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The Water Bearer

By Karlene M. Kubat

*Dream will not rise nor blood flow
without water to make it so.*

. . . . Rafael Arnau i Roca

She leaned on her Queen Anne Hill Tudor window ledge, pondering a variant thought: that something extraordinary and in part of her own making was about to change her life, for better or worse but for good. The swung-out, water-speckled window of leaded diamonds quivered in a salty marine breeze, a coolness that at more languid times helped banish temporary boredom. No languor today. No ennui. A riveting suspense. Above her hung a layered watercolor wash of shaded grays, gentle rain descending from a familiar Seattle sky: clouds folded like the pearly wings of a wet dove. Water everywhere, drop by swelling drop trickling down gabled roofs into gutters, flowing away in rivulets and rushes headed for sloshing blue Puget Sound. She had always needed to live near water, to know in traveling away from its influence she would return here, or alight on a similar seductive margin marrying earth and water. Gazing upon the mercurial dazzle, she found its lively flash and substance much more than aesthetic. Water sustained life, *was* life.

Dreaming on into a restless speculation summoning a hellish antipode -- a vision partly the result of her own anticipated involvement -- there appeared a dry horizon of choking dust rising against a glare of hot blue sky and barren baked earth, a place where listless bodies with parched throats barely moved in search of a few drops. Water was not present in that stark reality. And of that unattended absence they would die.

The phone rang. She moved away from the open window and stepped across her walnut-wainscotted study toward an orderly old walnut desk, reaching for the receiver that would connect her with an unsettling New York voice.

“Oh, from whose point of view?” she was soon inquiring of her paramount boss, Jefferson Davis Smith -- *El Jefe*, the Chief, a wryly conferred title used by his staff. Her delivery was necessarily inflected with polite respect as she ran her finger

lightly over the disconnect pad in a vain and wishful pretense of shutting him down. “I wonder from whose point of view I’d be getting in over my head?” she repeated, having fully understood that it was *his* view, not merely an associate’s with more seniority. She at once regretted not having spoken more softly, more compliantly, because her question was only intended to lead into the next remark: “This sounds almost like a pretext for...hmm...some other motive...I mean, if it’s a criticism of my work...”

“It wasn’t a criticism. You aren’t forgetting whose point of view carries the weight, are you, Semele?”

She had never been in Smith’s proximity long enough to discover much more than unforgettable surface qualities and a resolute temperament. All else was extraordinary rumor of the sort that induced serious forethought in any exchange. She pictured him coolly poised at the head of it all, many layers into the role of bossman. The resistant exterior she did know was likely covered by a crisp white Jermyn Street hand-tailored shirt, embellished with one of his signature navy silk ties with thin diagonal red stripes – habit and tradition. Girdling a firmly toned middle while neatly adorning his Savile Row slacks, would be a russet calfskin belt, itself worth a quarter day’s wages; hers, that is, not his astronomical income. She could never quite apprehend the noised around cost of his regularly replaced oxblood wingtips – if true, from her frugal perspective, exorbitant expenditures of wasteful extravagance. In the most casual posture, he would still appear elegantly throned in his tufted maroon leather ergonomic chair, while his pointedly uncluttered mahogany desk horseshoed around his intimidating stature, computer glare staunchly at his back; all this signifying and certifying success and affluence, and thereby a daunting range of independence and a rather unfashionable power, unfashionable because he made no attempt at cloaking it in the niceties of factitious equality. Indisputably, he was the head man. With his carefully selected stable of highly proficient and well-compensated associates – he did at least prefer that term to employees – he could assign or reassign company contracts without explaining himself.

In the job assignment just now under consideration, Semele Taylor had never anticipated the need to present herself to the very apex of the organization for the sole purpose of arguing her suitability. This assumption arose from an insufficient knowledge of grave facts that would only come under her purview if and when she received the assignment. She generally preferred to receive her assignments at a deliberately arranged distance from her ultimate boss. And for good reason. The occasionally required head-to-head confrontations with her employer could be disturbing, for whenever they met they were likely to exude a vaguely distracting personal interest, which on her part demanded a little extra reserve. For two

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prepossessing high achievers such as they, mutual attraction grew out of recognized merit, admiration that had easily transitioned to personal interest. To date, the execution of her work was unaffected. Jefferson Davis Smith, having initially laid down certain rules of conduct within his company, remained untroubled, overtly amused by the ambiguity of their relationship, occasionally teasing with innuendo meant to defuse any untoward result. Semele did find a measure of comfort in her assurance of company standards – keeping prurient interest in check was just good business sense.

From the day she had at last managed to pass through the portal of the final word – his definitive interview – he had looked up from her file and pronounced her as yet unvoiced name just as it should be pronounced, like Emily. He had even known, with obvious delight and a significant foreshowing of things to come, that her name originated with the mythological mother of Dionysus, by Zeus. She was so accustomed to explaining this whimsical label forever settled on her by professorial parents that when he had stopped her mid-sentence, reversing the process to himself inform her of her namesake, she had to swiftly conceal her surprise. This small concealment joined a weightier list of studied measures and restraints tolerated as necessary in obtaining the competitively sought after position with his investigative firm: a multinational corporation low-profile in the extreme but world-renowned in all the right venues. She would have done nearly anything to have the position. Ultimately, her peerless academic record and proven, if brief, experience carried her over the difficult places without the need to test that audacious avowal.

“I’d really like to have the UNIFOLL assignment,” she said into her phone, passing over his question of authority.

“A lot of storm clouds massing over this one. *I have* considered giving it to another associate, unfortunately someone not quite up to your numerical genius...possibly your formidable dexterity with the...a...SIG-Sauer. When I have any time to think of it, I certainly regret the severe precautions needed today -- a *weapon!* -- but without that recent protection we might not even be talking now.” His admission of necessary security was probably straightaway considered far too revelatory of unsound business trends.

“Sir,” Semele posed, remembering too late how much that form of address from her, and oddly *only* her, irritated him, “isn’t mental proficiency the primary reason I was hired?”

“You wouldn’t be employed without it, but a helluva long list of other requirements also had to be confirmed.” Interpreted as positive, his answer was undermined by an assertive rise in tone reverberating across the distance.

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Her own heat flamed as she drew in her lower lip and held it firmly with evenly set teeth, repressing anger but not dismay. “Then...in spite of my favorable record, the job’s being offered to someone less...competent?”

“You understood me, Semele. These finessing maneuvers won’t get you any further along.”

“I’m too candid to finesse. Usually, I just say what I mean. Is this case so threatening? I’d hardly be banging away at account books with my SIG-Sauer -- not to say it isn’t familiar...useful, I guess...one more responsibility. But I know I’m pretty good at detecting quadrupled entries on cooked books...and isn’t that what this is about?”

“And then some.”

“What? At the moment I’m only guessing, but isn’t it simply a matter of verifying a clean slate?”

At his withheld response, she thought how badly she wanted this assignment, so badly she was actually sweating. Could he detect the faint tremolo in her voice, the struggle for restraint? Recently there had been a stronger need to engage in something more seriously worthwhile: an expansive act accruing to the hugely deprived -- pitifully minimal in the measure of others’ sacrifices, so often unheralded.

“Semele...I’m hearing a lot more than you’re saying, but I have sound reasons. Want to fly over on commercial and listen in depth? Our planes are all occupied now.”

Did he assume she was sufficiently tenderized at this point to relinquish? “All right,” she agreed, confident. A few thousand miles of airfare ought to yield some benefit.

“See you Thursday at...a...” A little surprised at his direct response, she visualized him going over appointments from the thick black book he kept in his right-hand top desk drawer; an old habit of penciling in a formidable calendar, even though his secretary kept it tidily columned on his computer. “At six o’clock, Semele...time for the normally off-schedule commercial flight east...and I think perhaps later a cocktail...maybe even dinner.” *If you’re flexibly agreeable to my inflexible stricture* was the implication.

“Yes, I’ll be--” was all she managed as the line died.

Succinct and effective. What superb economy. It was well known that, however briefly present in his elegantly Spartan office, he only *appeared* to be doing nothing there, a habit of his trade; a voluminous mind assessing infinite bits of incoming data, housed in that impenetrable head reigning above his grand empty desk. As he rang off, he might have thought himself fortunate in acquiring her proved

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mental agility, until something else pulled him away into a clamoring mesh of unrelated yet interrelated enterprises.

Now the ball was in her court. She'd have to wallop it with the dead sweet of high-performance history, and hope it retained enough life to land where it was irretrievable.

