as repugnant as that thought was to her.

As she stepped into the parlor the compunction exacerbated exponentially. Seeking to be unperturbed by conscience, she told herself that having sex with a hundred men in a hundred days was no different than being loyal to one spouse for a hundred and some odd days. She argued that one behavior was no more or less slutty than the other. It was true in a rational context; but on the other hand sexual loyalty was a way of discerning this feeling-based abstraction of a relationship which otherwise would diffuse as a cloud of smoke. She went into the family room where she saw a light ("family" seeming a misnomer since she doubted that there was such a thing).

"Hey! You are here!" she called as she went through a hallway to this room where her husband and son were standing at different sides of a billiard table. Obviously they were there to play against each other but seemingly it was as if they were together brandishing their cues, their phallic sticks, which would be used for her flagellation. As titillation and inebriation were falling flat with each passing moment, so her smile at imagining her forthcoming beating was momentary.

"What are you smiling at?" the man with the unmemorable name asked.

"Nothing." Acerbic guilt was bubbling within her.

"I decided to come back this weekend," the man said.

"What a surprise. Grading completed?"

"Some of it. I guess you are okay. Why is your hair this way? What's the word?" He said something in Russian that she did not understand.

"Disheveled. In the car-- windows down, me blowing in the wind. Guess I look a mess. Don't worry. I wasn't in an accident."

"Okay, I'm not. I wasn't."

"Seems that a late night pool game has stretched into early morning," she said. There was no response so she feigned a beautiful wide smile as she slouched into a vinyl couch --vinyl like that she had withdrawn into when parting from Nathaniel's father with his dividing cells within her cells that were either cancerous or salubrious divisions although now it was perhaps too early to predict which or the denouement of this dabbled experiment. "Don't you think it is a little bit late for my two boys to be playing billiards like they are at a

poker party?"

"No, I don't Gabriel; and do you want me to tell you why?"

"Please. More than anything else on the planet, I live for it."

"Both of us had to do something while we waited and waited for you, didn't we? We couldn't stare at the door all night. Folk dancing to balalaika music seemed out of place and we didn't know the phone numbers of hospital morgues to see if you checked in with your bags."

She chortled. "Uh oh, facetious and angry. Looks like I've been grounded and will have the car keys taken away." But grave memories were flung into her consciousness that sobered her frivolity: she remembered being in Japan waiting for Michael to return from his dates with Kato. Sitting on her futon on the tatami of her living room, she would blow into the shakuhachi, that wailing instrument that was the only thing she could communicate with in a grief so tacit and incommunicable.

"Do you want me to not care?"

"Huh?" She was recovering from damnable memories that were running over her the way swathes of the Earth's hardened vomit, continents, moved, reshaped themselves, and demarcated anew its body of water. Then it occurred to her what he said. "Sorry. I thank you for caring. I really do. You are a good guy."

"You left your son here all alone."

"Are you kidding? Hardly that! After hearing from Peggy about his penchant for arson, I wouldn't be that crazy. Where is the babysitter, Nathaniel?"

"I didn't like her so I got rid of her," said the boy. "I fired her but I paid her off first."

"With what?"

As she waited for him to speak she saw him scratch one of his earlobes. From this she imagined him saying that he paid the babysitter with money he made from selling earrings like the ones she was wearing. Then, in the daydream, she demanded to know whether or not he had been pilfering bits of her jewelry all along and what he did with the money once he sold them; but in the daydream he did not answer either question leaving inconclusive speculation to run rife.

But she told herself that the daydream had no significance. Once in February when not able to find various pairs of earrings and blaming herself for having lost them somewhere between Tokyo to Tijuana she had engaged herself in comic anecdotes of the boy sneaking into her bedroom in leather gloves and pajamas so that he might mail some of her jewelry to Hispanic Betty before Valentine's Day. She told herself that this daydream was merely the rebounding of her dismissed caprices. And yet she couldn't help wondering if this particular daydream was, as Freud would say, a resurfacing of repressed fears, unwanted knowledge, or strong convictions about a given matter of importance.

She thought about how little of a human's mercurial life was grounded in the present moment: an athlete was in the rush of his adrenalin, a conversation consisted of past events and future expectations, and a current event was impinged by pertinent hunches exhumed from the subconscious in daydreams. Even if she were to have conclusive knowledge about her son's actions throughout each and every day, and even if she were to find him as innocent as a babe, the correct way of dealing with him would still be guesswork. Such was the peculiarity of the human condition.

"With Monopoly money," he chuckled

"With what?" she repeated irascibly.

"Twenty bucks out of my allowance money. Are you going to take my head off for that?"

"For twenty bucks, never. Thirty, maybe." She turned to her husband. "Didn't he tell you where I was at?"

"He said that he didn't know."

"I don't know," said the boy.

"I told you."

"I wasn't listening. Was watching a movie. Didn't hear," he spoke with cold indifference. Only his eyes were visceral and they were directed at the billiard balls while he daydreamed phantasms of men and orgasms in which his mother copulated with male partygoers in a back bedroom. Bending toward the table and aiming his cue stick he murmured inaudibly, "I never listen to where anyone is planning to cat around to. It's none of my business." Then he shot the balls. "Your turn, Comrade."

"Cat around?" said Gabriele. "Is that what you said? I think it's time for you to go to bed." Angry as she was, she laughed awkwardly to give the impression that she construed it to be one more impertinent statement having as little significance to her as others he had said previously.

"Go on! We'll finish in the morning, I promise," said the man.

"Game over permanently," said the boy in decisive coldness. He hastily garnered the balls into a tray and then began to descend into his room. As he did so he heard: "I want to know where you have been!" "I was just at a buyer's home. A kind of show and tell party." "You hate going to those things." "Yeah but I sometimes have to: smiles, and small talk. One has to suck up to these people for cash. I don't have any money, you know. Not well, not completely that way but coming soon. And if it gets any worse I'll have to go to public schools and I'll sell the house. Maybe go back to Mexico and this time live in an Adobe hut." "Well, if that came from another person it would be a joke but since it is coming from you it would not surprise me if you mean it. Remember that any crazy action like that would be the end of us." "I'm joking. I don't want an ending of us but a forever of us. I just mean that money has become an issue. I have to rebuild my reputation. Not from scratch, but still reestablishing it is a struggle. It ain't

easy." "Get a job." "No, I detest jobs N especially professional jobs. I would rather be an automaton in a factory than a paper pusher or a money hording entrepreneur. All of them have such wasted lives." He laughed. "I have such a wasted life then."

The words did not fall into place so much as they just fell profusely like a mist that kept her obscure from her spouse. By their mere arrangement, their emphasis, and their plausibility, deceit was done without the need for prevarications, obfuscations, mendacities, and outright lies. She felt delivered from being thought of as the slut that she was beginning to feel that she was.

Later, while the two were asleep and she was reading on her vinyl sofa and occasionally peaking out of the curtain into the darkness, it seemed to her that with sordid thoughts and deeds being such it was a good thing that communication conveyed so little of life and reality. In her own brain there were these incessant skirmishes to separate herself from her environment, the tacit hostile intent toward others expressed in the coldness of her eyes, and all these indefatigable hungers of base instinct. The loneliness of philosophical ponderings, the ineffable brooding, and the meticulous details of producing life and personal statements in her art forced her to take dives ever so often into these wild sexcapades. Sometimes one needed to have those moments of feeling, although never believing, the specious inebriation of mutually shared physical intimacy.

She thought about telling him the truth. She believed in honesty but as she pondered doing so honesty didn't seem to her as either all that pragmatic or virtuous. If one were to convey her more carnal side to any of these judgmental and precipitous creatures they would believe it to be the full summation of the confessor. She was a faithful wife: faithful to her intent to care about a man, and this faithfulness did not require ridiculous sexual fidelity as its measurement. She told herself that a higher being, a licentious goddess, was able to sculpt a higher authority within all this effluvium, this muck of feelings and thought.

So, what if she were unfaithful in a sense? It was not she who had amended the marital vows. His utterance was partially made in jest, but having made it changed the nature of the contract. Being faithful was no longer an infeasible Claus. It was he who had begun it all. "So many beautiful women are on campus. Sometimes they look like babies and sometimes they look so ripe." "Well, don't famish yourself on account of me." "You wouldn't mind?" "I guess not. Not if it didn't mean anything. If a man sits in a box for some hours he would need exercise. If hungry enough you would chew on a shoe if there weren't anything more edible in sight. What right would I have to stop you?" "Good, that is what we should do if it becomes hard to control, and I promise that it won't mean anything." "Fine," she had said; but surely he wasn't so naïve as to think that it would be an amendment giving privileges that would be exclusively his own.

Then she went to bed. Not able to fall asleep for an hour, she just lay there with her man. At certain moments she felt reassured to be there listening to his breathing and at other moments it felt constricting to have the imposition of a man share her space. And yet she too needed her contracts. She too needed to cling to another person to seem to herself that she was more than dirt blowing around in the impermanent streets of the city. Each minute hunted and devoured its

predecessor, and together all the minutes were this composite of time as the replication to replace dying cells was a collection that was the body. She listened to the clock. It too was an ephemeral device that seemed to hum as incessantly as her breath. But both, she knew, were temporary devices. The abstraction of time itself, the best a woman could conceptualize it, seemed more "eternal" just as the life of any elderly woman would seem successfully "immortal" when there among grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Still, in the scheme of things all was blowing dust.

She did not blame her morbid disposition on the night. Nocturnal stillness aided concentration and she sunk under it as if it were her grandmother's quilt. It did not evoke a mood, for her saturnine thoughts came in part from the slowing of spinning intoxication and a more sobering reality pressing upon her: that she was a fraudulent wife, an adulterous bitch, and a woman wrestled to the ground by the mundane of financial woes. How she could devise a viable, commercial art that would be easily manufactured without having to forfeit her role as a serious artist—this was her insoluble dilemma. Even though she sensed the answer to be immediate and palpable, it kept eluding her nonetheless. Seeing that her bedtime contemplations were circumgyratory spirals of thought expended without even tiring her to the point where she could sleep, she dressed and went outside.

A bike ride taking hours; hills beyond the city limits—hills gilded in sunrise; hills like that picture in her son's Book of Mormon showing the Hill Cummorah where, according to the myth, these imaginary plates were once buried; hills like that idyllic Hill that recently provoked her to say that she would rather have him study a dirty magazine than these man-made scriptures; the idea, as the wind blew through her hair and massaged her skin, that physical delusions were less deleterious than mental ones; the coolness of wind blowing in her face; the silent splendor of the ride; the hat blowing off her head; halted peddling to find it; the potholes and sharp rocks of rural roads; running over some type of shard; and then there was that flat tire. She walked the bicycle for an hour before finally coming across a filling station. A worker told her that he would patch her inner tube for twenty dollars. She called him a capitalistic pig. He pointed to her long, ostentatious diamond earrings and asked her what she thought that she was. Then there was an awareness that she knew that she was that too. A fixed bicycle; slapping against the winds within her movement; a new conviction to simplify her life; a rest at a convenience store; coins into the slot of the newspaper vending machine; headlines of a man in Albany who shot his wife's lover, his wife, the children, and then himself; headlines of an overworked postal employee from Albany who began to shoot people in the queue so as to reduce the amount of packages submitted into his window; a nice elderly woman smiling at her like sunshine and asking how she was but Gabriele's cold eyes turned her to ice; an awareness of having wronged the woman, a compunction, and a recalled analogy that she was that stuffed polar bear with the stiff arms that the factory of the human race mutantly created; an elderly man wanting to change her quarter into two dimes and a nickel for the newspaper vending machine but Gabriele's cold eyes turned him into ice sculpture until he came to himself and quickly fled from the witch; and then at last a return home. Her son was there, brandishing his BB gun in late morning.

"Morning soldier! Aren't you a little old for this thing?" she asked as she got off her bicycle.

"Yes. Give me the real thing and this kid's gun can go into the trash," he said.

"No can do," she said, "or matches to an arsonist."

"I'm not an arsonist. It was an accident."

"I wouldn't know. I wasn't at your Aunt Peggy's."

"No, you were in Japan, weren't you? Where have you been?"

"Riding. It is a beautiful morning. Good exercise. And I was thinking: you know, we are living beyond our means. I've decided to sell the house. We'll look for a smaller place and we'll have money to travel around from time to time. You'll get to see other places. Maybe you'll get to see Japan too."

"You do that and I'll be gone."

"Gone? Gone where? Peggy would never take you back."

"To Sharon's"

"You despise her."

"Yes," he said. He fired one shot and it went into the window. He fired a second, and a third time at the fleeing owl and the bleeding corpse plumped onto the earth like a water balloon.