On her flight to New York, Semele studied a swiftly but comprehensively assembled notebook of water conditions in the world, along with deftly researched and related data on World Bank and International Monetary Fund overviews of private contract sanctions. She intended to be as fully prepared as time allowed, because she knew that J.D. Smith had not invited her east without something else in mind. He was far too thrifty and expedient to waste airfare on an ego-soothing discussion of her turndown. He intended to pawn her off on some lesser assignment, one she had no intention of taking.

“You look, I might say, well shut of the red-eye,” Jefferson Davis Smith remarked. He had taken in the thick waves of lustrous red hair and glanced into the glacier-blue eyes that shone resolutely back. “Pardon that sorry pun.” He was laughing as he stood up from his desk and ran his fingers through his hair. “I always forget the impact.”

Knowing that once again she would have to minimize his candid appraisal, she chided lightly, “It’s only skin deep.”

“Same effect.”

Her deceptively slender, long-legged and agile body was kept well toned when at home and at whatever gym she was near away from home, or wherever she could jog. Still, she was not obsessive about physical fitness, and never allowed this duty of profession to interfere with her reading time, which was, for her, the most important activity away from her job. Today, her body was well camouflaged by a navy blue pants suit – although still highly imaginable. Even her elevated throat was silkily covered to her chin by a deliberately discreet, ruche-necked white blouse.

Motioning her toward an intentional selection of none-too-comfortable chair, he came around his desk to join her in a facing chair of the same maroon leather and ejecting style. This façade of amiable coziness might well presage a decisive wresting away of the desired end.

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She seated herself, steeled herself, and looked directly into the gray eyes, rediscovering that sardonic, smoky vision well steeped in the covert, eyes that could look straight back with intense appreciation while revealing absolutely nothing else. He liked to say her name and was about to do so more than once. She was familiar with this.

“Semele...Semele, the Johnson case was a pretty good trophy. The necessary self-defense, we hated to anticipate. We were pleased that you handled it so adeptly,” -- *we*, she knew, being simply multiple versions of himself.

Supple hands, Greco-Roman and implying power, rested lightly on the chrome arms of his chair. She felt that he would touch her knee or her taut moist hand in further praise, and shifted in her chair, knowing she could not indifferently withstand such a gesture. It would not be a liberty taken in suggestion of anything; he might also at one time or another involuntarily touch the shoulder of a male associate in praise. Her left hand was hidden at her side, its smoothly filed, unpainted short white nails firmly pressed into the leather seat. She continued to look at him in admirably constrained acceptance of, but also with an underlying defiance of, her subservient position.

He smiled at her with all the earned superiority of his apprentice years of brinksmanship, those perilous years culminating in the expedient use of extended reputation and unassailable, hard-won authority. Still, it was a wistful smile, mourning the loss of old wildfires now banked by heavy responsibility. Although hers was a face that could induce from him an unfreighted smile of pure pleasure.

“I have a project you’d--”

“I don’t want it.”

His eyes did not blink but narrowed perceptibly, lenses glowing peripherally, made pellucid from the fading light of tall windows as the altered visage tilted back. She could then discern the fine cream thread of a flak scar high on his sun-burnished left cheek; this old wound lay beside a distinctively cast nose that, with its gentle prominence of central bone, and along with a fully fleshed disapproving mouth, and flaming eyes, summoned up the vividly pained image of the soldier-emperor Philippos. The likeness, especially in this heavily frowning pose, was instantaneous for her. Fraught with ordeal and threat, the remarkably literal, very Roman head of antiquity was one of the most powerful images in her memory. This habit of comparison to historical figures was instilled by her father in their early travels, when coming across a certain person, he might utter, “Hmm, *Head from Delos*,” or, as in once observing the rescue of an imperiled group of male tourists, “Ah, *The Burghers of Calais*.” This was good. Such observances taught her to historicize human significance and the salient realities of abstract time. While momentarily superimposed, the enduring third

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century image of Philippus evoked in her a strong unbidden sentiment for suffering and its anger of consequence. But just then the trenchant eyes were set directly upon her. The ancient marble face dissolved into the actual present, and she had to look slightly away from his censure, at thick waves of gray-flecked umber hair, a resilient mass resistant to the frequent thrust of agitated fingers. Her unsustainable dodge failed to offset the frown now tinged with the humor of power.

“You have no idea what I was about to--”

“I know it’s not what I want.”

“Careful. You haven’t enough seniority for this sort of wrangle.”

“Excuse me...I didn’t mean to sound so...but you did offer an in-depth explanation and...this isn’t it.” Her eyes flashed over his.

“So I did. Why do you want this assignment?”

“I think it’s good.”

“Good?”

“Worthwhile...much more than...well, sometimes a person gets burned out on...on cold-blooded avarice.”

“An inherently bright young star like yourself?”

“Hmm, bright would indicate a fast burn. I’d really like to be a part of something more...more meaningful for a change...something--”

“Noble? Semele...Semele, this is a business, a rough-edged business for cool experts who make no mistakes. Noble is emotion. Noble is risk-taking...possibly even the final act. It isn’t done around here. If you’re inclined to be Mother Theresa, get the hell out of this line of work.”

She had no desire to overtly venture into the personal, into what she suspected was the truth, but that was where she had landed, and finally she had to return his hard serve with all the force of her conviction.

“Are you...afraid of...of losing me?”

The self-induced blankness of his stare and the sudden composure of his contending posture were for her a flagrant answer. He leaned forward and placed his hand on the seat of her chair, just beside her rigid left knee.

“If that was personal, and I think it was, I can’t lose what I’ve never had. I *am* concerned about endangering--”

“When I first came here, you told me there was no discrimination in work assignments,” she interrupted, her voice deferential and softly persuasive, inarguable. For the moment she had him at her advantage.

“All right. In vying for this contract, there’ve been an unusual number of nefarious connections, bribes, and already a couple of highly suspicious deaths. With several billion dollars involved in creating an infrastructure of H₂O for the parched

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little country in question, you can well imagine some of the malevolent activity waiting in the wings...actually, as you now see, already on stage.”

“I was thinking more of near waterless agricultural folk...and also...of a once beautiful valley aridly singed.”

Makeshift signs flashed in her head, encountered in yet another place -- too many such places --, enjoined pleas held up by emaciated children, their cracking pustulate flesh thickly sequined with black flies. Tutored signs printed in clumsy but always the most negotiable majuscule English letters: NEED DRINKING WATER.

He leaned away with his head thrown back and his mouth unsmiling but relaxed, then folded his arms, gold cufflinks flashing above tan wrists faintly napped with dark hair, assessing her with narrowed eyes for a full half minute.

“If you were to have this assignment, you would be charged to think only of the intent and solvency of the private company being considered for the contract. Where your necessarily contained sentiments quietly surface in your free time is your own business...but they could at *no* time interfere with your work. Remember this: what your professional scrutiny brings to light, barring something of public odor, would be pro forma in a bidding decision. I know I should not have to say any of this, but I *am* saying it, because, Miss Taylor, you want this work too damned much, and that sentiment makes you unreliable.”

“No, it makes me assiduously thorough and therefore totally reliable,” she instantly retorted.

“My God, you have fortitude...if I tolerate this I have only myself to blame...or praise...even now conditional.”

He lifted the white shirt cuff of his left wrist and glanced at his Patek Philippe Sky Moon Tourbillon. For the price of this select and exquisitely made instrument one might purchase a rather handsomely designed little cliff house on the edge of the Sound.

“I’m thirsty. Let’s adjourn to a cocktail and dinner.”

The invitation to dinner she had desired very much as an expression of reward, but didn’t wish for it at all in any other guise, especially recompense for denial. She slid from the discomfiting chair, which had lent her a stiff appearance of rectitude -- not to be discredited --, and stood glancing at the mahogany double doors of exit.

“I’m afraid I would need to change.”

“Into something more seductive? Did you anticipate Tavern on the Green?”

Why must he prod his inescapable invitation toward a lowly humiliation simply for his own amusement? She turned her face away, blushing profusely and riled too by this. As if she would attempt to dress for that sort of advantage.

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“Possibly a hotdog on the corner,” she answered, a curt smile overriding his pugnacious jab, still smarting.

“Then you won’t need to dress, will you?”

He took her to a newly opened, aquamarine-walled eatery with arched private alcoves, ebony wainscoting, and a spare scattering of surreal paintings; where less formal dress was contingently acceptable but the location, the décor, and the food outrageously expensive. It was aptly named *El Pulpo’s Caverna*, and indeed they were deftly hidden away in their own indirectly illuminated private den, the subtly crafted suggestion of underwater denizens. She mused that such distilled but swank coverture suited his clandestine habits.

“I can’t deny I’d like to have taken you somewhere else where I could show you off...arrayed in a gown matching those arctic eyes or that powder keg of hair,” he indulged himself. He grinned and took a generous swallow of his Lagavulin scotch and water -- too much iodine and peat for her; it took a meaner palate. “But dressed like that you might possibly gain some advantage. Yes, would have definitely had an advantage. We can’t have that, can we?”

“I own no such gown. My advantage should be in my record of achievement...I would think.”

She held her eyes steady and level with his. For ensuing seconds, until she remembered the usefulness of displayed indifference, they seemed engaged in a warming contest of forced surrender. Solidly in her was the thrust and parry and touché of her childhood: her eclectic parents’ titillating repasts -- tables often crowded with interesting old friends, or at least intriguing brief new encounters, and sometimes forborne hangers-on, mainly suffered for their oblivious entertainment value --, lively breakfasts or lunches or dinners at some intended or unexpected stopover in their always eventful, rigorously discussed vagabond world. Verbal combat swiftly and gainfully learned.

“You don’t have to compete with me. You can’t, remember? I’m the boss and *you* are the employee.”

“The associate?” she prompted in a musical tone.

“You’re still doing it.”

She took a long swallow of The Macallan, a smooth enabler already having its effect, allowing her to mutter very softly under her breath between lightly clenched teeth, “Oh lord, do I get the job or not?”

“Either the job or nothing?” Obviously having heard.

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He glared at her, his impatience with her obstinate manner of ruffling him immediately thereafter forcing a countering grin. Finishing his scotch, he ordered oysters and a touted Chardonnay.

She ordered mussels in lemon-garlic broth.

“Not afraid yet?” he asked, lifting an oyster from a bath of red sauce with his cocktail fork and slipping it between lips sensually contorted with the pleasure of taste.

“Of...what?” She had begun to struggle with a small recalcitrant mussel as tight-lipped as her own mouth, but gave up, snatching another from the Spanish earthenware pot.

“Of your boss.” A direct caveat. Something ominous?

“Always a little afraid...a healthy stance...keeps me on my toes.” Ultimately discounting serious intent, her response had been issued from a bent head concentrating on a gleaming slightly opened but unyielding blue-black bivalve.

“I’m afraid...I’m going to have to let you go, Semele.”

“What!” she exclaimed, dropping the mussel, which clattered across the table and bounced onto the ebony marble floor. The blood had drained from her face.

“Ah, that’s fear, the only really useful emotion. That is, if you can summon enough of it to keep you alive.”

“And that, sir, was...a very unfair way of...especially if you meant it.”

“You failed to notice that I didn’t mention *where* I was letting you go. Don’t drink very much wine. When we’re finished here we’ll head back to the office. I’ll be the one acquainting you with the file. I’m sending you to Paris where, as you know, the company you’re assessing has its headquarters. Then you’ll likely travel to the country itself, where UNIFOLL already maintains an office. But,” he admonished with little humor, “only if you never again, alone or in the presence of others, call me *sir*. That servile title demeans not only you but *me*.”

The computer-weighted long mahogany conference table was strewn with papers. J.D. preferred to immerse his associates in any cluttered briefings he chose to handle personally by removing to a designated work arena, where his staff could readily restore order without annoying him in the tamper-proof global terminus of his private sanctum – his sanctum, associates had dubbed *the vagus nerve center*.

Semele pushed back her chair and rubbed at tired eyes inflamed by a surfeit of facts and figures blipped across four glaring screens. Willfully recharged, she lifted her head more quickly than expected and, well schooled in reading only slightly more revealing faces, caught a naked sentiment on *El Jefe’s* usually restrained face. What was that, a fleeting revelation of concern, perhaps even a hint of apprehension? No,

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certainly that would be going too far. Such murky assumptions might well indicate a slightly lapsed concentration, and she must never appear unfocused. An ample and necessary reserve of energy was a tacit rule of her profession: never complain, never show fatigue, and, in full possession of strategy, always be ready to go anywhere at a moment's notice and perform in good health.

"We could probably finish this in the morning. I think I have a few minutes available at--"

"No...excuse me...I can work longer. Unless this wrapping up will take a lot more time than I thought."

"I'm taking a lot more time than you thought because I want you thoroughly briefed. All right, here's one more face I want you to see. Not an immediate NGO liaison -- there are a plenitude of non-governmental-organization reps -- he's an affiliate of World Bank. This man makes a weighted decision in the Paris office. You'll only meet with him if your report has a seriously negative outcome, we hope so negative as to be unlikely."

She tugged at the high rasping collar of her blouse, a constriction she disliked intensely but had felt compelled to wear. His eyes went to her fingers and she could read his irritated thought: *Why the hell do you think you need to dress like that? I'm not going to lay a finger on you.*

Inclining a disgruntled head, he suggested, "Why don't you take off your jacket...or whatever you call the outer covering of that confinement you're in."

"These are the best business clothes I have."

"But confining, strait-laced. Possibly if I allayed your fears with a slight raise you could relax into a better line of clothing that wouldn't interfere with your work."

"You're already paying me more than I...for which I'm grateful...as are several worthwhile charities." She could hear her father's stentorian laughter, her mother at that jog in memory having implored her to contribute to a certain urgent cause, one that she was already supporting.

"Where the hell did you come from? You're not what I'm used to...aptly named...are *you* a myth? Aggressive, yes, but definitely not a materialist, and that unacquisitiveness makes you harder to satisfy. You're--"

"This is really a precedent-setting case, isn't it?" she interrupted, steering him back to business. Normally, he was the stony-faced, work-oriented master-handler, and the unusual reversal of their positions evoked in her a moment of gloating satisfaction. "This private bidder is dickering big time," she continued. "I mean they're taking a lot for granted. It's simply because they have the best stats -- to the untrained eye, that is -- that they can get away with operating like this...only agreeable

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to doing the water and sanitation infrastructure if they can run the proposed mine. Their discovery and proposal, of course.”

“Yes. They used experts to nose around until they found something worth their while, but the nonferrous mine is both insurance for them and a bonus for those poorly sustained farmers. Essentially, it mitigates a micro-credit system that ultimately invites dependency and a trickling payback that is way too long-range. Private companies are not wild about undertaking construction in countries with questionable politics, a shaky economy, and a poor exchange rate. They never recover...if they’re foolish enough to start chucking the earth around in those places.”

As he talked he punched a key on the nearest computer and shoved his chair back so that she could move in closer to the screen.

“The IMF actually seems to favor the corporate entity you’re doing. Probably they recognize a kindred spirit, but World Bank still isn’t going to shake the government’s hand without this company’s clean bill of health.

“Here’s someone they don’t like: Rafael Arnau i Roca. We don’t know a great deal about his personal life, if he has one. He’s hard to track...but presently we have no need to. Appears and disappears -- some incarceration -- but we do know what fires him up, and when something does he’s high profile, a self-made reformer -- Doctor’s the title...for members of his unofficial constituency. It’s how they like to address their shrewd Renaissance man. Mostly this roving professor’s crusades involve water and poor people without any. Born in the smoldering center of Barcelona, he’s a Catalan, and his parents are highly respected academicians.”

“Ah, like mine,” she said, leaning close to scrutinize the indistinct but animated black and white photograph, which must have been taken at a demonstration. His eyes were jet hollows of blurred shadow, his striking face lean and with a certain El Greco fervor, but his hair a wild mass of windblown black tendrils and his dazzling white teeth prominently displaying triumph. Objective-charged virility.

“A little intimidating. Am I going to run into this demiurge?”

“If he has a reason, he’ll find you. He’s very good at that...damned good. Interesting that you should call him a demiurge. Longhairs have dubbed him hieratic...presumably because of such fervently dedicated disciples...he’s a humanitarian rebel...that is, one with legitimate causes. He’s generally a loner, adept at artifice...but he does have a more recent high-profile network of plodding devotees, fans...whatever.”

“Am I to assume that he’ll have a reason to find me?”

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She sensed that something was annoying him, some dissonance that kept him for several seconds in a morosely reflective mood, nursing a dismal answer that he would clearly have preferred not to give.

“Oh, I see,” she quickly intuited, “you want me to be amicable.”

“If you should meet -- it’s quite likely, because temporarily you’ll have possession of useful information and decisive power -- it would be better if you had a friend in that counter-effort, rather than an unpredictable adversary; much easier to know things...to control situations.”

“A friend?”

“Preferably just that. If your paths should cross, very intentionally on his part, don’t become too attached to this charismatic animal.”

She had done this sort of thing before, and thought of it as simply a necessary part of her job; it was the easiest method of keeping tabs on principals who mattered in the scheme of things. Having acquired a certain deftness in drawing the line at personal invasiveness, she was not much concerned. She had always known, without dwelling upon it, that a measure of physical attractiveness was one, but only one, of the reasons she had been hired.