Although he saw it flounder in the skies as he floundered around on the Earth, Sang Huin was not exactly sure where the kite was struck to the ground. He thought of how so many years of his life were struck down in silence. Only June, the basketball star, had voice and opinions that could sway the parents. He was inconsequential, relegated to shadows. He upbraided himself and stymied his thoughts immediately. He didn't want to think any bad thoughts about his sister. He had no right to think them. Instead, he desperately thought that he should marry a woman and have a family of his own, thereby enveloping himself in a world of forgetfulness. His buttocks were hurting from where he sat and the wind was beginning to sweep down its polluted grit of rain. He got up. He needed to go downtown to Myong Dong and try to find a birthday present for Seong Seob, but first he needed to pick up an umbrella.

Chapter 42

"E No," she thought, "those disconcerting eyes would not leaveE will not leaveE wouldn't want them to leaveE .He is here a part of my fateE .Spots over my eyes, hypersensitivity to sound as well as lightE ideas so painful, and yet I drag them aboutE pounding thoughts of raw sensitivity and I drag these sickly bodies to have something to doE and to clog the empty space of the hours. Before this I was thinking of my son and now I am thinking about my thoughtsE a concentration on anything to forefend this unreality of everythingE every item in this dark tomb, and the air and light within it are so distant like trying to remember the details of a dream weeks earlierE brain insurrection, and

stomach like when I was carsick with Michael in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, sick as when I was pregnant with Nathaniel Adagio SangroidE inert as if deadE dead as the owl plopping onto the groundE lack of energyE enervation not of being drained but like it just suddenly packed up its bags and went, leaving behind the barren house, now looking like a dilapidating hutE Need to think of something placid, pellucid, permanent." She meant that she needed to imagine a tranquil and permanent entity, God, by which to ease her pain, and yet being an atheist there was none. For atheists like her there were just ideas to be posited as if raising these walls, these labyrinths of logic, and then running in them, would lead her to some advanced destination. And so she posited that man, being such a dodger of pain, would inevitably become religious within sickness. She posited that even the most intransigent atheist was susceptible to the god of his own making. But thinking about thoughts was making the migraine even worse. Ideas were making the bulimic sick and she felt like she was ready to vomit them up. She again tried to find a benign image exempt of painful words that she could rest in while in these vapid hours.

And she could only think of her grandmother who, with Peggy, arrived that one time at the Emporia Kansas bus terminal to pick her up. Those eyes were so empathic to her, the young girl who was just beginning to recuperate from having been run over by lieutenants Mom and Dad as they went off into the sunset on their tank; and this grandmotherly empath could transmute pain and make it her own better than any mood ring. She thought of the feel of her grandmother's pantyhose when sitting in her lap and the appearance of that ceramic cookie jar in the form of a piggy with a chipped ear and a vest. When her grandmother removed his head all of those chocolate chip cookies that she baked were there. Still, this sole, loving and loveable relative was not permanent. She too was fleetingly mortal. Gabriele thought of a more permanent entity, a tree, but its leaves were deciduous and it had no power to alter its environment or to love selflessly. Then she thought of the sky: it was permanently sky; but it was rarely placid and only pellucid to meteorologists, and of empathy it had none. Men died in hurricanes, typhoons, lightning strikes, floods, and heat strokes. She wondered if she was going mad. "Need to go to the shopE I need to get off this sofa," she thought, but the thought was barely pressed together under the butcher knife of the Migraine. Still she thought it nonetheless, and others as well, to fill the stillness of the hours of pain.

Alone: When not having a father or any type of a male role model the "differentiation" of a boy in his stages of disengagement from his mother have no other course but through these addictions to titillations which compel him to climb each and every pleasure until at last falling into the crevasse of family himself and all of its falling debris of obligations. This being such, she knew that her time within her own crevasse would not last; and that to be inextricably attached to these selfish and impermanent beings who had fallen in with her would merely be a form of weak clinging. It was bad enough in stability searching herds but for a goddess like herself it would be a particular debasement.

Family: Her aunt had believed in it enough to take her into her home despite the objections of her husband; but then she had also believed that Heaven was a better place than the Earth without having gone to the former and rarely getting out into the latter with Wal-Mart shopping centers so nearby, that openly communicating one's filthy mind about misinterpreted gestures like avuncular touch would be conclusive

proof that one was a hateful girl indeed, and that only within muteness locked in immeasurable and inconclusive memories was one showing love toward all members of this sacrosanct organization. This, the incommunicable utterance, was the only means to exist successfully for they who, to acclimate, were ensconced in safe perfunctory movements within the crevasse.

The mutability of family: Wasn't it apparent that her man had snagged himself on his tree of recently ripened campus fruit and that this adulterous delay in the Big Apple might go into a third week and beyond? And last week what had been her role of chauffeuring Nathaniel and his giddy date to an amusement park unless it were the beginning to that end? Evidence for both came in the form of flinging more and more TV dinners into the oven and eating them saliently alone in her dining room. Not that she felt uncomfortable uncovering the aluminum foil and eating her food all alone. She loved her ruminations more than any other earthling she encountered. So wondering what her man was uncovering and putting into his mouth and what bimbo her son was chewing on like a chicken bone as she removed the foil of the TV dinner was a very enjoyable activity. It was enjoyable for she was intrigued with all of life's curiosities.

These stodgy thoughts: They encompassed the hours and moved at a dinosaur's reptilian pace for they weren't fully the refinement of thought either but callow half ideas shaped more of superfluous raw feelings than thought and being newborn with eyes shut they staggered around..

Feeling: it came about from chemicals that surrounded an impression made in the gel of memory, and if the impression was a good one, they tried to prompt a being toward more of them, and if it was bad with less of such engagements.

Staggering, her stodgy physical being also had trouble moving. She went to the bathroom with a belief that she would take a shower so that she could go to the shop. She had opened a store that sold landscape paintings and posters from various sources, picture frames, and in her partitioned backroom that she called her gallery, paintings that she picked up from recent trips to Southeast Asia. It was there, as the business was beginning to do well financially that within her migraines she began to founder there in mundane numbers of dollars and cents, abstractions that bored her beyond belief. The frequency of her migraines augmented for, buoyant as she was, she was nonetheless tossed in the undulations of the ennui. Sick at times like she was now, she did not feel like a deity any longer but an effete, forlorn bastardess in this world.

The shop: It was a room by which bland lives from colorless walls could choose from her insipid goods; and from it her monetary concerns were eased as she prostituted the hours of her days.

The days: Already a year had passed away since the point where she wanted to sell the house. It passed away as if it were a mere hour. It passed away as the owl, the ball games of her two boys that had disturbed the bird, youthful naivety that a child's bliss in the simple pleasures of the day (the only happiness there was by her reckoning of the years of her life) would go on forever, and that confidence that the unquestioning love of a child would never alter into the adult judgment against an errant parent. It passed away as youth itself no matter how

many doses of Vitamin E and C, growth hormones, estrogen and testosterone replacement, vegetarian meals of choices rich in antioxidants, low fat foods high in carbohydrates, botox injections, wrinkle reducer creams, and morning racket ball sessions with her employees that she implemented into each day.

The house: They were still living there because less than a year ago no one seemed likely to buy it to be of immediate help to her financially.

The boy: And she kept the boy, irate as he was about having a real estate agent's sign in the front yard, since there was no other place for him to go.

She would have gone into the "gallery" to perform her perfunctory duties were in not for the bathroom mirror reflecting a paler and more haggard visage than what she cared to accept; and so, unable to let determination belie reality, she returned to the cold embrace of her silk bed linen. She just lay there with the hours until, puffing on some marijuana and dozing for a few minutes, she awakened to her higher authority accosting her like a mosquito. Gabriele tried to shoo her away with her hand.

"You can't get rid of me that easily," laughed the Higher Authority.

"Athena, sorry. I thought you were an insect."

The Higher Authority guffawed. "It is Athena, the insect, is it? I thought the last time we were together I was Aten and you were Akhenaten, or was it the other way around?"

"I've made you Athena this time. You have a body and garments that I would ascribe as being Ancient Greek and goddessesque. So, what is it?"

"So haughty and so cold. And I am your higher authority! You can freeze people even in the most innocuous situations, Gabriele. It is pitiful; as your eyes did to that Pizza Hut delivery creature who brought you a cheese instead of a Bella Garden and with the extra thick crust instead of a thin crust in violation of your strict adherence to a youth fulfillment diet. You can freeze them all you like, but don't make the mistake that you have that impact on me."

"The pizza was too hot. I turned the delivery guy cold. It kept the world in an equilibrium that way."

"And on that train trip from Bangkok to Changmai to acquire those Nawin Biadklang paintingsN "

"Not only those but others in Southeast Asia. What about it? You can't surely scold me for my response to that jackass on the train. Well, Athena, I was sketching that verdant green landscape and a train stop in a small town with all of its myriad figures when this old jackass seated next to his wife said in English, 'I would like to go to sleep now.' I said 'You are over there with your wife so sleep there next to her. I don't want to be the instigator of divorce proceedings. No need to cross the aisle and come over into these seats.' He said, 'I have a ticket. I am over there. I have a lower.' I checked my ticket.

"I sleep in the lower cot," I said. "It is marked on my ticket." "How much was your ticket?" asked the old gizzard, snatching my ticket out of my hands. "1400 baht round trip," I told the old gizzard. "I paid 1600 baht for mine and so I get the lower no matter what it says on your ticket. You get the upper!" he told me. "Listen, fuck head, I'm busy now," I said as I took back my ticket. "Upper/lower? Who gives a flying fuck. I suppose I can climb the bars like a monkey and into this upper monkey coffin but it won't happen right away. I'm busy, you see. I wasn't put on this planet to serve your whims. If you are so tired take a nap in your present seat." By this time he had uniformed security guards and God knows who telling me I needed to go out with them as if I were being arrested and he was gossiping full force to every Tom, Dick, and Harry on the train making an embarrassing scene. Was I supposed to stop my work because Old Gizzard wanted to go to sleep at 6 p.m. I am not that big of a whore that I exist to please the whims of all old gizzards. So, he and his brown suited thugs got the cold stare from beginning to the end when I sealed myself up in my monkey coffin. I know I have a hard facade but that doesn't mean I don't concern myself with others. If Old Gizzard were choking to death, of course I would give him the Heimlich maneuver. If he were having a nervous breakdown I would talk sweet logic to him to appease him throughout the hours of illogical and troubled emotions. As it turned out, I think that he is lucky I didn't climb down from the metallic limbs and clog his snoring with my dirty socks choking off mouth and nostrils."

"You sound like a real bitch."

"People have had that impression of me. They have since I was a little girl. I don't mind at all. Matter of fact I think of the word as a real compliment. Your impression of me is all your own. Do what you will with it, and then bug off."

The Higher authority guffawed once again. When she gained composure she asked, "So then, should I say that you need no one?"

"Yes, you've got it, no one." Gabriele smiled complacently.

"Hmm. Maybe Antarctica would be the best choice for someone like you. I did come here for a purpose but it seems that it would be futile in the present attitude. You have gotten more cynical with the years, haven't you, Gabriele?"

"Perhaps. I don't paint any longer, you know. I just run a shop to keep my family going. His tuition is rather expensive."

"That's love. It is nothing to be cynical about."

"And what is this grand purpose of yours?"

"I just wanted you to consider whether or not, at this point, you have been an effective mother. You've done some things with good enough intentions, I know, but overall Americans judge accomplishments in a very pragmatic perspective: has it worked?"

"You've already reached your conclusion that it has not, so there isn't a lot of purpose in the question unless you just like wasting my time. He's a teenager now. It's a little late to go back in time, wouldn't you say? I doubt that there is anything that needs to be

undone, anyhow. Just as siblings compete fiercely to get mamma bird's affections so that she will feed them the biggest worms, an only child also uses his parents."

"And parents children."

Gabriele felt as if the words had smote her on her face. It stung but after a gloomy and tacit withdrawal she looked onto her higher authority and smiled gravely as one beginning to understand. Having failed her son was seeping into all previous convictions and deep into old memories themselves. She was being enlightened in a most acerbic way. It was unpleasant; but when anything came along to make her more aware she did not want to shun it. She stayed silent for a few minutes until words again bubbled up through the aperture of her mouth.

"Perhaps I did use him. By having a child I gained companionship on my journey into alonenessN "

"And?"

"And maybe the wish to finish family completely by beginning one of my own. Not good reasons I know."

"No. Keeping Peggy from seeing himN "

"Okay, it was spiteful. IO ll grant you that one."

"Quite unseemly for a goddess."

"OkayE I suppose so. Still, realistically a bad family continues its stranglehold on the errant child unless she brings closure on it by making her own family. That is just the way it is. Anyhow, I attempted to fulfill my duties to the world. I gave birth to a child and put him into an isolated area of a small town to bring his formative years in harmony with classical music and non-violent fables. But he was a child of impetus and not reflection. Born in the Gulf War, the year of truculence, by his seventh year he had beaten up some red headed girl for kissing him on the merry-go-round and had beaten the shit out of some little fuck who made a crude comment about me casting spells on men and eating their piss. School sucked him up to make him a member of truculent society. Ball competition was preferred over looking at the uniqueness of every blade of grass. What could I do? I did my best considering the fact that I prioritized my own continuing evolvment."