“You ought to know how to do that. You certainly handle yourself well around...around.”

She watched him look away, turning his attention back to the screen as another involuntary smile of confidence curled the corners of her mouth. He was not often so discomposed. On this heavily engaged night, they had occasionally strayed from an equitably balanced work effort, straddling a precarious seesaw weighted with cloaked emotion that sometimes left her up, him down, and sometimes the reverse. When fatigue seriously set in, she wished for no more unwieldy sensations but only to finish the briefing. She saw that he was aiming for the same toneless manner.

“We’ll talk a little further about some of the more unpleasant stuff, then I think you should get some rest and fly out tomorrow. Get your personal affairs in order. The 60 will pick you up next Thursday and fly you back to La Guardia. I’ll also be headed for some business in Paris on the J2. Spence is already there checking things out.”

Her face altered with surprise and disappointment. She had worked with Spence on several occasions and he was pushy, rough, but admittedly capable.

“Spence?”

“That’s right. He’s involved in other matters, but he’ll be around.”

“You mean behind...dogging my tail.”

“If so, be glad of it. He comes in handy.”

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“I’ll simply be slumped over a lot of books and quarterly reports, or asking slews of leading questions. Really...he’s a little too trigger-happy for my taste.”

“In this matter your taste is irrelevant, Semele. You can never be part of the problem, only part of a positive result. You know my attitude concerning teamwork.”

“Yes, all right...as long as he stays out of my way at work,” she added, her voice dropping to a softly muttering complaint. This audacious pushing to the edge, this flare-up of superior confidence, very closely paralleling the irritableness of a virtuoso, was tolerated, even encouraged from time to time as beneficial. It connoted pride of high performance, ensuring accurate responses where split-second decisions often had no margin for correction.

“Bring your SIG-Sauer and give it to me. I’ll see that it gets to Spence in the event that you need it. I don’t want it a problem for you at customs.”

“*You* are asking me to bring my SIG-Sauer?”

This time he did rather violate her space, but with a cool authoritarian reflex unobjectionable. It was only to reach out and lift aside between his right index and middle fingers gleaming red strands of tossed hair that had fallen back over her surprised eyes and seemed to annoy him.

“Yes, Miss Taylor,” he formalized. “Precautionary. Unfortunately, you’ll swiftly discount the harmless nature of your work once you’re engaged in it.”

“I really appreciate your willingness to look after Catney again, Dora.” Semele was standing on her curving cobbled walk, as her large mouse-gray, orange-eyed British Shorthair coiled about her ankles with loud-rattled purring.

“Catney and I are sly friends,” Semele’s seventy-year-old next-door neighbor said in a high, benignly in-charge voice, a retired executive secretary long used to order and to giving orders. “I like him very much. He has a mind of his own and I admire that because I myself am the same.”

“I guess we really share him, don’t we?” She laughed with the gray-haired woman, whose knotted arthritic fingers slid into the pockets of a flowery apron. They had become friendly when her exploring Catney had insisted upon the expanded perimeter of two households. “Oh, I suppose I shouldn’t have a cat the way I move around, but I really can’t do without him when I’m home. That wily independence, trust, playfulness...even *naughtiness*, is so enjoyable.”

“Part of what makes us their willing servants. There’s nothing more attractive, more binding, than a furry little feline’s indifference. Of course, they only

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pretend not to need us. Catney does miss you when you're away, you know. He sleeps right on your bed pillow."

"I do know...and, if he can get away with it, when I'm claiming the same pillow. Cat hairs up my nostrils. The cobby little beast."

"Don't worry at all about your mail. I'll sort and forward as usual. How long will you be away this time?"

"I really can't say. I'm not certain, but I will keep in regular touch with you...and I've left sacks and cans of Catney's favorite meals in the same cupboard. The cleaning service will do one final sweep. Oh, and I've told the gardening service to give you any roses before pruning these late ones...if you want them. Or just help yourself."

"Thank you, dear. I especially love those fragrant *Audie Murphys*. I'll think of you as I fill my large crystal bowl with them. Their rich velvety scent just covers the house. You know the minute you walk in. Ah, roses."

"Aren't they wonderful, Dora? Such mystery springing from branches with thorns. Everyone's always searching the skies for miracles, and they're all right in our midst to contemplate...the secrets of my gloriously fragrant lilies, for instance, all locked in a dry little bulb...short-lived beauty, but think how faithfully it repeats itself."

Twenty minutes after take-off at SEATAC, the Learjet 60 had achieved its 40,000-foot cruising altitude, and Semele was winging along at 480 miles an hour while her cautious mind ran through a checklist of completed personal details. She smiled a bit wistfully, envisioning the way poor Catney merrily chased the crumpled tea bag wrappers that, to his continual delight, she tossed across the kitchen floor each morning when brewing tea. How glad she was to have dutiful Dora Benson. She hadn't many real friends nearby. There was a reclusive male cousin she visited, some distance away in the country. In her line of work those friends locally cultivated had drifted away for lack of attention. She had never been married, and now, at twenty-eight, was moving so constantly around the world she could not imagine the tame quotidian normalcy of a routine that might include a mate.

Larger issues of global importance soon took precedence over cursory thoughts of self. She opened the notebook that lay on the tray before her and perused the comprehensive data assembled by the staff at J.D. Smith & Associates. This data, together with her own appropriately slipped-in sheets of research, filled her concentration until one of the two pilots, whose name was Mike, leaned over her

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shoulder. He had made his way down the narrow aisle to speak to one of two other agents seated to her right across the aisle and traveling to other eastern destinations.

“Hello, Semele. You headed over the pond today?”

She looked up into the calm reassuring face of the sandy-haired pilot. “Yes, on the J2. Guess I’m in for the long haul, Mike. How are your wife and little boys?”

“Just fine...right now busy spending my money on a whole lot of expensive sports equipment.”

“Well, maybe you’ll have an Olympic champion as compensation.”

“You’d think so with the dough I’ve got invested,” Mike responded with a sanguine grin, then leaned over to deliver some radioed weather reports to one of the dozing agents, and Semele went back to her methodical studies.

This was a thoroughly enjoyed aspect of her work. She was continually filling her mind with facts and figures that delineated human progress, or lack of it, in the global environment, always expanding her memory banks with an astonishing backlog of useful information. In college, she had most loved the research aspect of the academic scene, especially when she took her doctorate at Stanford, but her paralleling taste for volcanic adventure had precluded her remaining in that plodding scholastic milieu.

Six and a half hours down the continental flight path and Semele was deplaning at La Guardia. Soon thereafter, she entered the company’s comfortable BBJ2, the large Boeing Business Jet specially appointed to suit the overseas travel taste of Jefferson Davis Smith. Sixty million dollar wings always flashed across her accounting mind when she boarded.

A familiar Carib attendant named Jessica seated her in *El Jefe’s* cozy walnut-paneled cabin -- a quarters into which she had heretofore been denied entry -- and brought her a small, watered cut-crystal glass of The Macallan. This meant something specific, as nearly everything done around Jefferson Davis Smith proceeded from direct motive; it meant that she was not going to work in flight. *El Jefe*, a very resolute chief, never allowed any drinking on board if there was some issue he deemed too serious and immediate to expose to even the slightest alcohol-induced loss of acuity.

She buckled up for takeoff, then sipped her drink and continued to peruse the pages of her weighty notebook.

“Please put that aside. You’ll be staring yourself cross-eyed soon enough,” *El Jefe* admonished. He entered the cabin and slipped his trim body, dressed in chinos and cream polo shirt, into a large and comfortably accommodating blond leather seat. The plane was leveling off. “Besides, you may need that spared vision for target accuracy.”

“You trying to unnerve me, s--Mr. Smith?”

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He laughed. “No, I know you don’t scare easily as that...except, that is, whenever you’re afraid of forever parting from my company.” The taunting play on words was left briefly dangling in a silence echoing an intimate connection. He was clearly amused. This cheerful irony then transitioned, his crises-etched tan face becoming for a fleeting moment irritably sullen. “Please don’t call me *Mr. Smith*. It’s injudicious. Do you know you have a knack -- oh, unconscious I’m sure -- for insulting inflection?”

“Excuse me. I never meant...what should I call you? I’m running out of titles. Everyone calls you *El Jefe*...but not, I’d guess, in your presence.”

“No. Do I assume that tiresome soubriquet behind my back from you too?”

“I believe it’s really a variety of respect.”

“Maybe, but only from a few of the old guard who started it, the jungle-schooled remainder; for the rest, it comes off pejorative...tongue-in-cheek. Call me Jeff. We’ve come that far...easier working, in any case.”

“It seems disrespectful.”

“Do it anyway and I’ll bear your attitude in mind.”