"And what did you learn that was so instrumental to your personal development?"

"I learned to play a shokohachi, a Japanese musical instrument." She chuckled embarrassingly.

"Your mouth always did like to go down on long instruments. Anything else?"

"I became a lesbian briefly."

"ThatO s right. Hilda was her name. When did you last communicate with her?"

"I donO t know. Four years ago, maybe."

"Forlorn Hilda. Not all that much different than Rita/Lily Lily/Rita. Das stimmt, nitch wahr?" [That's so, isn't it?] spoke the Higher Authority, for a moment changing the conversation into German.

"Oh, please, you got that from Adagio. He doesn't know what he is talking about."

"Doesn't he? He knows. I know. You know. Dear, silly little Gabriele, you are hallucinating desertions of mom and dad in all things. So you desert rather than be deserted. Remember that with kings and paupers, with great and small creatures, one can have such sweet connections, but you have to leave Fort Gabriele first."

"This mixing is a diluting of potential. Most people don't know themselves and have never had an interesting thought all their born days because they are scared to sit down with themselves for a minute. They flit around as social butterflies when they are gadflies to me. You make me sound as a nut with a major behavioral disorder. I guess you would have more grounds to call me autistic. I just don't have this strong yearning to drive myself into the thick part of the herd. If one is such a deviant, they think she is crazy. Their negative judgments are meant to pillory a person to drive him or her back into the herd.

"Just because someone has gone from a person's life doesn't mean she cannot be ebullient with that entity. The more beings that are there in the heart the more alive he or she will be! It is that simple: love and be loved!"

"Oh, you sentimental creature. Heart-- is that the receptacle of these highly prized human emotions for contemporary man? Eith emotions that make humans slaughter each other. The Egyptians thought this heart was the receptacle of thought. You make me want to puke using such silly words frivolously to reflect nothing. You talk abstractions of heart and love like such a sophist."

"Gabriele, dear stupid Gabriele of such wasted intelligence, were you really so smashed by that tank which your parents drove off in? Has life really been so flat ever since? Have you never considered that human relationships in particular are like the beautiful scents of flowers and these scents are the interaction with other entities."

"Nay, these scents as you call them are manipulative forcesN the flower trying to attract the bee to pollinate its kind, the gentleman wanting to get laid, the smiling businessman trying to woo in the money. I am sick of this flowery gunk. Matter of fact I'm damn sick and sick of you! Be gone with you, Mosquito!" And so she shoed her Higher Authority away.

She thought about that time a year ago when her hubris was so indefatigable. Hadn't she told herself back then that, should it take place, his return to Sharon would be a detachment of no more sentimental value than an extracted tooth? Then, visibly upset one given day, he announced to her that he really meant it and would be leaving immediately. It was only in her phlegmatic folding of his clothes, packing his bags, calling a taxi for him, and seeing him go away in it, that she put consistent direction into the distraught boy's ambivalent and floundering movements. Back then he couldn't even pack a suitcase for himself, as discombobulated as his thoughts were. Back then she was

so dangerously obdurate as if she were not mortal at all and had no connection to these lesser beings. Still she supposed that if he had not been refused, and had not retreated home in that same taxi, she could not have maintained her dignified stoicism indefinitely. Losing another boy to Sharon, she might well have eventually fallen into a nadir or great depression like an apoplexy felling her into a great sleep. Change, that tempest of discontent, made deciduous waste of all this impermanence that always left a person long before she would leave herself at her demise. Maybe it was auspicious that her will had been thwarted. At the time she even sensed some external force upon her that was trying to stymie her recalcitrant will. Were these the feelings of a secondary will or was it the voice of God trying to choke deleterious determination before she was choked by it? This too was an unknown. And time went by like a shell-shocked soldier.

Sang Huin's interactions at a convenience store that he often frequented were no different than at any other time. For the people whom he encountered he had, at one moment, the pugnacious haughtiness of a bull ready to charge, the next moment a conscientious withdrawal from this arrogant stance by awkward fumbling glances and gestures, and lastly a shy retreat from human interaction. So as he was at the 7-eleven at 2:00 in the morning buying some milk the same thing occurred: bullish glances into the faces of the cashiers, awkwardly attempting to locate his wallet from one of the pockets of his bag (money always having been such a dismissed tool until that inevitability of having to use it), and a hurried look of one wanting to abscond from having his fumbling interactions with King Sejong notes scrutinized as much as a wish to avoid small talk with the cashiers (Korean utterances or near utterances to which he would be as ungrammatical as a pig or therein in his native English where a fuller exchange and a denuding of himself would have to ensue).

This disorganization with Korean Won and money in general was what he knew to be a microcosm of wanting to depart from all social situations. It was his secret of dislike of humanity and feeling that he was wrong to feel this way embarrassingly disclosed by the fumbling subconscious like the disrobing of Janet Jackson's breasts. It was no wonder that the gentleman within him often ran away in the midst of social encounters.

He was even a little annoyed that there was no one behind him waiting in line and, in so doing, making his time with the cashiers a more professionally expedited encounter. But this English speaking cashier would not have any more of this being dismissed the way he had behaved unto her for months. She found his pugnacious and haughty awkwardness such an eccentric mix against his handsome backdrop. By her reasoning of things, not being so beautiful herself his blighted character made him more obtainable.

In one quick gesture she snatched his Pocket PC out of his shirt pocket and asked, "What is this?" He answered, "It is my pocket PC. Can I have it back?" He was alarmed. It was no less than a kidnapping of Gabriele and his face grimaced like an old man, making her chuckle. "No, she said. You will not get it back. Well, maybeN but only if you send to me an SMS from your mobile phone asking to have it returned." "Why do I need to do that when you understand what I'm saying in person?" he asked. "Because I want to have your phone number in my mobile." She quickly wrote down her phone number on a piece of paper

and handed it to him. There was little else he could do but to fulfill the instructions of the ransom even though the obtuse man was totally baffled by these actions. He needed the return of his beloved Gabriele, his image, his truth. He sent to her this SMS: "I don't like it when people steal my things. It isn't friendly." She read it and smiled widely for this was their first substantive dialogue. "Okay," she said, "I will return your toy but I want you to smile every time you see me from now on, and I want you to mean it." He felt excited by her storming of the wall he had built around himself and smiled more meaningfully than his usual genuine contrivances. She handed to him his change and the plastic bag containing his carton of milk. "My shift ends now. You can walk me home." She signed out of her cash register, and then winked at her coworker who giggled as the couple left the convenience store. "What is your friend amused about?" he asked. "You," she said. "Why do you want me to walk you home? Seoul is such a safe city," he said. "Safe if you are a man," she responded. He felt aroused by her. With Seong Seob no longer allowing him to penetrate, her flesh seemed all the more sumptuous despite the effluvium of cheap perfume that exuded from it. For he who lived so little in this world it seemed that he needed the physical immersion, the pierce into another human's skin, beyond all other creatures. At least it seemed to him as such; and he would have gone with her into her apartment and its bedroom had she not stopped him at the gate. This was Korea, and a Korean girl in the mainstream of the thicket would consummate a relationship only after the marital vows were declared. She kissed him. "I am free to see a late morning movie. Meet me in front of the store at ten." "All right," he said.

Three years later another spell more debilitating than this migraine took place. Whereas the other one, and ones like it, felt like the impact of being smacked against some type of a wall, this one was a gradual crescendo of being smashed into the abyss.

It was 6:00 and she was returning from a trip to New York City where she had attended a symphony with her man when she missed an entrance to a roadside park. Needing even more to stretch, she veered off the interstate to a small town.

Although it was wintertime, a new brand of boy keen to play a global sport was in a baseball diamond practicing a sundry of soccer maneuvers from kicks and stops to stylized manipulations of balls. She parked outside the diamond and got out. These male youths were kicking a mist of dust into the air in what at first seemed like a purposeless expenditure of energy but when she thought about it seemed more like a male initiation ceremony. All were so uniform in their uniforms. It seemed to her that young men and boys in particular needed a typical male activity with which to sense themselves. What they were and what they were supposed to do with themselves from the events that should bring on insouciance and imperturbability to appropriate times for masturbation would be extrapolated in this ensemble of males. As her eyes followed the dust she felt deep sympathy for these fragile creatures. Boys and their balls began to seem like such a lugubrious theme and she wondered if it could be transferred to canvas should she ever paint again. She scanned the field and its outskirts. She saw some men who were no doubt watching their sons. If a boy were to not have a father showing some interest in guiding him, if not to a positive expression of manhood that most did not have a clue about, at least an innocuous release of youthful energies on a ball, it seemed to her that

he would be lost forever. It seemed to her that he might not ever find a real vocation for himself and he would not even know if he should look up a skirt or pull on another man's zipper.

She called her man on her mobile phone. "Hi, it's me. Did you get back to your apartment okay? Good. No, I'm just taking a break from driving. What? Oh, I don't know exactly. Some little town. I'm near a ball diamond. Nothing really. Stretching and thinking my weird thoughts. Yeah, I went through a Chinese fast food drive-thru, thanks. What about you? Huh? You are breaking up a bit. I see. Okay, I guess if you are with someone I should call you later. Girl or guy friend? Uh huh. No, I'm not jealous. That is an antediluvian instinct of troglodytes. Cavemen, my Russian friend. You learn so many new words from me on a daily basis that I ought to charge you for the service. Antediluvian? No, old, out of date, ancient, prehistoric. Well, I guess you should get back to your date. Better to ball a chick than play ball with a boy. No, nothing. Just me and my weird thoughts. Purpose? Well, again, thanks for the ticket to the concert. I decided to call because I wanted you to know that I was thinking of you, although my timing seems to be all so wrong. What? Why do I make jealousy equated to primal drives of cavemen and cave mice, of mice and men? I think that is what you are asking. Think of it, my love, it is just a way for a man to make sure that he doesn't have to take care of babies that aren't his and for a woman not to lose her hunter. Okay, so I can't prove it. I'm a bit like Descartes that way despite my belief in scientific inquiry and methodology. But still one can know lots that can't be proven. It is simple and base selfishness that prompts humans to respond as they do. That is why I scorn the herds. One of my other reasons for calling is thinking about both of you, you and Nathaniel, and each of you needing each other no matter if you believe it or not. Of course. I'm not scolding you. No lectures. I agree. Yes, I know you have been kind to him, but you haven't been close. A man needs to guide a boy and a boy needs to be guided by a man. I know he is not your son, and he isn't exactly the easiest person to deal with, but he has no other father. Yeah, I know. You don't exactly live with us now. Forget it. I shouldn't have asked that I suppose. What? No. Okay, in part when I married you I thought that you would be a positive influence on him. Is that so bad? Marriages are contracts and people have expectations when they go into them. What did you expect? (Laugh). Pussy, you say? You seem to be getting that without me. Is your friend at the table with you? Oh, gone to the bathroom. That's good. God, I don't even know if you want to stay together. I know you think that friends should marry and we did. What? No, I don't want a divorce but we need to do more than once a month of seeing each other. Yes, I know. It was my crazy idea. I'm full of them. As an artist I need time alone but I'm not an artist now but a businesswoman. Yes, I'm sure I'm not jealous, as much as you might want me to be. I'm beyond that. I'm beyond instinct, beyond societal influences, beyond religion, beyond, beyond! Free to be a loose canon. Yes, I know I amuse you. So, to better amuse you I think we should meet at least twice a month or our signatures on a piece of paper will begin to seem like a distant dream. Okay, good. And could you call Nathaniel later this week just to ask him how he is? Do you still have his mobile number? Good. Everybody needs to think that someone cares for him a little no matter if he does or not (laugh)... I'm joking. Of course I am. Yes, I know you do in your own way as me in my own ways. We all have our ways."

A half hour later she got back into her car and drove into the embrace of darkness. It was 3:34 in the morning when she first saw the

roof of her quasi-hermitage from a distance. At the first glimpse of it she released a long exhalation as if, after a long exhausting journey, she needed to rest from breathing itself within the comfort of her solitary bedroom. But then seeing cars strewn on the edge of the road, she felt disconcerted as if she had driven into the wrong place while knowing that she was back home.

She felt alarmed and her mind tried to conjure up scenarios that might explain this emergency, if it were such. But upon advancing closer, she saw that there were no emergency vehicles and merely more of these emptied shells of unwanted strangers littering her drive. Unable to park there, she was forced into a backward retreat.

She parked halfway into a ditch behind most of the others and turned off her engine. There, she was stunned by loud music vibrating the windows, piercing her ears with its pollutants of action usurping meditation, and weltering in the hollows of her brain. She entered her hermitage whence all the noise originated. Inside all was being barraged in the cacophony of rap, hip hop, or some other artillery that she had neither knowledge of nor empty labels to place on that which she was adverse to know anything about. She looked on her surroundings with the consternation of one returning to charred and smoke filled ruins still in the grip of war.