His eyes went to her bare throat, and she had to restrain her hand from rising to clasp the gold chain fastened there. She wore a light-weight, non-wrinkle olive-green suit with a modestly dipping neckline considered a slight risk. His earnest mouth pursed slightly and formed a punishing smile that made her fight not to lower her eyes. Willfully defeating the inclination, she held his amused gaze while she adhered to the reason she was here.

“I suppose we’re not going to discuss work, anything about the company in question or--”

“No need. Not until your first assault is over. By now you know very nearly as much as I do about UNIFOLL and its contenders...very soon, I expect you to know a hell of a lot more than I do.”

Curly-headed and petite Jessica bobbed headfirst into their private space, affording Semele temporary relief and looking ever crisp and professional in her white shirt, slim navy skirt, and flat navy shoes. Her smooth brown-skinned hand offered her boss an amber-full glass matching Semele’s. He responded with a quick *thank you* and a questioning look.

“My single Islay malt?”

“Yes, sir, Bunnahabhain.” Jessica pronounced the word with exact correctitude: *Bu-na-ba-venn*. Precisely why she is here, Semele thought, noting that she was permitted *sir*.

When they were alone, Semele again felt uncomfortable, this time because of *El Jefe*’s unconcealed and, as she read it, personally motivated scrutiny. Faulting herself

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for letting emotion override her serious sense of purpose, she was about to make an objective statement as far removed from the personal as she could get when he suddenly said, "You look like someone waiting to have a tooth extraction."

Her involuntary reaction would certainly be observed in the crimson flush flowing over her face. She was trying hard to diminish this pitifully obvious display when he further observed, "My god, you're blushing. With your handle on karate, you could probably make a damn good attempt at throwing me across this cabin."

"I would never... You..." she sputtered in protest, then clamped her mouth shut.

"What? Were you going to make a personal assessment? That would certainly be a departure. I'm sorry, I really don't mean to torture you but you invite it. What were you going to say? Goddammit, use some of your highly efficient investigative expertise and ask me something...or at least tell me what you've observed."

"I...I understood that you never say very much about yourself...or like to reveal anything too personal...and I think that's a very good--"

"Oh for Christ's sake. The gossip, innuendo...*rumor* is reaching a critical mass. It's what happens when you can no longer keep your hands fully on the pipeline. I'm not about to issue a factual memo just to set the record straight, but, *Jesus*, it would be refreshing to hear a halfway honest evaluation without fear of reprisal."

These bruising remarks at once provoked a need to restore her independence of mind, perhaps even her wounded integrity, and she hoped she wouldn't later regret candidly tendering what she deemed a safely superficial observation.

After a hesitant clearing of her throat, she offered, "I suppose I could comment on a Wall Street, yet sometimes cost-spurning, authenticity...quite verifiably profitable judgment...urbane dress...mannerisms suggesting the ivy agenda...and a...well, *savoir-faire*...which doesn't jibe with the rougher legend that's always circulating...of the risk-taking soldier-of-fortune adventurer...a bit raw."

"Well, what do you know, you do have a personal opinion...restrained...a little shallow and clichéd."

He laughed and swallowed the remainder of his scotch.

"I could be all of those things easily enough. I hope the flagrantly missing parts -- understandably unknown -- wouldn't be found totally offensive. I grew up in prime Kentucky blue grass...heavy into top-of-the-line racing stock. I learned a hell of a lot more from the, overtly genteel, wheeling and dealing cutthroat racetrack crowd than I ever did at Princeton. That isn't to say college didn't add something; it must have. It was an advantage to have been, from the start, more literarily disposed than

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the average blockhead -- I've always loved to read. Surprises you? You thought I was more inclined to the Hobbesian wilds. I've done that...a fair amount. It was, however, my dapper womanizing father who taught me how to buy a good suit...taught me quite a bit more than that.

"When I was a young paddock-boy, comparatively harmless but full of curiosity and somewhat reckless, I would go with my father, and sometimes my shrewd horse-loving mother, to the annual Keeneland track auction -- thousands of world class yearling Thoroughbreds, gruelingly displayed in all their prancing promise. There, it was possible to stand next to an Arab sheikh who had just flown into Lexington, deplaning his 747 at the Bluegrass Airport with some good horseflesh in mind. His well-informed eye would be fixed hard and sharp on the confirmation and blood line of a select few polished and prinked-up animals. While watching hundreds of millions of dollars tendered for Kentucky stud farm issue, I learned to assess the purchasers of that horseflesh...those who move in, and *move*, the larger world.

As to the risk-taking adventurer, yes, that's where I learned the most: how close you can sail to the wind without losing velocity, your capacity to breathe...and something else learned along the way: how to *see* my environment...all of the animals in it."

She blinked, astonished that he had said so much.

"That *was* literary. I once exercised race horses," she added in the same breath, less inhibited -- scotch at work.

"Do you realize that, aside from your employment application, that's the only piece of personal information you've ever divulged?"

"I had to divulge quite a lot on that...that darned application."

"More than you liked, obviously. You graduated magna cum laude. Accomplishment is nothing to hide. Why so tight-fisted, Semele? It's not really a strong point, except of course out in the field."

"My parents brought me up to think beyond myself. So I've always considered personal revelation a form of bad manners. I suppose I could add to my *restrained* opinion that you probably seldom mix pleasure with business."

"Hardly ever. And I can do business with anyone, but I don't cozy up to folks who've had it handed to them without any personal effort.

"Where did you exercise race horses, Semele?"

"Horses...and myself...around Seattle...Longacres, gone now -- the new track is Emerald Downs. I have an Arabian; he's on a distant cousin's farm east of Seattle at Bear Creek...I try to get out there and ride...when I've time."

He studied her a moment in silence, fuliginous chert eyes holding a great deal back -- yes, dilated pupils the sooty residue of inuring fire.

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He buzzed Jessica and said upon her swift arrival, "Please refill our glasses."

Jessica smiled and nodded, exhibiting two delightful dimples. She was one of those so happy to be alive and agreeably employed that her cheerful demeanor was enviable.

"It won't loosen my tongue very much," Semele boldly ventured after Jessica had completed her task and gone away.

"Ah, you think I'm trying to get you drunk. What a silly childish notion...and, generally, I think you're neither silly nor childish."

"Are you going to...to embarrass me...again?"

"You embarrass too easily. I simply want you to relax. You won't get to for some time after this little interlude."

"You have two daughters," she quickly summoned from her reservoir of old gossip, and was immediately disconcerted by her clumsy attempt at diverting attention from herself.

"I try to keep my family out of this."

"Oh, yes...sorry...excuse me."

"No, that wasn't fair, was it? Not after what I've just put you through. It's an old habit...for reasons of safety, security. Lucky their name is Smith. One wants to be a doctor, the other's at a private school in Rome, art."

"Your influence was broad."

"That was a nice thing to say. I hope it's true. I think their mothers had something to do with it -- my girls are half-sisters...that alone an indication of some kind of failure. But fortunately they've turned out well...so far."

Feeling jumpy, she stood up and stretched, rubbing her neck, then again felt his eyes traveling over her.

"I guess...these days broken families are the norm, rather common...almost endemic." Her voiced perception, supposed to have been placating, sounded to her idiotically smug.

"How easily you put that.

"How old do you think I am, Semele?"

"I have no idea."

"Aren't you supposed to be very good at this kind of assessment?"

"She studied him for a brief moment and said, "Hmm, not too near forty."

"I'm thirty-six. Twice divorced. The first time was a childhood sweetheart. I was too hard-pressed to be there. The second time I was decidedly somewhere else."

She turned around and leveled at him a direct and inculcating stare. "How easily you put *that*...but I don't think I need to...that is--"

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“Hear a rationalization, a confession from me? You’re absolutely right...but for the wrong reason.”

In one quick glimpse, she caught a vanishing flash of bleak sentiment, a startling glint of regret instantly masked. She didn’t want to share his revelation, to feel any of his emotions at all, to have to commiserate with Jefferson Davis Smith over his own careless mistakes. Why should it be necessary? It wasn’t her way of life, her entanglement. But in the next moment her self-satisfaction at having made no such mess of her own life suffered a reversal induced by shame at her own condescension. As the irritating splinter of his unexpected disclosure, now permanently imbedded, was felt and reconsidered, she divined an implicit loneliness, not for proximate bodies, of which there were plenty, but something more deeply reciprocal. She felt a certain gratitude for having been judged worthy of his confidence, and found it praiseworthy that he had remorse enough to inculcate himself.

He grinned, swallowed more scotch and said, “Given enough time, you’ll undoubtedly make some of the same mistakes. We’re all foolish when it comes to raw emotion.

“Let’s play some poker. I’ve heard you’re very good at it.”

“You’ve been talking to Spence,” she said, laughing freely for the first time.

“Well, you’ve cleaned out all of the toothpicks,” he observed several hours later, when they broke for rare steak sandwiches.

“I think you weren’t paying attention.”

“Plenty of attention...misdirected. You have a definite advantage in that department. Still, I could have finished you off simply by noticing the way you hold your tongue when you’re nursing something close to a full house.”

“You let me win?”

“Not altogether.”

“I don’t approve...and it wasn’t necessary, I promise you.”

“I enjoyed it anyway. I know I’ve been a little rough on you. You like to win, don’t you?”

“I like fair play.”

“From now on I’ll try to see you get it.”

When they had finished eating he said, “If you don’t cotton to our hotel accommodations, you could stay at my flat. It’s in *Montmartre*, just off the *rue des Martyrs* not far below *Sacré-Coeur*. Nice lively area, easy to get around in, plenty of cafés and *pâtisseries*, and you can...” He had stopped talking because she was glaring at him with a deeply displeased frown.

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“What is it? I’ll be there only a couple of nights, then I’m heading east. The place has more than one bedroom. If that scares you, I’ll stay over on *place Vendôme* at the Ritz...or maybe the *Lutetia*...near the...ever been to that unbeatable gourmet supermarket the *Grande Épicerie*?”

“Do your employees usually stay at your flat?”

“My...no, they don’t.”

“Then why...why would I be expected to--”

“I only *expect* smooth results in your work. It’s just easier to... Look, you’re going to be there for a while and I thought you might be more comfortable in--”

“Your flat.”

“My God, you’re a wary woman. I thought the offer was considerate, especially since--”

“Did you? Is it really...consideration?”

“Didn’t I just offer to stay somewhere else?”

“I’m supposed to put you out of your flat for...for some reason I don’t even want to contemplate.”

“You’re making something cockeyed out of this. It’s true I enjoy your company – *Jesus*, except at present. I didn’t expect to have my offer thrown back in my face. If I’d wanted an *assignation* I could have done it a hell of a lot more smoothly than this...but you’d be out of a job.”

“Impossible.” Her softly scolding voice tempered that assurance with folded arms and an appeasing smile.

He began to laugh, candidly appreciative and obviously unperturbed, by way of the certainty of his admonition.

“I do find you amusing...even with your ridiculous chariness...curious. You’re an expert at self-defense, having already sufficiently demonstrated your proficiency in martial arts, and yet you think I, your cautious employer, am going to have you for breakfast. What if I called that wishful thinking, you nervous little red hare?”

“I’ll stay.”

“What?”

“I’ll stay in the flat. Thank you very much.”

Still considering her sudden volte-face, he said, “I’m not going to fire you...not unless you fail miserably at your job...and I don’t anticipate anything like that.”

“I don’t either.”

“Why do you suppose I’ve offered my flat?”

“To save money,” she swiftly replied without believing it, still too flustered to engage her normally logical mind.

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“If that’s your conclusion I won’t dispute it, although I doubt you really think that. No, I can’t let that stand. A while ago I promised fair play and now’s the time to deliver. Haven’t you thought why I might want you to stay there, especially after I’ve explained to you how, and likely why, two effectively obstructing lobbyists have already rather mysteriously died? I didn’t want to...to cause you unnecessary stress while you’re concentrating on getting the job done...so I assumed a friendly offer was better than reminding you of the dangers that...but, *Christ*, you’re so damned suspicious it’s--”

“Oh,” she said with reddening face. “Sorry. I was a bit slow. Your flat is easier to secure than a hotel room.”

“Right. My flat is already secure, but staff will be keeping their eyes on you anyway. You’ll have to remember to lock doors...watch your step.”

“I think I’ve always been very good at that.” She was still blushing profusely.

He stood up and poured ice water from a silver carafe into her empty scotch glass, holding it toward her.

“I’m sorry, Semele, to have made you so uncomfortable. Your assumption wasn’t so foolish, really. You *are* very attractive...but more importantly you’re a valued associate of J.D. Smith. This ride hasn’t been much fun, has it?”

“I can take it.” She sipped her cooling water and offered a peevish, rather self-critical smile. “And anyway I’ve learned some things about J.D. Smith.”

“I hope they had something to do with trust.”

He dropped into his seat, folded his hands under his chin and smiled back at her; in the end, very likely no more of himself revealed than he had wanted revealed.

She didn’t bother to investigate her surroundings when they arrived at the flat, giving the handsomely appointed rooms only a few cursory glances. She was far too tired and disoriented by jet lag. They had been picked up at Charles de Gaulle by Spence Bailey, who was waiting in a black Land Rover belonging to the company. When she peered through the dark-tinted glass and saw his grinning face, a little stir of competitiveness briefly overrode her fatigue. He seemed to know that she would be staying at *El Jefe’s* flat and drove straight there without receiving any instructions.

She yawned and smiled at the coffee-skinned Sudanese caretaker, Jura, who took charge of her luggage. “Think I’ve got to go to bed.” Jura, clothed in a rustling brown silk kaftan, led her up a short staircase and into a large room with a balcony facing the city. The adjoining lemon-yellow tile bathroom was inviting, and she decided to shower first. While she was standing under the invigorating warm spray she began to feel pangs of hunger. Spence and *El Jefe* had gone out for a quick nightcap

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at a favorite bar. Jura had returned to bed, and Semele felt at liberty to freely wander into the compact, up-to-date persimmon kitchen and look inside the refrigerator. It was there at the butcher board kitchen table that *El Jefe* found her, eating a wedge of strong French cheese and drinking a glass of Cabernet.

“I thought you were going to bed. You could have come with us.”

She pulled her blue satin robe more chastely around her straightened body and took a swallow of wine.

“I found I was too hungry to sleep...otherwise I’d be dreaming at this moment.”

“You’ll be dreaming all right, after eating that.” He tossed his head at the redolent cheese.

She took another bite and dropped her head back with her eyes closed in a moment of sensuous pleasure.

“Delicious. Cheese never bothers me. But I really don’t know how you can go cavorting after nightlife with jet lag nipping at your heels.”

“That’s what Paris always does to me...and I had some things to talk over with Spence. Will you have breakfast with me in the morning?”

She briefly thought of politely declining but knew it would be far too lax...the wrong decision.

“All right. When?”

“Whenever you’re awake.”

“Better make that whenever I’m standing up, walking around and attempting to speak halfway intelligibly; something like that. Truly awake may come a bit later.”

He offered a tired grin and said, “Well, good night. Fatigue’s finally setting in...I’m a little drunk. Spence really puts it away...swears it was only in celebration of my arrival.”

She shook her head with disbelief and, when he was gone, stood up to rinse her plate and wine glass, finally taking herself off in a weary eagerness for sound sleep.

“Coffee and a roll al fresco with all the noises of the street for background music. How very, very French.”

“You look fairly awake to me. You slept well?”

“Yes.”

In a practiced and often employed manner, but thinking at the moment only of politeness, she appraised *El Jefe* merely from the corner of her eye. He was wearing a black polo shirt and casual chinos. His tanned fingers lifted the large half-filled white cup in one hand, balancing it with a thumb over the rim. Steam rose from the

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handleless bowl. What she would have considered scalding heat was somehow facilely tolerated as he swallowed the aromatic dark brew.

She leaned forward in her heavy wrought iron chair, placed an elbow, wrapped in the long sleeve of a white jersey, on the mosaic table top, and glanced off at the distant black Eiffel Tower prodding the silvery sky.

“This convenient balcony...this very Parisian vista. I suspect I’m sleeping in your bedroom – it’s so large, with all the thoroughbreds hanging everywhere. Still, no four-footed nightmares,” she lightly teased.

“You *are* sleeping where I normally crash.”

She drew herself sufficiently together to brace for a brief glance away from her steaming bowl-like cup and into her boss’s startling eyes: a moist dark gray suspending some unspoken notion, or more likely merely reflecting unrecouped fatigue. Her stomach muscles tightened up in a willful effort at containment as a stir of sentiment recurred. It took both hands to lift her unwieldy cup, and then she wished she had not done so because she couldn’t get her lips to the rim with the natural casualness she wanted to resume.

The limpid eyes burned on above an indefinite curve of mouth, suggesting an incursive discourse so wholly personal she might never have withstood it; but his pointed words were objectively impersonal: “Day after tomorrow, you will find yourself courted like visiting royalty...on the surface everything at your disposal. Keep in mind just who has enlisted our services for this assignment.”

Her face closed with a fair amount of indignation.