Then her mood changed into something entirely different: moralistic loathing. She felt as an unwitting heterosexual man innocently defecating in a cubicle of a restroom in a shopping mall who is startled and appalled to see from that crevice interconnecting the adjacent cubicle to his own a hand one moment, a face the next, and then that hand again as it trespasses with fingers wiggling a "come to my stool and service me" gesture. For when the consternation had worn off the former whore and Victorian adulteress was repulsed by the world around her: repulsed by the nebulous clouds of smoke, the inebriating smells of beer so potent as to be tactile and viscous enough to be a liquid pouring into her lungs, this scene of teenage couples smooching and almost smooching as they got stoned in her living room, and how this generation was caught up in the same hungers making it no different from those which preceded it.

All compunction of her own interestingly varied if no more lascivious life than other earthlings vanished from all conscious thought. Even if she had latent ideas that Puritanical prudishness would be hypocritical, and even if she doubted having the moral authority to be the guardian of youth since, according to her there were no morals to guard, she intended to crash the party nonetheless.

The indignation she, an American homeowner, experienced at such intruders occupying and thereby desecrating "her" hallowed domain amalgamated with her Puritanical eagerness to excoriate all moral unregenerates. For she too was an American, that autocratic hybrid of conservative and liberal property owners, espousers, and defenders of ownership who wanted to dictate moral rules sententiously in accord with ownership agendas. As nature only had evolvement from viable elements, energy, accident, and chance into its structure a person with some financial means wanted to own and possess to be, and wanted the trespassers of her property arrested. She thought of this peculiar sense of ownership that flared within her; and although she would be amused by ruminations of its senselessness in the immediate future, now she judged it was time to be irate. It was time to act.

Disheveled angel on a loveseat: "Hello, you must be Mom." Beer bottle quaffer on a newly upholstered chair (repeating mockingly): "Hi Mom." Androgynous purple haired creature (disingenuous as a child waving at Mickey Mouse in Disneyland but directed at her, this polar bear with the stiff arms who had been mutilation at her inception, who trudged through the party): Merely waving.

The occupiers seemed to be everywhere. Some were rising from below or descending from above to stare at her from a staircase while a good many of the others were in the same room with her or waiting in the hall. As her house had myriad rooms, so she assumed, would be the amount of trespassers

Gabriele (to all): "Who or what the hell are you?" Angel (as if the question were directed to her alone): "I am an angel." Angel's partner on the loveseat: "Angel of the streets. That would be more like it."

He was using his fingers to comb through her disheveled hair. Hair that combed or not was comely in youth. Youths who were insouciant and free of financial worries, nonchalant to the shadow of their adulthood of entrapment that they were stepping into like a snare. Shadows of ineluctable errors in the making of one's own family that for now were not their own. She imagined the angel "dirtying up" the back of her sofa with the hair fibers of her mop. Then she surmised the dirty invaders as a whole. They were getting high on more than the present moment. If they were still floating on a dispersed cloud of smoke they would soon be seeking to inhale more to keep themselves high until the inevitability of sleep would make them founder. If they had not already burnt a whole or spilled beer onto any of her furniture they would have surely done so had she kept her original plan of staying in New York City for the night. She loathed them for being the dirty ravagers of her home that they were but, wise to herself and the tricks therein, she knew that she loathed the occupiers more from the envy of their youth than for any carnal carnival that they had imposed upon her hermitage schemed together in the expectation of her absence.

Angel: "Okay, I'm a street angel." Laughter in the room to which Gabriele also laughed albeit begrudgingly. Thick lips: "Call me Mr. P. How do you do, Mother? Would you allow me to kiss your cheek?" More hysterical laughter. Was her role as the mommy storming the party something so farcical? Was she such a farce as a mother? If she were it was from the fact that her intelligence was greater than the role. This was what she told herself. She grabbed thick lips by one of his long ears and forced him to kneel. "Do you think I'd let an ugly dog like you slobber on me?" she blared. There was more hysterical laughter. The room itself seemed to scoff her pretension to motherhood within the sheer volume of its cacophonous and sneering laughter. Her obdurate eyes fell as solid boulders into his retina pools. Then suddenly, her cold eyes dismissed him as of having no more importance than any insect, and she brushed him aside.

Were not they impertinent? If it had been directed toward anyone else she would have approved, but their impertinence to her was a contemptible act mocking the authority she had to dismiss them with. Their sedentary refusal to leave her immediately as she entered her domicile was a criminal action. "Party's over, party's over!" she screamed six times into random faces that were seated in a semicircle.

But this only increased their laughter at the redundancies of the mad mommy. For a year now there had been her own repudiation of the residual smells of cocaine; briefly returning from the shop to find him lounging around in the house in his underwear; music slaughtering her contemplations; sitting languidly in meetings at the school to discuss his truancy and feeling as a broken drum, a defunct instrument that could not obtain change; his running away for days without her being able to fathom where he went; talks where, without propitiating, she admitted having not been there as much as the domestic sort, but cautioning him to secure his future by attending classes and studying as diligently as he was able to do; scoldings and beatings that were also to no avail; watching small but expensive items disappear from the home and telling herself that she meant to get rid of them anyhow; and now this.

"Where is he!" she demanded to know from the sundry people who had risen from the pit of the house to the parlor.

"Up!" said someone; and she found him in her bed copulating with his girl beneath him. She grabbed him by the neck, dragging the naked body through the frenetic crowds. With a burly frame kept muscular by her ritual of weekly if not daily racket ball sessions, she was able to pull him around no differently than she had when he was five years old. Enjoying his ride and his naked exhibition beyond any pleasure he had ever felt before, he squealed with laughter even unto being hurled into the snow.

"I love you Mom," he guffawed.

"IO ll bring your bitch out next and you can do that in the streets." As she turned to do just that someone brought out NathanielO s clothes and the crowd began to disperse from the house.

When he returned late in the afternoon she was on her deck. Like her migraine, an unpredictable storm was coming upon her. Trees hurled their limbs at the dusk because they themselves were being hurled. They were angered because they were being angrily smote. It seemed to her that everything was smote in jilts of unpredictable existence, and love itself was no guarantee of anything. It was selfishly using a child and being used and merely this. Bland philistine lives devoid of color and galleries in a marriage where two conventional parents were always present could produce Klu Klux Klan members, Timothy McVeighs, serial killers, snipers, child molesters, unibombers, or bigoted bible thumpers blowing up abortion clinics. Weakened and in pain, she half way yearned for a priest to hand her a round piece of unleavened bread to melt in her mouth for a reduction of tension in her life, the melting of her quandaries, and the belief that crucifixions and violence and those who were born in the wrong socioeconomic state and whose short and painful lives were consumed by hard labor and drudgery for survival in the injustices and truculence that abound were all part of GodO s plan. She wistfully thought of the statues of saints and patron saints that had their home warming familiarity. Then he approached her.

"Hi. Sorry about everything. Teenagers, right? We like parties. I didnO t have permission and things got out of control. Are you angry?"

She noticed how muscular he now was. For the first time she felt intimidated by it, seated there as weakened as she was. She cleared her throat and looked on him like an object such as a wall that she

would see and her hubris would bypass as immaterial. He had felt it before and hated that look of hers beyond all others. Her treatment of the dog, he assessed, was sometimes better than this. "I think I'll try something," she mumbled aloud contemplatively. "When do you think you'll be paid from that burger joint you work for?"

"Why?"

"Do you have money?"

"Some."

"I don't think I'll have you as a son any longer. Still, it's a little hard—not impossible though—to throw you out. Stay as a tenant if you want. You can give me half what you get. That way you can stay. We'll do this for a time and see how it goes. And if it doesn't go then you can go. I'll ask you to leave if it doesn't work. I'll force you out."

"You stopped the allowance. That is why I'm working there so much on the weekends with so little pay when I should be studying."

"I didn't want it to go into dope."

"Oh, please. You are the one who smokes joints."

"Different. It is medicine for my migraines, and I don't take it often. Pay half and then you can stay in your area below, and only this. Half and you can stay."

"All right," he said.

The next morning she woke up from a strange dream in which she was driving over her son the way Michael had run over the Indian boy; and as she woke up startled from the dream she was again startled in her awakened state. Nathaniel was there smirking at her in a corner of her bedroom, crunching on a cup of ice, and the shadow of his burly form was impinging on the edge of her bed. She was mute in a cold chill. He was there for a few seconds and then he was gone.

She again stayed at home the next day since her headache was now fully a migraine; but unable to concentrate on reading a book, she soon felt lonely and bored with so much resting in bed. She brought in a stray cat that she had been feeding for a month. It strangled her footsteps when she moved, cried if it wasn't touched, and when she put it on her lap it tried to suck on the buttons of her shirt as if it had regressed to the unopen-eyed newborn needing to be nursed and to immerse itself in a mother. The behavior was strange and she was half-tempted to throw it out had unwanted empathy not infected her thoughts. Furthermore, it gave her subject for thought, which she liked so well; and whenever an event or being provided her with a subject for rumination it gave her a gift that superseded the pleasure or pain of the interaction. If she had morality it was that of empathy and to measure a thing based upon it giving her subject for rumination. It was from the cat that she garnered, from her experience with it, that memories of traumatic events pressed into the actions of all things. She was watching Star Trek reruns, and drooling chewing tobacco into an aperture of a Coca Cola can when Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy were beaming up at the same time as her son. Obviously he didn't go to

school. She told herself that she didn't "give a damn" and this time it was essentially true.

"Little pig, little pig, will you let me come in?" he asked from the doorway of her bedroom.

"It all depends," she said stoically. "If you have money you can leave it and go. If you don't have money you have broken two fundamental clauses in our contract: one that forbids you from this area of the domicile and a second that you have to pay what is owed to me." She was angry that even now, for his sake, she threw away money on tuition and tutors, was living in a house that was really beyond her means, and was a businesswoman, a lowly merchant, for his sake. She had sacrificed for him and it had been a waste.

"I'm not paying anything to you," he said.

"Is that so," she asked calmly. "Then really there is no reason to be up here, is there?"

"All right," he said and went away.

And then, in that evening of the third day of Migraines, her flow of energy was now a desiccated bed of rock and soot. She merely lay on the sofa near the billiard table with the cat sleeping on her lap and her eyes staring at the individual and collective tiles of the ceiling. She too had regressed for like a child she was afraid to make any movement lest the cat be disturbed; and this pathos, like a child's, was from discerning the vulnerability of all things that could only be peered from the scope of one's weakness. He again came to her. He was grinning complacently. She wondered why he was now moving beyond his boundary: and yet he was male, and no different than any Ghengis Khan who conquered new turf and made foreign natures submissive.

She wanted to say, "Hello, honey, could you give me a wet washcloth" but she did not want to approach him from weakness and so she said, "You've trespassed the agreed boundaries."

"Uh uh!" he negated. "You're down here in the family room, and down here is mine, isn't it? Maybe I should get the cops." He laughed. She didn't say anything. "Whose car is in the drive?" he asked.

"It's your graduation present. I bought it months ago. I had them bring it out today when I had a clear purpose."

"I'm not graduating."

"You are and I am," she said. "It is time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to leave. Time to end this state we have found ourselves in." Her heart was beating rapidly and she could barely slur the words from her mouth by imagining them to come from some source outside herself. "I've been waiting. I wasn't sure the context of giving it to you: a birthday or Christmas gift, a banana waved under your nose to get you through school, or to facilitate a permanent departure."

"You're kicking me out?"

"Yes."

"Where would I go?"

"You just go. Just as I went to Ithaca. You just go, deciding that you will suffer through anything so as to end it with people who failed you." Tiring, she stopped and put her hands on her pounding head. Then seconds later she continued. "Anyway you stop thinking about them. You will them into non-existence, or as close as you can, because as cold as it is nothing else works."

"What sort of a person tells her son to leave?" The reality of being cut off with no one filled him with dread and his voice had a whining undertone for he was questioning if the end of family had been his aim.

"You will them into non-existence," she murmured in a despondent redundancy, "because to even take in one nice enough memory would bring in a stampede of others to trample over you leaving you nothing but bitter in those memories, never able to reestablish yourself anew. No need for sentimentality: will a permanent end. Resurrecting yourself anew is only possible with the gates closed." She was remembering that day she arrived in the airport visibly pregnant and intent to move to the East Coast to begin family anew. They inveighed the Rice University graduate school graduate with their artillery of words: whore, loser, [bastardess] whom they had taken in, and not in [her] right mind. She had been matched to an old doctor named Jerry, hand-Picked by Peggy. Marriage to him and living the remainder of the myriad days of her life in Emporia, Kansas would have been the payment for her indulgence in being allowed to study abroad in that quasi-nation of Texas. Merging the more affluent family to hers had been the price for Rice that Peggy had put on her head. Standing there unwed and pregnant, the bulging belly an ignominy, they saw her as ungrateful for their charity in taking her in. They believed that her education had gone to her head, and that she was so unlike that little girl they trained to be a housekeeperN the one who did her perfunctory duties even if her eyes were hard and cold toward those who tried to finger her. Without words those eyes had demanded all these males to get their fingers out of her and put them into their own rectums but back then she had done it in wordless etiquette as a respectful family member. But as a graduate she was releasing her latent honest thoughts in contemptuous words. She was as a madwoman rebelling against that designated role as a lesser family member by a pregnancy and a declaration to leave them forever.

"Making oneself anew. It can be done if the gates are shut completely and the herds of memories are kept at bay. Then there is no bitterness to poison the present. But be forewarned that if one creates family of his own the new self and the new life might go awry. Then he or she needs to fulfill the expectations of the new family, needs to sacrifice himself for their sake, perhaps is in a detestable job, and needs to raise children with only that defunct model of a bad parent as the example of being a parent for oneself." She saw his smirking and it aggravated her. "Don't be so amused by what you don't understand."

"You always say weird shit all the time. What else can I do but laugh at it? You aren't really kicking me out are you?" He asked this but she did not say anything. "Are you in a lot of pain?"

"Some," she said. "My medicine is in the kitchen. Could you bring it to me, and could you bring back a cold washcloth too?"

"You are kicking me out of the house and yet I should help you."

"You don't have to."

"Have to help you or have to leave?"

Either one was at her lips but she could not release that wisp of air and her bottom lip began to tremble. She suddenly realized that she was not watching someone else say these things that she thought should not have been said and not say things that should have been said. "Help me. You don't have to, but you do have to leave"

"No," he whined as tears weltered in the confines of his confused eyes. "You can pain me but I wouldn't want to pain you." He said this in such dulcet ingenuousness. He was like that child he once was-- the child who had taken an empty tray of a TV dinner, filled it with water, and picked wild flowers to bring to his beloved mother.

Going into the kitchen he tried to think, as he looked for the pills, what words he might enchant to propitiate her, his sustenance; but his howling dog, chained up near the swimming pool, kept destroying his concentration so he went to the deck to silence it.

"Bitch," he yelled as he looked down from the balustrade, "shut your fucking snout!" The dog continued to howl and so he repeated himself with a more angered vehemence. Only after trudging halfway down the steps did the howling stop. He bent down over the railing and looked at the dog again. His eyes dropped into the dog's like stones and the animal began to whimper. He glanced up at the darkening clouds, sighed, and sensed that he and the dog were the same; and then a visceral malaise about the futility of all things began to permeate all his thoughts and his vitriol mitigated. "Upset that she brought in the cat instead of you? I'm sure you are but you're thrown your bones and are nicely kept here ignored and forgotten. What's wrong with that? You're back home after two weeks in the kennel. It seems you should be happy with that."

He sat down on one of the lower steps, whittling away an edge near his feet with his pocketknife. At first he hoped to see answers in his current dilemma, but then deciding that there were none unless that gained by time and obscurity he thought, "Maybe she won't think like this in a few days. I'll keep out of sight and ride it out. Not look too anxious for the car. See how it goes. That's the best thing to do."

He spoke to the dog. "Get back. Such stinking breath, bitch." The dog backed away a few steps. "So, you were in a cage at the kennel. She knew that I'd never take care of you when she made that trip to Thailand to buy paintings for this so called gallery of hers--just a partitioned backroom, more like a closet, that caused her to rename the store into The Gallery. Me, the arsonist, was in my own little kennel in a cheap hotel room. But then yours was a little worse wasn't it? You did not get any money deposited into your bank account from which to buy booze and a bitch. I never need a whore. Just a willing patron, but you have to take them to expensive restaurants and treat them like they are the center of the universe, be soft to them. Takes up a lot of time, so I'm always tempted to get more professional whores that you can

buy outright but sometimes they are too expensive. Not that I haven't had some. If you pawned off something of hers, all things are possible."

Whittling the wood was more than merely the whittling of the minutes of life but a wistful hope that time itself would carve a purpose to his days that no patriarch had done. Expressed in the subliminal connotations of gestures defacing property it was hope hopelessly rendered as boyhood tagged him and ran off leaving the stark ogre of manhood overtaking and merging into him. The dog came to him, ringing the saliva-drenched towel to dry on the rack of his face like a gift. The unbidden intimate gesture of the dog was so repugnant that he drove the knife into the bitch. He was startled by how the clay of flesh was so easily pierced. Not wanting to hear the agonized yelping of the bitch he re-obtained the knife from its sheath of flesh and cut the throat in one little action that would end life suddenly.

He hated the bitch and the bitch who had given to him the bitch. By his mother upsetting him terribly, she had thrust him into this role as slaughterer that by the blood alone seemed as a vile and malicious rampage against life itself that the killing of birds and crawdads had not done. Hating the bitch and the bitch who had made him the breaker of the wine glass, he ascended to the kitchen, pulled out a glass from the cupboard, and returned to the corpse before all the blood had bled into the thin layer of snow. Finding when he returned that it had mostly done so he scooped the reddened snow into his glass and returned for the Imtrex and Topiramate.

As his mother drank the melted dog with her pills, he hated her even more for dashing his innocence to pieces. He grabbed the glass out of her hands, disgorged the contents into her face, raised her in his arms, and razed her onto the billiard table. There he began to undress her. "No," she said weakly but no utterance would have stopped it. He took down his pants. Banging and piercing into her, within were the voices of childhood peers telling him that his mother was a witch who put spells on men and drank their "pee." It was as if her head detached itself from the body and was rolling, slamming into billiard balls, and rebounding against the edges of the table only in reality it was attached to the debased physical extension of herself that bumped against a sundry of balls in the tossing of this world.

Chapter 43

The catalysts of a migraine being blood vessels that constrict blood flow as they dilate externally, and the headaches themselves being the reduced metabolism that is the consequence of the constriction and the dilation: she knew them and their impact well. She was feeling unprecedented surges of pain deeper than she ever had before; still they were nothing to her, catatonic and naked as she was on a billiard table for a period of hours. Lying face forward in a state of shock as the body cuddled to the clothing that was beneath her—clothing that absorbed a bit of her blood and incontinent discharge while the rest seeped into the fabric of the table—she was a veritable puddle there unto herself, and her mental state was not much different than severed consciousness. For the most part it skid like blowing trash that moved with the elements and had no sense of itself in space and time. Occasionally there were seconds of sensing something, or imagining herself sensing something. It was some type of boxed light or illuminated squares like

the pattern of her grandmother's quilt and with it was static as a deafening cloud of locusts. She was not trapped in the boxes because there was no she. Likewise, she was not exactly listening to the sound for to do so would be to have intent and for intention there would need to be a self that she did not have.

The monotony of the enclosure of boxed light compacted with that masticating rumbling sound of the descent of insectual clouds: when seeming to be at all this was all there was. And such seconds of coming to herself were as of putting toes into the cold waters of a swimming pool and then suddenly pulling out again.

Whereas a hallucination like the tunnel of light was an instrument of the psyche to delude a dying soul that there was a positive within the termination of being, hers, which she encountered in the third hour of her figurative demise, was more like regeneration. To avoid more pain by accepting death was the aim of the former but for the latter it was a time, a half-life, before some renewal could begin. Then light and locusts were transmuted into balls and banging.

The black ball and the myrmidons of the black ball were moving like the cars of a train around the table with individual parts sometimes banging against the edge and rebounding but always to return to that designated train in that ineluctable orbit. The pull of the eight ball was gravity in a sense like a sun moving ever so slightly in space and by its movements capturing smaller entities or the whirlpool formed in the sinking of a ship. But why was the larger black billiard ball moving to begin with? Inertia? What was the prime mover of inertia? The answer she would not know even if she were aware of a she to know something, which she didn't.

It seemed to her, if there were a her, which there was not in such a state, that the moving train of balls sometimes slowed down and curved into letters as if they meant to communicate something incommunicable, too painfully incommunicable, like the image of a US soldier who had a hand hideously swollen from the radiation he received from the A-bomb experiments on Bikini Island-- hideous images thumping consciousness until it became something other than consciousness, something altogether surreal.. If there had been more of them these billiard balls might have come together to spell out a message one letter at a time. But these Pythagoreans had numbers tattooed to them as mute and wordless as they were. Though numbers they nonetheless conveyed:

-- Andrei Linde began a paradigm shift in cosmology that allowed for theories other than the Big Bang or Steady State theories when he proposed that the universe or universes were self-replicating and inflationary.

--The mixture of hydrogen, methane, ammonia, and water vapor was bombarded with lightning, and in the course of time generated amino acids that could produce protein, but how a self-replicating organism of DNA sequences evolved from this has no plausible theory.

--The Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins was an original means of envisioning organisms as temporary, reproductive homes existing solely for the purpose of allowing genetic material to thrive eternally, and from it a new branch of social sciences known as sociobiology emerged.

--Wild wheat and barley live naturally in the area between Eastern

Turkey and the Caspian Sea. Some time between 12,000 and 8,000 BC, women must have discovered that by sowing the seeds of these grains they could reduce the amount of time required to gather fruits and vegetables. In so doing they allowed sedentary life in organized cities to emerge.

--Amonhotep IV (1353-1337 BC) changed his name to Akhenaten or Akhenaton, which meant, "Aten is satisfied." Although unable to retain conquered lands like Palestine or succeed very well in military campaigns, this pharaoh's emphasis of the sun god, Aten, allowed a more naturalistic art to flourish.

--Cleopatra (69-30 BC) was the last ruler of the Ptolemaic dynasty which ruled Egypt from 51-30 BC. As one of the strongest women in the ancient world, she was idealized by her people as a reincarnation of Isis.

--Most owls are nocturnal and spend daytime in a quiet and inconspicuous roost. Their activities consist of preening, combing plumage with their claws, screeching, hooting, whistling and snorting

--When owls bob and weave their heads it can appear as if they are exhibiting curiosity concerning the world around them in a humanoid gesture, but in fact they are merely attempting to improve their three dimensional concept of whatever it is that they are looking at. It is no wonder that people, such as they are in readily subscribing to the superstitions of their brothers and sisters in the herd, attributed wisdom, prophecy, and witchcraft to the bird.

--As a successful predator feared by the other birds, lone owls are sometimes mobbed by flocks of rival birds and forced to depart from its roost because of the harassment.

--In keeping with the first two laws of thermodynamics, organisms can neither create nor destroy energy but can only transform it from one form to another.

What she was thinking curled there like an aborted fetus N there being in a corner where she could see a beam of sunshine from a distant window as she stayed hidden behind a large chair, obscure within its shadow N she did not know. She did not even know how she got into her library, or even that she was there.

There, in this fetal position on the floor, she was not as ingenuous as a child for she was more innocent than this. An infant had its cries and smiles to manipulate responses but only she, a non-lachrymose mute, timid and shaking but with eyes open to any compassionate deity who might transcend from the beam, had such ingenuousness. Had someone other than Nathaniel gotten beyond the locked door she would have reached her hands out to the deliverer and the deliverance unreservedly. Once she even slipped into the raiment of memories where a self (presumably herself) interacted with another; and it was from it that, all so briefly, she imagined herself there in human form feeling of Thai silk with Hilda opening the door to find her. Behind the leather of that antique and ostentatious, patriarchal chair that had become her protector and shield she was a human being for the first time, needy, needing to be needed, and enmeshed as a member of the herd. There was even a second where Hilda fused into Rita/Lily and instead of coming to her, it was she, Gabriele, who came into that

apartment in Ithaca, embracing her friend in the joy of comforting another being and just being there in the throngs of shared human thought and feeling.

The hours led into dusk and the beam of sunlight floundered behind an opaque screen and then withered into darkness. In that vacuous darkness within and without she remained a convalescent to the impairment of memory which could not be lobotomized no matter how much she yearned for it to be. As before, there were some sane and enlightening ideas in her hallucinations, which had she been able to record them in her madness, upon reflection might have shown a world beyond Fort Gabriele. But all her thoughts were merely shards within the hours. It did not even dawn on her to go to the bathroom. Without meaning to do so she urinated where she sat and even this fetid puddle soaking into the carpet seemed distant and detached as if not having been perpetrated by the self.

By this time truly crazy thoughts interacted with memory as if the mind were attempting to cause her to recognize herself in the midst of absurd fantasy. She believed that she was her Ferrari; that in each city where she drove the traffic lights always turned green at her approach; that she, the car, often reached into her window for the snuff on her dashboard which she would put into the gas tank as she drove south; that she would have gone all the way into Mexico, departing completely from the truculence of American society, were it not for that red light in Fayetteville, Arkansas; that after five long minutes she, that car, felt restless before the ongoing red, turned right, and moved up a steep hill until she was at a Confederate cemetery; and that there on a gravel road in the thickets of Elm trees, huge Evergreens, and weathered tombstones she felt a kinship with these deceased secessionists grouped according to states N

Legs on a bed (presumably her own) and ants on the sheets crawling upon those legs -- empty cities and this feeling of being forlorn and banished in a world of no people N an uninhabited White House where no flag blew N flaming World Trade Center towers and her eyes looking up in horror N people falling wordlessly out of hundred story windows and herself thinking that Aten, Athena, Jehovah or some god outside of manO s feeble conceptualizations of one would surely deliver them by using clouds as baseball mitts but not feeling surprised, only disappointed, to be living in such a godless realm N gluttonous nations fighting for the free flow of oil, and herself seeing them on the evening news N a maze of rooms in her home divided like Baltic states N wanting something to impale into the concrete of her makeup when she went to galleries, museums, and these art partiesN herself, her complete self, with Nathaniel as the two of them watched her cat, Mouse, sniff the room for bugs; herself, her complete self, telling him that "all creatures need to feel industrious no matter whether they accomplish anything or not," hoping that subtle clues would inspire him to attempt his homework N the chest of her husband, the man with the unmemorable name, inhaling and exhaling and herself floating on it in the undulations of an ocean.