“That thought is always present...I won’t succumb to treacle *or* intimidation...from any quarter. Is there any more I can use to advantage before entering Machiavelli’s wonderland?” Her astringent voice held a tinge of sarcasm.

“The company could be over-extended, unable to perform as agreed...but that’s something you’ll discover, probably fairly easily, judging from past work.”

She let the compliment slide away, staring at the sky and willing herself to affect an impersonal and efficient demeanor; an uncanny preparation for ensuing sharpness.

“Ah, Paris,” she attempted as casual diversion.

“We aren’t here for frivolous banter. This isn’t a Paris vacation.”

“I certainly never imagined it was.”

His flaring excoriation had abraded her mood to equal sharpness. What downright meanness. Had he meant to censure his imprudence at her expense? She could only suppose he was reasserting the rule of noninvolvement, personal noninvolvement with him – hardly necessary. She was unable to prevent herself from standing up with the intention of swiftly quitting his presence. Then she remembered

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that she was in his flat, momentarily with no particular place to go. She folded her arms and turned back toward the skyline, grimly promising herself not to speak another word.

“Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

Her shoulders stiffened in shock. “Dinner?” she muttered, caught completely off guard by the disturbing ambivalence of his manner.

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow and I’d enjoy sharing one last good meal before I go. You’ve earned it, Semele.”

“All right...thank you.” Her succinct words were evenly modulated, carefully controlled and emotionless.

She should not have done it, fully aware that it was foolish and extravagant. Nevertheless, she decided to go shopping, managing to stay out all day -- her last free day -- and eventually coming across an unusual little evening dress that repeated the color of her crystal-blue eyes. No, she couldn’t possibly wear such a risky thing to dinner, she did finally assert, but thereafter her bruised ego overrode disciplining reason. She could do this with cool finesse, a method of expunging the anger that had persisted; do it with swift selectivity, like a skilled woodsman culling a tree, like a sharp scythe lopping off an even swath of ripe grain. She knew very well that it degraded her integrity, but never before had she wanted so vehemently to bring someone down, no matter how shallow the act, how fugitive the result.

At eight o’clock in the evening she left her room and entered the foyer wearing her ice-blue dress, her lustrous red hair flaming out in thick waves to frame her pale face and play across her bare white shoulders. For her, this retaliatory leveling was nearly tantamount to malevolence, and not conscionably sustainable for any length of time.

She heard *El Jefe* leave the guest room, and busied herself with fastening a stubborn little blue-faced platinum wristwatch. His brisk step halted. She lifted her head and looked straight into his accusing eyes, not a frightened red hare, but a self-assured ice maiden, her eyes, she knew, enhancing the dress, or the dress her eyes. But then the explosive hair, countering the well-proportioned molding of glacial blue haute couture with a firestorm of coruscating red. She took appreciative note of his formal white Italian shirt, the abbreviated gull-wing collar specially tailored to remain open and minus a tie, then of his Armani black blazer and charcoal slacks. They had both managed a diffident smile of greeting, but even without looking she detected the change in him, the silent hesitation.

“In New York you told me you owned no such dress.”

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“I went shopping today...in anticipation of a certain amount of drudgery ahead. I thought why not one last hurrah. Well, it’s far more than I usually spend.”

“Lucky for you it has an uncommon destination.”

When they strolled through the white-painted front doors of *Lasserre* and into the world of Louis XVI, Semele surreptitiously inhaled a long savoring breath. Having heard of its imaginative chef, its cloud-painted ceiling, brocaded walls, open mezzanine, and period appointments, she had wondered about it. She had never been in Paris with anyone amenable to a dinner investment here, and more recently able to afford it herself, she had been unwilling to enter this culinary empyreum as a solitary diner.

The evening held a clear sky, and the staff had slid back the roof of the two-story dwelling to let a jovial moon peek in at the appreciative, zealously attended clientele.

Once settled in her Louis XV-style salon chair, she glanced discreetly around the room, at the silk-draped windows, high and arched, that faced the street, at the silver and crystal and the fine gold-edged porcelain adorning the table, and finally at the cluster of lambent flames flickering above the silver candelabrum. She had not yet looked fully at *El Jefe*, not actually met his eyes since her composed gaze in the foyer of his flat. She suspected that, in a veiled manner of appraisal, he had not ceased to ponder her intentional affectation. She was beset with guilt at her foolishness, and relieved to have the menus.

“The cuisine here is classic French, along with the special creative flair of the chef. Shall I order for you?”

“No thank you. I’ve a mind of my own when it comes to food.”

“And much else, I think.”

“At the moment I’m too grateful to say so.”

“No, you’ve earned this. I’m ordering a champagne that you may never have tasted.”

“Oh, I’m certain of that...and I’ll drink every drop.”

“Leaving some for me, I hope.”

“Oh, yes...a little for *El Jefe*.”

His smiling face had darkened in a frown. “Don’t, please. Don’t say it and don’t think it.”

“I’m afraid everyone thinks it.”

“If it ever had cachet it doesn’t now. I happen to be top of the hierarchy. The situation might be reversed. You could be my boss. Should I then call you

The Water Bearer

Pocahontas...or some other generically facetious epithet behind your back? *Jesus!* I've asked you to call me Jeff."

She couldn't resist a tittering rush of laughter, her fingers held over her mouth. "Jeff seems too personal."

"What in hell is wrong with you? Everyone has a given name and nowadays everyone uses one. You want me up there." An accusing hand flew up to accompany his remark, as if censuring the eavesdropping moon. "Honor to the remote patriarch. I can't believe you need a father."

"I don't think so. I already have a very nice father. I just like order...like to keep things...orderly."

"Excessive order leaves no room for spontaneity."

"And little room for mistakes."

"Has all this order anything to do with your dress?"

A decision she now regretted. "You want to embarrass me and I can't retaliate...not when you've invited me here. I never expected such...this classic symmetry...so--"

"More of your order? I should have taken you some place eclectic or avant-garde. But I have news for you, postulant Semele: there's no order in any part of human history, including that of the grandiose Louis Seize."

A firm-lipped waiter approached the table, with a cautious attentiveness, and when Jeff -- she was now trying to think of him as Jeff -- had selected the champagne, the waiter turned to her. She glanced again at the menu and said, "*Je voudrais la pêche...blanc de sandre à la nage.*" This she knew was zander, a freshwater central European pikeperch delicately prepared in a savory court bouillon.

"*Oui, mademoiselle. Bon. Eh...?*"

"*Je pense...oui, je voudrais les queues de langoustines rôties avec sauce aux herbes. Cela suffit.*"

"*Eh, pas plus, mademoiselle?*"

The waiter did not seem to think the next course of large prawns in herb sauce enough, but she persisted.

"*Oui, monsieur, c'est assez. Merci.*"

"But you will have dessert, won't you, Frenchy?" Jeff asked, laughing with infectious pleasure at her deft handling of the waiter. "It's very good here: *parfait aux noisettes grillés.*"

"Oh, I do love the flavor of hazelnuts," she admitted.

They sipped their champagne, of which her first taste produced genuine delight. "Elegant...dry as gold dust."

"And about an equal trade in liters," he said touching his glass to hers.

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Well into her third flute of the shimmering liquid gold, she was emboldened enough to inquire why he had undertaken to spoil her so.

“We have to eat, don’t we? We might as well do it properly, our last meal together.”

“How sinister that sounds. Are you leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes. By afternoon I’ll have finished business here.”

“Are you headed somewhere dangerous?”

They fell silent as the sommelier began to prepare their wine selections, decanting the red wine in a silver pitcher and the white in sparkling cut crystal. Soon their first course was presented.

“You don’t need to know where I’m going,” Jeff resumed, cutting into his simple steak *au poivre* and then looking up.

“You’re strikingly beautiful in that...incredibly fashioned cloth...and especially here in this room with the soft painterly candlelight on your hair.”

Once again she was amazed by his blunt and discourteous response followed by such aesthetic praise. Surprisingly, it answered her covetous need, pleasing far too readily.

She laid her fork across her plate and studied his bent head with hurting admiration. There was the latent charm, sudden and dazzling. His usual practice of revealing little or nothing about himself, and far less about his agenda, was a fiercely pursued habit she could only hope to emulate on assignment, or in living her marginalized personal life.

Heady with the superb and hard-to-resist selections of wine she had downed, she suddenly asked, “What sort of woman appeals to you?”

“The one sitting across from me appeals to me...very much...*very much*...except that...”

“Except that?”

“You work for me, and a long time ago I made a rule about that, after...”

“What?” the wine encouraged.

“After I made the mistake of marrying someone who wanted to share my work -- all too soon a lot like hell.”

“Why am I certain I’m not like her?” *Please, please be careful, Semele; your unpredictable tongue has been loosened by an insidiously subtle effervescence*, she warned herself.