At this time she was not even aware that her fingers were pinching air as if a brush lay between them or that she was tracing out owls with her hands as if this was magically transmuting them onto the walls. Owls and more owls she patterned out N not regular barn owls, and not saw-whet owls, but Arctic owls living alone in cold snowy deserts. An hour into this some consciousness of what she was doing took place and the word "Paint!" flashed over her mind in a conflagration for she was

afraid of falling into complete madness.

Opening the door, she crouched on her four legs as if in crawling through tall grass she could extricate herself from the land of her enemies to a land of lambent color. Scurrying from room to room, she at last found that which she sought; but she became terrified at finding a photograph of Nathaniel on a table near her paints and she retreated from it. She crawled into a corner and for twenty minutes she kept her eyes closed and her body shook in chills of terror before courage began to replenish within her. Reentering her fortress with color and instruments, she stood on one of the upper bookshelves that surrounded the whole room of the library. Dashing paint into solitary stoic owls, in one moment she became cognizant enough to see that each one was without any variation from the others because life was incessantly cruel without variation. The room was in total darkness apart from a bit of moonlight that kept her task possible. Then something divine came out of the moonlight. It was not a deity for it was flesh and blood as she.

"Gabriele," sang Rita/Lily happily. Then, like an empath, her visage changed as had the compassionate face of Gabriele's grandmother, and as had the mood ring that Gabriele wore as a teenager. "What are you doing? Are you okay? Can you understand me?"

Gabriele's bottom lip trembled and she dropped her paintbrush on the floor. Then she accidentally tipped over the paint. "My friend, my friend," she murmured.

"Yes, Gabriele, yes I am your friend. Don't be afraid. I am with you now." From at first seeming to comport her usual uncertain hesitancy, Rita was now appearing as a decisive voice according to the perspective of the child before her.

Gabriele pulled back inside herself for a moment, uncertain about swapping roles with the callow and manic-depressive neighbor whom she once cared about. The idea of friendship was beginning to befuddle her and she looked dazed, swept away in a mist of adult skepticism for that which was not in her experience. But overall she was ingenuous, and as one who was ingenuous she retained hope in foreign concepts. "Friendship. Really? I have existed all these long 39 years without any."

"No, you only thought that you did not have them."

"I didn't forget you, you know. I haven't forgotten you."

"We are here together so we haven't forgotten each other."

"Together in a dream?" Gabriele asked.

"Sometimes dreams have a reality unto themselves."

"I wasn't good to you, I know. I'm so sorry."

"I cried for a week when you left. I cried because you did not tell me that you were leaving. But it is okay now. I don't mind now. You are better and brighter than me, and I understood that you weren't thinking of me then, that I was nothing to you then. But it is all in the past. Now we just need to get you well."

"Am I sick?"

"You will be well. You will be well soon."

"Rita/Lily, what has happened to me? I don't understand any of it!" she cried.

"Hold on, my dear. I'm afraid that you will fall."

"Please!"

"Be careful! Stay unperturbed. Look at the paint. It has splattered onto the floor."

"What happened to me?"

"It is better to not think of it. Far worse things have happened, as bad as this is or seems to be. They have, and they have been overcome by mere mortals."

"Is he here?"

"No, he is gone. Didn't you hear the car drive away?"

"Yes."

"He'll be back, won't he?"

"No. You saw him with a suitcase in his hands."

"He spat in my face with that bag in his hands."

"Yes, my dear. Let it go from you. You are a goddess. You are beyond the cruelty of this world."

"Oh, Rita!" she cried and fell into hysterical sobs.

"Stay calm, my dear. Don't fall from the bookshelf."

Gabriele regained her composure and smiled lugubriously at the moonlight as well as at her friend of the moonlight. Even though nature was sometimes cruel it was beautiful; and even if hallucinations were derangements this one was kinder than any reality she had experienced.

"Maybe I should go somewhere else, Rita. I could go away into the northern parts of Canada."

"Newfoundland?"

"Oh yes, Newfoundland! It sounds so beautiful."

"They cull seals there. They beat and impale them in the most inhumane manner. It is better than American culling of its unique people but no, cruel places like that are not for a goddess like you who has seen too much cruelty and pain as is."

"Look at my paintings, Rita/Lily," said Gabriele in retaining the nine years and deleting her thirty.

"Yes, beautiful my dear. You are so talented. What a beautiful artist you will be."

"I think I was wanting to bring back the owl again."

"It is dead, as is the dog, as is so much. No, don't climb down. Not that way!"

"Which way? Oh, look, my vagina is bleeding profusely! This is not normal bleeding. It's damaged! I'm damaged!"

"Yes."

"And the blood is on my hands."

"It will wash off. And you will get well. You are already better than you were."

"Why is the blood on my hands and vagina?"

"You've been mixing some of the blood from your private area. You've been putting it into your paint."

"That is strange, isn't it?"

"Yes my dear. It is part of the shock. Don't concern yourself with it. No one has seen this just you and I. Please do me a little favor. Can you? Are you listening? The bookshelf on this side is not steady. I want you to slowly slide down to the other part of the room."

"I don't feel real and my entire body feels numb like it doesn't belong to me."

"It is part of the shock but you are coming to yourself. You are."

"Are you real?"

"What's real? Will you be here in a hundred years? You need me, and that makes you more real than you ever have been before. Come and slide down a little further. Near the open window. That's it." Gabriele scooted carefully to the other side of the room where the bookshelf went over the window. "Yes, good; now crawl down onto a lower shelf and let me take you from this state."

"Yes," said Gabriele, and she swung down to the third shelf.

"Good my dear. Look, I am here too. Now we will dive together."

"Dive? But you don't want me to fall."

"Fall from the bookshelf, no." She hesitated as if not wanting to say anything more.

"What is it, Rita/Lily? Tell me as a friend."

"If you were to go back you would be stone. There is no life in that. Really there is no other choice. We will dive from the window."

"From the window? It is three stories high."

"Yes, if we just jump we might miss the exit. We will do it together and depart from all of this death."

Chapter 44 Conclusion of Gabriele

Then she was looking up at the unhinged diagonal teetering of the bookshelf and glancing back at this strewn rubble of books girded about her on the floor. She judged that the bookshelf and the diagonal teetering of a mind were analogous to each other not so much from what they lacked as from what they possessed. Both were on one last hinge really, neither one was completely gone, and both could continue on in this state for as long as the elements that made them did not unravel by decay or degeneration.

She guffawed and the guffaw droned on monotonously into a dry acrimonious hysteria precipitated by a need for relief from loss, lament, and this feeling that she was vile for being violated in this most repugnant way; but this laughter was essentially the revelatory irony that madness, in whole or in part, was willed into existence, or at least hers was. Not she who was a consummate actress unto herself.

She had missed her suicidal exit from sensing that the right bounce before the leap would bring it all down, and it had, making the wish to live more dominant than the wish to die. Now with bruised buttocks there in the rubble of ideas, unable to think of any reason that she had averted her demise, pain tore at her inside and out.

Conscious will had devised suicide that the instinct to live had thwarted. Before this, somewhere early into the "madness" when the shock of this horror had passed, her ongoing madness into the hours had been merely a conscious choice. Both had been her own scheming, her own devising.

She got up in full recognition of herself, her surroundings, and the memory that thumped inside her brain. This memory of the rape played over and over and the monotony exacerbated the thumping. As a living entity, one lived without a clue to the reason of it all. One rose in pain and moved as she was doing now, for how could even a creature of contemplation contemplate without movement away from the sedentary gaze of one specific thing? Did she really contemplate more than others, and were here contemplations more trenchant than others? She assumed so and that it was a mixture of her own genius and her obdurate wish to not be one of the herds. It was her wish to be a unique person who was not afraid of homesteading in the self and listened to and experimented with original thoughts that a good intelligence removed of cacophony devised. It was her belief that this was the only real life for it was beyond delegated roles and instinct.

But as she went into the bathroom to vomit she thought such a reaction was as feeble and absurd as homesteading within the herds. Should she throw up what little energy she had? Would she let an external event discombobulate her in such a nervous disorder? This thing that happened to her was repugnant rape but, she argued, only societal norms made it viler than other forms of rape. It had not harmed her irrevocably. Only the horrific memory would harm her and it,

memory, was within the self. Only she could create pain to herself. Only she could continue self-flagellation lodged there in the brain whipping herself in memory. No, she answered herself, she would not let memory maim her.

She filled up the tub with cold soapy water. Going to extremes by the attempt at sterilizing herself in hot water would have been a natural response, and it was in the fear of scolding herself that she avoided the tab controlling the hot water altogether. She liked the coolness and the vibrant stimulation that it saturated onto her body. In the frothy suds she tried to sculpt the rough external shapes of the ice sculptures that she and Kato had made during the snow festivals of Sapporo. With her fingers she traced these suds-sculptures the way they once were as ice, but the suds only lasted for a moment, a reminder that time went by like a shell-shocked soldier.

But there was only so much enjoyment that one could have in hell, and one thought kept pecking like a vulture on the corpse of her brain: was she cleansing it all away? The semen had gone to the uterus and then into the oviduct or the fallopian tubes. How would she get it out now that it was there? Menstruation and those hungry janitor cells called macrophages that were responsible for dead cell removal would cleanse her of such things in the course of time. She needed to wait without going out of her wits. This was what she told herself, and yet still she poured half of a bottle of shampoo onto her head and body and

the rest she poured into her vagina and began to scrub. "If only," she told herself, "I had a washcloth with that scouring side like those one gets in a Japanese sento!" Having none, she scrubbed even harder. "Still," she said, "this is absurd. Nothing will get it out but natural processes over the course of time. As repugnant as it is by instinct, it is no more repugnant than him having grown in me to begin with. I must override instinct with logic. Stay calm. Stay calm."

But one moment her equilibrium tilted and she found that the control of her thoughts was slipping away. She thought of her mother braiding her hair when she was a very young girl, and how Peggy had often taken her out for ice cream. Were these women so unforgivable, so unreachable now? She just wanted to grab them by the sleeves and yank them back to her but all had gone to the point of no return and these situations of estrangement were, she believed, the unparalleled human tragedy. And then she thought of how, after walking with Nathaniel through Cornell University and eating ice cream sandwiches with him one time, she took him to a mall to buy for him clothes that she could not easily afford. She remembered how during this time she went with him into the men's bathroom to get him started on his own "Go to urinal 425. It looks lower." "Urinal 425" he repeated in delight as he read 425 from the wall. "Lady, what the hell are you doing in a man's bathroom," demanded a uriner. "Peeing," she told him coldly. "Zip it up, man. Zip it out, Adagio." Was the boy too so unforgivable, so unreachable now? This sweet lost boy she too wanted to take by the sleeves and yank back to her but he too had gone to this point of no return. This estrangement was, she believed, the unparalleled human tragedy of all unparalleled human tragedies.

At this time she picked up her mobile telephone and dialed Information to get the number for a rape crisis hotline. However, as she was in the process of making the call she could not think how mere mortals could guide the more advanced creature, or perfected mutant,

that she was. Assessing that it should be she who should be giving crisis intervention to the herds it suddenly dawned on her that working at some type of crisis hotline might be her part-time vocation for the future. She would only need to pick up a telephone, reflect feelings the way a calm stream might cast one's reflection, subtly throw in ideas for them to ponder that would challenge them in new directions according to her training as a counselor, and guide them to social work agencies and resources in the community. She would never need to see the faces of fellow counselors or fellow victims of abuse and madness; and furthermore her thoughts would not be stymied within the paperwork of regular psychologist-prostitutes by such a dabbling.

And yet it was an entirely different phone call that she made instead, and after making it she then asked herself whether she should make another one. She wondered if she should call the man with the unmemorable name. "No," she thought. "There are realities that if words are used to describe them people will sic the men in white coats with their strait jackets on the verbose culprit." She didn't want her words to be mistaken as a source of mad delusion as they no doubt would be.

She would just dress herself blandly after a time of soaking in the tub--not that even hours spent there would make her feel clean unless she controlled her feelings and willed concluded cleanliness into her thoughts. And after that she did not know. She sliced off an ice cap of a mountain of soap and it flew toward her like a garuda. Yes, she told herself, "I will fly on Garuda Indonesia Airlines and mingle with common people of Jakarta -- paint the world as it is." But as she thought about it, the subject seemed more of a distant plan. "Before this I need to sell off this inane property that I have, but that can't be done in a day. Maybe in the meantime I could go to the industrial sector of the city and get a job in the new Tyson's tortilla factory stuffing dough into the machines. They are hiring now. I could blow kisses to men in hairnets. I've always been curious what these simple folk are like. Maybe their lives are better. Anyhow, it would provide me with some experiences that I could sketch. I need to practice sketching for a while and regain my talents, anyway. Yes, I need to practice before I go off to Jakarta and do it for real. Oh, and I would need to train someone else to be the slave manager of the shop. I can't train any one of my employees immediately. It takes time and I would need to witness them in action before I would ever sign someone over for such a feat. I can't even go back to work until I recuperate. But no matter what, I have to live here until I can sell this place off; so to make that bearable there must be a great conflagration of all things that belonged to that devil. There should be no reminder of him. Whatever can't burn can go to the Salvation Army. And about this man with the unmemorable name, if I can't say the name by this point, that should tell me something. And what good would he be, as a husband, if I cannot tell him about any of this....well, maybe I can but I presume that I can't--not to anyone. One is merely married to herself. That's all there is."

She tore off the loose threads of her washcloth and tied them onto one of her fingers. Then she loudly asked and proclaimed, "Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife to have and to hold until dead do you part? I do. And do you take the same she, yourself, to be your wedded wife to have and to hold until death do you part? I do! I, by the power vested in me proclaim you and thee married until death do you part and a little time afterward when not all cells have come to a cessation" She smiled and puckered her mouth into a kiss toward her

reflection in the mirror. And as she was playing in the suds, singing the song, "Alone Again Naturally" by the Monkees the doorbell rang. She got out of the tub, not bothering to take a towel to the frothy suds that were still on her naked body, and went downstairs. She looked out the window and then opened the door. The Pizza Hut delivery boy gasped.

He stuttered. "Ah-ah-I am su--supposed to da-da-deliver a pizza."

"Deliver it then," she said. Her eyes were like the coal of a snowman.

"You ha-ha-have to pay for it."

"Is that a fact? Have you always had this stuttering problem?"

"Ma-mu-ma'am, you are na--ked."

"I'm in my own home. Can't I be naked in my own home?"

He took in a deep breath. "Well, most people aren't when they come to the door."

"Well, I'm not most people. What does it do to you to have to deliver a pizza to someone not wearing any clothes?"

"It ba-bu-bothers me."

"It bothers you because you are revolted by it or because it excites you?"

"It's exciting."

"But I'm sure that if I were twenty years older it would be revolting to you, wouldn't it?"

"Uh-uh-I don't know. I suppose so."

"And yet it would be the same body. The same type of replication of cells, just not as beautifully rendered. Not worth stuttering over. If I were you I would go to a speech therapist and get that cured.

"Yeah, maybe I will."

"Good. How much is it?"

"Seven dollars. Should I cu-cu-cu-come inside?"

"No one comes inside me, buddy. Wait there." She took her pizza and slammed the door shut. When she returned to the door she only slid a ten-dollar bill beneath it and fastened more of the locks.

Chapter 45

Conclusion of Sang Huin

Beyond his dabbled research on the subject, Sang Huin did not know much about Jakarta E th its Rupiah coins as light as a childO s play money; female mendicants ever so often dancing seductively into the open doors

of tiny shack restaurants as their partners carried speakers and collected the money that only rarely was given for these dances of desperation and futility; guitar mendicants (usually children or teenagers performing in stalled buses); Suharto's penchant for small gardens of ostentatious statues to beautify Jakarta still his legacy; women free to let their long hair flow or to constrain it under hijabs and jilbabs; blue bird/ white bird/black bird taxis; oblong orange tuc tucs swarming the streets like cockroaches; Wartel phone cafes on every corner for those without phones; photocopy shops for so many businesses without photocopy machines; green and white city buses as uncomfortable as a back of a pickup truck; graffiti on doors of businesses such as that of "Fuck The System" somewhere between the train station and Jalan Jaksa (Jaksa Road); 40 percent unemployment with panhandlers, newspaper boys, and money boys on every street; train personnel giving out free condoms to all of its customers; trains going through the middle of Jakarta linking its disparate groups to other cities of Java N each with its own provincial language; the provincial languages, Javanese, and Indonesian all spoken in Java; those calls to prayer from distant mosques reverberating sotto voce as slightly discordant echoes of the nearby mosque; that orphic song of a nearby mosque thundering its plaintive notes; commerce and human activity stunned and mesmerized by wailing notes ubiquitous to the human heart and experience but still continuous; and the cacophonous cries of competing street merchants and entrepreneurs all amalgamated into one chorus.

Sang Huin was not quite sure whether or not he had written his conclusion. It was an open question whether chapters on Gabriele's life in Jakarta would add much to the book. Regardless of having finished it or not, he would no doubt be writing on something or another in the immediate future if nothing but the unpublished musical notes of chamber music for the cello. For not having connections of family dwarf his imagination in financial and emotional obligations, his world was less myopic and this play with ideas was still rich within him. It seemed to him that the fecundity of homosexuals in the meaningful production of ideas came about from not lodging a foundation of family within the sturdy earth. Instead, homosexuals blew with the top soil and ideas shifted along with this drifting in the pensive ponderings of the ephemeral nature of reality. He thought that it was true enough but his reason for formulating the idea was more from a wish to see a positive within this solitary blowing that became him than a belief so much in its veracity.

The antithesis of this, a woman, was a summation of an obsession with stability and the characteristics of prostitution that entailed. At least it seemed to him as such. Each woman was slightly different but in general they married to have that exhilaration of raising little children and property to put their nests on. To have this they would do anything: live years of indifference to a man and hide the rift in meretricious tree planting with him; overmedicate a boy and tell him what to do in all things; ignore that boy's need for a father to suffocate him in her own need to nurture little beings to feel useful and loved; and then suddenly ignore him when it is clear that the years had mutated him into ugly opinionated manhood. Landscape obsessions were his mother's substitute for lack of stimulating conversation with a spouse but she got some satisfaction in her active sorority with a daughter. Still both were exponentially more important to her than him and yet both were deceased.

It was with a sense of relief that one day he found actual content

in a letter that his mother sent to him which went beyond planting roses and water aerobics. It was a need to reconnect and his heart warmed like a child being given a Valentine's Day card. He bought a plane ticket to St. Louis, at his mother's quasi-request, which would allow him to see her once again and to escape the imbroglio that he currently found himself in with a girlfriend, a boyfriend, and bafflement what to do with any of it. The only thing so far to come out of these dates with the convenience store girl at coffee shops and cinemas in Seoul were her suspicious looks for of all these months that he would he not invite her to his apartment or introduce her to his friends; and this incessant returning home late without any inclination to touch his boyfriend exacerbated that one's suspicions of disloyalty and infidelity. Absconding into a plane seemed a natural course.

He found it odd that after so many letters where she told him that she was fine and did not want him to return (letters that became increasingly blunt to the point where in the previous one she said, "Frankly, I don't need you. You need to get on in the world alone. Start your own family") that she should aver the opposite now. In the long flight to America he was preoccupied with this subject and in his preoccupation he would frequently drift in and out of sleep.

-- My cousin is always wondering about you. What? Well, why you left our mother in a foreign country all alone. He thinks that you are a bad person but I tell him that you aren't really that. That you are more like damaged goods. Yes, I am that. Not bad, just damaged. Damaged goods, as you say.

--For her and everyone. Let people come and go like breathing. It is unnatural to give it conscious significance. Okay, Gabriele, I won't worry so much. Whether she hates me or not, you can't go home again. That's right; and it makes the issue irrelevant. Are you okay in Jakarta? I sort of left you there. You left me positing the possibility of going there but now I am in Bandung Indonesia and planning to go deep into the jungles. My choice only, as always.

His mother, a tall broad woman once beautiful but made haggard from tragedy was wearing a scarf to cover hair loss and a feigned smile to get through the day. The smile's lack of warmth could be measured in the inconsistency of its flickers. Glad you could come, she said disingenuously. Anyong hashimnika, Mama. Is that all the Korean you've learned? Yes, he chuckled, not a lot more than this. How have you been? As well as someone like me in my circumstances can. Put up an ad for your father's John Deere riding lawnmower but there haven't been many callers to take a look at it. Well maybe you priced it too high. What would you know about it? Nothing -- I finally threw away your sister's music box. I didn't want to go on year after year fighting the temptation to wind it up and listen. Who is this with the dog? Mama, this is Seong Seob, my special friend. Seong Seob, this is my mother. Anyong haseyo. Special friend? What is that? No, sir; not under my roof. He can find a hotel or the two of you can go back to wherever you came from.

It was in a descent to the San Francisco airport, when the seatbelt light went on and the captain's voice awakened him from these latter dreams, that he suddenly had an epiphany that there had been no request at all that it was merely a begrudging acceptance that sooner or later they would inevitably meet. He cancelled St. Louis and boarded a flight to San Diego.

There, with his backpack, he wandered the streets of downtown San Diego, ecstatic to be a pedestrian in this great cosmopolitan medley and to see all signs in English. He wandered in this honeymoon some hours until he came to a queue of miserable morning mendicants mingled in the malaise of having to be minions for morsels of a blended meat and vegetable mush that was scooped into Styrofoam cups by badged and indifferent scoopers. Stepping into lines demarcated by ropes within this parking lot at St. Vincent de Paul he saw that only some of these eager but patiently waiting eaters were badged and that the scoopers wore badges with stars.

"Excuse me. Who are they?" asked Sang Huin to an old man in front of him.

"Who? Oh. Same as us all but residents. Badgers are all Vinceteers, living here. The ones scooping with the stars on their badges are the helper pigs, the preferred pigs. For being allowed to wander the streets one or two nights a month without losing their beds and real food that real people eat instead of this trough stuff they would do anything: tell on masturbators, them that goes into the showers at the wrong times, having to take a runny shit at 2 AM when not able to hold it. Things like that which can get someone thrown out of here. Ain't Catholicism and Christianity pretty? That's why I sleep in my own little hut in the woods of Balboa Park."

Sang Huin nodded painfully as if in derision of all things that were of pig stardom in deference to the pig before him. In so doing he imagined Nathaniel going into such a place expending his gregarious energy with the right people, becoming a head pig, and for two nights each month having sex under bushes in patches of greenery between highways. Then he thought of a new character, Guillermo. "Guillermo walked the streets of San Diego partially earnest to find a job."

Sang Huin took his Styrofoam cup of mush and a muffin and ate with the rest of the scrawny, chilled pigs who would hours later sizzle in the sun. His reverberations of the pavement during lunch. He felt as if being here without activities of distraction he was in the thickets of life that most were cognizant of from birth to death. Within purposelessness, disorientation, and futility in life. His wanderings his was the global experience of the majority.

After breakfast he continued to erode and blow off life. His embankment but he was sanguine for here he was once again in America, the country that made up so many of his years. Insular capsule that it was under the current chauvinistic and militant regime, it was more or less his land as one of its class that was entitled to permanent residency. Still he could envision a more preferable state. It would be a UN government of the world mandating human affairs without any member countries having the right to veto. It would have the best hope of bringing financial equity and justice to the world, halt excessive military spending and wars, slow down environmental degradation, and allow for an extra millennium of life; but such a thing did not exist. Such a thing could not be sought by sensitive souls as a refuge for hope, optimism, and an ongoing positive perspective of life. Here he was in the embrace of the bully, and he told himself that here in America he would stay. But then he thought that it really was not his country anyhow as proven by how he had been treated at the airport. The immigration officers had put him through an inquisition suited to

potential terrorist cells all because of his tourist visas at Vientiane and Kuala Lumpur prior to his arrival in South Korea. His treatment had not exactly been a welcome home placard; and of course having lost his residency card, that laminated summation of himself, had not helped.

Guillermo decided, as night approached, to take the trolley into San Ysidro to make his exit into Tijuana. He was not about to stay in a shelter. Unlike many Mexicans, he could reenter America another day. His was a mostly legal journey having obtained a passport years earlier for his military service, which enabled these sojourns. Still he did not have much money so at the tiny train stop, feeling that his monetary worth was no different than muffin crumbs sustaining pigeons at St. Vincent, he stared at the large ticket machine with awe and bewilderment and then spontaneously leaped into the sudden emergence of the trolley with the automatic opening of its doors.

The doors closed and then reopened at the next stop. He breathed out, wondering if he should get out quickly. His ambivalent finger remained pendent over a button that would keep the nearest door open if pressed. A man entering the back of the car with his back shoving and parting those that clogged a door was not a trolley cop. His leather coat was a lighter brown than trolley trolls and his entrance came backwards. A woman entered with her face forward. The face lacked animation apart from a visible twitching or throbbing in her left temple. Both of them carried a stroller. Guillermo looked again. No one else was entering from the other end of the car. He was safe.

His eyes returned to them. The black woman was pregnant and in her early thirties. She slowly seated herself, careful not to disturb the infant that she now had pressed against her. She did not look at it nor at the man that had helped her raise it here. The raising of the stroller, the folding of it, and the child himself were the only evidence of the marriage of these heavily withdrawn strangers who were forced to sit next to each other. The man's size 13 shoe was in the aisle pointing toward two black women in the passage interlinking an adjacent car who danced long inundating rhythms reminiscent of tribal heritage and sang a beautiful threnody together. He thought to himself that if all marriages were what he witnessed he was lucky that experience had mutilated his normal proclivities. As he saw them he felt the reality of what he construed to be their life together. His mind began to refine some philosophy or perspective from the raw material of his feeling and his whole body tilted in their direction when he suddenly lost what was his focus for the doors again opened.

"Have your tickets out!" the trolley troll spoke generically from another door in the car. His words were rough. He turned his head to the right. The trolley train troll saw a little child around the age of six putting her hands in the greasy KFC bag and pulling out a KFC bird. He watched her eat the meat as the trolley recording said, "I would like to remind all passengers that there is no smoking, eating, or drinking in the trolley; and please, out of consideration for other passengers, do not put your feet upon the seats. Thank you." For a second it seemed that the saliva lurched around the lips of the trolley train troll like a lasso. He snatched away the bird from the child's fingers and the entirety of the KFC bag causing the girl to cry. Then to Guillermo he said, "Get out your ticket!" Guillermo gave an affected display of a search. He hesitated, contemplated his situation for some seconds, and spoke.

"Listen, I am trying to get a job in San Diego. I only have \$20.00 but I didn't deliberately set out to avoid buying a ticket. Without thinking about it I just jumped in. Maybe subconsciously I wanted to save money but I didn't plan it that way. You are a brother. Surely you understand desperate situations cause desperate actions."

"I'm not your brother," spoke the trolley troll in Spanish.

"You know the language of the Mexican brothers and your skin says that you are south of the border."

"All skin, as you put it, can be American. An American is from everywhere."

"I know English well, and I am Latino so I guess I'm American as apple pie."

"You seem to think we have it in for foreigners. You can be Mexican, American, or Martian for what I care. When you board this trolley you have to have a ticket."

"Do you really give citations regardless of circumstances? Why can't you just take me out and force me to buy a ticket? Why does it have to be written down as a fine and a court appearance if I want to contest the fine? I was seeking a job. I could work for my family but I want a respectable job and I don't care if it is flipping burgers or sweeping sidewalks. Okay, I did something I shouldn't have. Have a little bit of compassion toward those in desperate situations from a land that was once the land of your ancestors in a land, as so much of America, that was an illegal acquisition stolen from the Mexicans."

"Quit the BS, la caca, and get out with me at the next stop. Then you buy your ticket at the machine in front of my eyes."

"Muchas gracias," said Guillermo.

"De nada," said the trolley troll.

Guillermo put a dollar and seventy-five cents into the machine and got a sheet of paper as long and double the width of his little finger. Both waited for another trolley on its way from El Cajon to come down the tracks; and when it came they entered. The trolley troll bounced his pad against his left palm. Guillermo saw a hungry and lustful madness for giving out citations once again seep into the eyes of the troll from within. He imagined the trolley troll rabidly looking at all people both rich and poor and searching for individuals who looked afraid. The trolley troll knew that being dressed in fine clothing precluded no one. Ticketless people were often camouflaged in rich clothes.

Through a gray wall like the back of a building was this portal leading from San Ysidro to Tijuana. Inside it was like a corridor and in this mire spray painted in Spanish graffiti he ascended and descended on pavement wreaking of the effluvium of evaporating urine. Then at a rotating gate Guillermo returned to Mexico. "Downtown for three dollars. Hey amigo, wanna go downtown?" he heard Mexican taxi drivers accost Caucasian Americans. He saw city buses in the distance. The taxis were often crowded station wagons where people sat in what was the trunk. He saw men balancing suitcases on their heads without the aid of

hands as they went toward the USA border. He saw a gray headed lady with a pony tail sitting behind a table of novelties and an Anglo-Saxon Navy officer knocking over some of the statuettes and plaques in his vehement, drunk theatrics to get the price reduced to two dollars. "Two dollars," he said. "Three dollar," she retorted without the "s." It was just more of the same in this overgrown US military tavern that had sprawled into the city known as Tijuana and it made him want to return to his hometown of Ensenada.

Sang Huin avoided the three-dollar taxi rides and walked through various shopping plazas with their myriad pharmacies. He passed a bridge that went over a dried up river polluted with tires and less visible debris. Then he followed signs leading to Avenida Revolucion.

Sang Huin passed a Bankoro bank; an idle man who yelled out to him as to other foreigners, "Taxi cab! Border line, Mister!"; mariachi singers; zebra wagons for tourist photos; Burger King; stores with rectangular mirrors on parts of their facades; hot dog grills part of mobile kiosks; taco restaurants; tamale carts; corn on the cob cartsN some which baked corn on charcoal and others that steamed it; police cars and policemen; and pi-ata shops and pharmacies in abundance. Tijuana, a sprawling 2 million with its myriad colonias, was like a ghetto of San Diego. According to the guidebook the sooty playas (beaches) were somewhat agreeable because of their adjacent bullfight arena and Spanish architecture. The unbearable dust colonias (poor suburbs) with the maquiladoras were to the south, and the central city, where Sang Huin was at, had some museums and art galleries displaying Mexican culture and of course the American red light district that had given birth to it all. He walked to Juarez Street. He saw an empty lot of grass where some fruit drink vendors had been throwing out orange peels for a long period of time. He saw mounds of dirt and trash that were in this street.

Guillermo turned to a pay phone that was on a side street. Not finding any coins in his pockets he pushed "O" for the operator" and made a collect call. He placed a call to what had recently been his estranged uncle. "Uncle this is Guillermo."

"Yes, good Guillermo. Are you here now?"

"Yes."

"It has taken you long enough."

"Yes, I guess so."

"Why did it take you so long to get back?"

"To be honest, I wanted to look one more day for work in San Ysidro or San Diego."

"Find any?"

"No."

"Have you decided that family loyalties are a bit more important than dabbling in petty jobs on the outside?"

"Maybe. I need a job. I need money."

"You are here but your cousin has not gotten here yet. You'll have to wait for her."

"Oh, I thought she would be in Tijuana by now."

"She should be here soon."

"I was told to come here."

"She's a little delayed."

"Can I wait at your place? How would I get there?"

"Guillermo, it is private residence and it's a little risky for us to be that conspicuous. It isn't easy to get to anyway and you would have difficulty getting through the guards. I'll make sure that she comes to you when she gets here. Do you have a hotel room?"

"A room? Well, yes I guess I should or else go back to Ensenada."

"You don't have a job in Ensenada. You need to align yourself with family. The loyalty of family members is the greatest of Mexican virtues."

"When is she coming? I don't even know why she needs to be smuggled through the border to begin with."

"Well, anytime. I don't know the details. I suppose it will happen when she finishes packing. She said that sometime this week she will have the money to buy a bus ticket. Her mother wants her to be responsible and save the little she gets here and there."

"You have an estate and guards and she is supposed to be some type of a beggar. I don't understand any of this. I don't know why my aunt wants her in the states after so long. I don't understand how I'm supposed to get her over the border. She just said, O Do it! O and gave me some money to come here."

"Watch your mouth. Be careful what you say to everyone. No tiene sentido? Maybe it has a sense not so obvious to you. Maybe it has sense or doesn't have sense. You know women, Guillermo. My wife's reasoning for things is why I stay separated from her. Maybe she's got good reason for sending her to the states. I wouldn't know."

"I thought that she did not have a job and that this was the primary reason for getting her to the US."

"She doesn't. She dabbles around from time to time, drinks, and runs around with the wrong types. I don't know many of the details, Guillermo. Well, I've got to get busy. Did you find the contact man, Ricardo, waiting for you at the shelter?"

"I don't understand. Contact for what? If you are needing a smuggler to get her across why isn't that done in Tijuana?"

"Enough. There is always more at work than meets the eye. You just need to get her to Ricardo."

"A transient?"

"A transient as rich as the US Treasury."

Sang Huin's backpack felt increasingly heavy and so he obtained a motel room in "Centro" T.J. It had a barren mattress without sheets or blankets. The window was nailed shut and there was no ventilation outside of what came around the cracks of the door and a draft that swept through a crack in the wall. There was no dresser and no furniture at all beyond a wooden chair. Outside the room at the far end of the hall were the water cooler and the shared bathroom. When the night clerk showed him this it baffled him why, when he was not given a key, that they needed to photocopy his passport and needed him to sign his name in a guest book.

"No tienes un llave?" he asked the clerk; but the man just scoffed at this Asian attempt at Spanish. "No key, hombre." Sang Huin stayed in his room for fifteen minutes but he felt a loneliness suffocate him worse than the musty air. He needed out; and so he picked up his bag and drifted into the night. Instead of providing him with space and movement to shed his morbid thoughts, the night just impaled him with a vast darkness that seemed like endless meat hooks in the cold meat locker of the universe. A sun, he told himself, was a temporary thing and all temporary things gave off the illusion of animation and illumination. Only the darkness was real and he decided to lose himself within it.

It only took an hour more and he was lost in the rains that set dry dirt roads on hills into mud streams sweeping down into the center of the city and could quickly cook a brain into a fever with cold inundations. The rains drenched him and he began to cough deeply. He found the city park that earlier had couples courting each other under the eyes of chirping and squawking birds that fastened onto each limb as thick as leaves; but now no one was there but a man who collected cans from the garbage. Still this Sang Huin, this Sean, strolled around as if it were a sunny day. He examined each corner of the park as if someone in daylight enjoying the fauna for he was hoping that some queers would not care about the rain and like him would be obsessed with the possibility of being impaled in promiscuous activity. An hour passed this way and yet no one came.

Finally he managed to find his way back to his room. He lay there making a puddle upon the mattress until what appeared to be the night manager came into his room.

"You can speak the Spanish a little," said the man,

"Prefiero Ingles porque mi sabio de Espanol esta limitado y despues de viviendo en Korea mis vocabulario esta una mezcla del lenguas."

"Where you from?"

It was such a simple question and yet he did not know the exact answer. "I'm Korean but I've lived most of my life in the states."

"A gringo?"

"Mas or menos."

"Want a towel, amigo?" Sang Huin sat up in the bed and looked toward the man that was animation and illumination in his doorway.

"How much?"

"Depends," he said. "Were you looking for Mexican pussy out there?"

"No."

"Are you a gay?"

"Yeah,"

"You suck my dick."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Towel is free, then." The man came in and closed the door. The sexual activity was enjoyable for a while but then it changed to being impaled "bareback" from his rear end. He did not know if it was rape. It hurt him as if it were rape, he hated it, his attempts to extricate himself caused more resistance, and yet he wanted it nonetheless. He had never had someone insert himself into him before and the rhythms seemed to slap over his consciousness until somewhere into the pain he fell asleep in it. Asleep, he dreamed that Guillermo was stopped by the police officers at the park.

"Dinero. One hundred dollars or a night in jail."

"I'm not giving you anything," said Guillermo. "What have I done?"

"Are you stupid? You can't walk the streets with an open beer can in your hand."

"I've seen others do it. I'm not paying."

"Suit yourself."

They put him into the car and chased other criminals throughout the night. When they had a couple more rounded up, including Sang Huin himself, they took all three of them to the police office for paperwork and then far away into the dusty bluffs where there was a jail. The cells were underground and they were wet and cold like a cellar. The bunks were just metal without any mattresses, sheets, or blankets and the prison guards inserted sharp instruments into the rectums of the alleged culprits.

When he woke from a coughing fit, he noticed that all of his things were gone including the little case that had his passport and the pocket pc that contained his novel about Gabriele. "Dear God, no!" he thought. Only bits of previous drafts were on diskettes in Seoul. His only copy of Gabriele was in that pocket pc. He felt as if he were living in a shadowy nightmare as sharp as a migraine. He quickly dressed himself and went into the lobby. When he saw that same night attendant sleeping on his chair it suddenly occurred to him that it had not been this man who had entered his room but someone else of similar but not identical looks. He wasn't sure who it had been. So greedy had been his need for blind sex. He went back into his room and beat on his head in self-flagellation. He felt lost and dizzy. He felt as a lost

speck of dust blowing about in space and time. He curled up in a fetal position on the bed and wept. His head ached and he fell asleep once again. He dreamed that won, pesos, and dollars were freefalling from the skies and striking animals and humans within the rain of capitalism. Then he dreamed that he was dematerializing from one country and materializing into another. No sooner would he be memorizing buildings and mapping out familiarities in his mind when he would suddenly be someplace else. People in each of these countries would ask him who he was and where he came from. He had amnesia and could not tell them anything and they just looked at him with deep sympathy.

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