He looked at her hard with seriously evaluating eyes, drawing up his mouth and then communicating a faint smile that shone with speculative amusement. “No, you’re nothing like her, nothing at all. You’re not like anyone. But that doesn’t give you the green light to cut me down.”

The Water Bearer

“I would never marry you.”

“You wouldn’t? You wouldn’t marry me? Then you’d better not quit your job.” He enjoyed his laughter alone.

“I take it that was supposed to be humorous. You certainly have an unusual sense of humor.”

“Semele, Semele, mother of Dionysus...are you possibly high as your moony namesake...or her infamous offspring?”

Jeff offered to take her to the famous Harry’s New York Bar on the Left Bank to see and hear a little more night life, but she declined, remarking that she had drunk enough. She was quite fearful of getting thoroughly smashed and perilously bossing her boss, or worse.

Once back in the flat she regretted that they hadn’t gone on, that the rare ethereal night was ending so soon.

Emerging from the downstairs bathroom, she found him in the sitting room punching off his cell phone. She hesitated a moment and said, “My head is swimming. I could make some coffee, want some?”

“No thanks. I’m going to bed.”

She felt suddenly dismal, partly from alcohol, but also because she had wanted something more and knew it was a threat to her own position and livelihood to want anything more; in that regard, the head of her company had been perfectly, impeccably correct in his conduct. Yet there was still that annoying ambivalence doing battle inside her head. Why should it be that because she had previously striven to remain businesslike and dedicated to her work she now felt insignificant, unwanted, unloved, quite rejected? Ah, it was the error of the avenging dress, and the complete betrayal of far too much French champagne, both uncommon things that had worked upon *her* instead of the intended victim. She must excuse herself quickly and sleep it off.

“Good night, then, and thank you so much.” At the utterance of this polite conveyance, her heart quickened. A slight dizziness overtook her as she moved unsteadily toward him, leaning forward on her toes, grasping his arm and kissing him on the cheek. The appreciative little buss had unfortunately landed so inexpertly near his mouth that he cast his head aside; this, she foggily presumed, done with remarkable restraint, for he had drunk as much as she.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

“It was just...I just...God, all those flutes of...of deceitful *gemütlichkeit*. I thought I was being polite.” Her maudlin voice had slowly died as she turned away.

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“You know if I take you to bed you’re fired. You know that, don’t you? Goddammit, am I worth risking that much?”

“I...can’t answer. I’ve drunk far too much. Almost enough to...to tell you off. I’d like to say that you’re a cold, a-bra-sive, in-sen-si-tive...excuse me. I’d like to say that...but of course I won’t because you’re *El Jefe*, sir...*El Jefe*, and I would never jeopardize my--”

“Damn you!” he said, taking hold of her bare shoulder. “Damn you, you insulting little... My God, you brilliant mass of contradictions, I’ve wanted you since the day you first set foot in my office. But haven’t I tried not to...haven’t I tried... You know exactly what you’ve been at tonight. Oh, the *hell* with this.” He lifted her up.

“No, you can’t, you can’t. I apologize. Please! Please don’t, Jeff. I want my job. I need my work.”

“*Jesus*, let’s both calm down. All right, forget what I said. *I* need your work. You’ll have plenty of it.”

Repositioning and balancing her body, he carried her up the steps and into her bedroom, *his* bedroom. The barely visible straps of the delinquent blue dress were deftly eased down; his mouth grazed her shoulders, savoring exposed breasts and covering her lips with a single-minded attention that whirled her reeling head into near soberness. No more qualms at throwing aside principles, he held her away to assess the intended heat, immediately, pitifully obvious. Very soon thereafter, his leveling words assailed her ears.

“It’s just this once...one lapse so we can get beyond this. We’ll both regret it hours from now. But, *Jesus*, we’ve come too far. Say you want me...say it, Semele.” Cradling hands at her neck, thumbs beneath her chin, he eased her head back. “My God...help me here. Say it.”

“Jeff...I...I do want you. Despite all the -- oh, that damned champagne! I think...I must be...in love.”

“No, don’t tell me you love me, you drunk little fool. *Jesus Christ*, Semele, don’t tell me that!”

She awoke with an immobilizing headache, her exhausted body still crying out for rest. Thoroughly vanquished, neither limp body nor hammering head would soon allow her to spring from bed in her normally exuberant manner of greeting the day. In the previous unreal night she had encountered a temporary cure for temporary insanity, the fateful discovery of a marvelous therapy that had extinguished an otherwise unbearable pain, both having arrived nearly simultaneously. This highly

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addictive remedy was an old one, as old as the human species, and very soon she was in a state of shock over the cure as well as the cause. Jeff had conveniently vanished. Why should that surprise her? For a few oddly liberating seconds she even wondered if it had all been some sort of drunken hallucination, then she saw the pale little bruises, conspicuous on her damp cream flesh. Experiencing the tender rawness of her lips, she regained her reason. *Reason*. It was what she always cherished. Why had she not employed it last night? That irresistibly seductive surfeit of champagne was not entirely to blame. The sight of the shimmering silvery-blue dress flung over a chair induced unbearable shame. A moment of terror gripped her, until she remembered that he had sworn not to fire her – the only positive element salvaged from unbelievable conduct that must somehow be expunged from her thoughts.

Perhaps he would say something before he left, a note, a phone call...a declaration of some sort -- her last quip bitterly self-mocking. "You idiotic fool," she whispered. When the phone did ring in the late afternoon it was Spence getting their schedule in line for the next day.

"I'm to pick you up and take you to UNIFOLL every morning at eight."

"It's not even half a mile away. I'll walk. It's good exercise."

"Negative. If you need exercise go to a gym on your own time. My orders are to drive you to and from."

She swore softly to herself, knowing that her superiority rankled, and asked, "Have you seen *El Jefe*?"

"He flew out an hour ago."

"Headed where?"

"Is there some reason you need to know?"

"Need to know? Need to *know*. I keep hearing that. This isn't a military exercise."

"If you needed to know he'd have told you himself."

"Hardly," she said and punched off her power button.

She spent the remainder of the day trying to realign herself for work. Images kept streaking across her mind of the ways she had been driven nearly out of it; his smoothly destructive hands and body laying her waste, his stinging-sweet whispers of praise and pleasure at each wildly erotic exchange. But never love, no not ever a single mention of that forbidden sentiment. At one soaring moment in their reckless pairing she had cried out, "Oh, God, help!" and he had answered, "Beautiful woman, I hope I am...but it feels more like I'm helping myself." The way it would be: they had both helped themselves. Their stars had crossed.

The Water Bearer

II

From Water

One last time the Sea calls her child

back to her primordial light:

This bold entirety swift to rise from

his green bower of dusk.

Far out in night's phosphor dance,

once again he swims his life,

burning bright as all around him

the roiling fauna sink below.

Heaving the prodigal from her radiant

child, the old Sea sounds her

dying murmur and withdraws.

Cast upon the dead shore, alone,

evolved ears open to the message

that cries within.

He is the mind. He is the voice. He is

the mouth of his Mother's words:

Miracle child, revere what I have given

or we will never meet again.

. KMK

He had awakened in so many different places that often upon arising he had to methodically gather his thoughts to remember where he was. It was a familiar disorientation induced by constant diversity and a tremendous expenditure of energy. Fortunately, the confusion lasted only seconds.

This was Paris, not Catalan-related Provence where the mere proximity of remnants of his distant forebears might perhaps have mitigated his temporary estrangement. Paris, like all international metropolises of diverse expectation, was a place unto itself, bearing scant resemblance to the Catalan certainties of swarthy, warm, furiously fraternal Barcelona. Barcelona, his center of gravity, his practical springboard, he thought of as a bastion of reason, of clear vision and free thought -- at least this remained from his youthful impression: the conspicuously staunch Catalan independence to which he steadfastly clung; the idea of old Barcelona, a place where even Franco had hesitated to show his fascist face. By now he knew Paris, knew it well, a moiling accumulation of sharp irritations, surfeited with remnants of remarkable human achievement, artificial enclaves of great beauty, but where a true

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Catalan would never quite feel at home. Yet there was no crowded place in the world where he felt very much at home these days. Even in Barcelona materialism had engulfed the young Catalans. Although well trained in their language, they were given to speaking Castilian, and he, with only slight chagrin and no apologies, generally did the same. Otherwise, with himself he was at peace, comfortable with the decision he had made to be who he was and do what he did; a yielding to principle that once done made everything that followed a matter of course -- the same process as that of submission to moral directives of prevailing myth, but instead with the rational self in control, acting in and reacting to the real world. For this powerful inclination to serve the causes of those without means or representation, he had both of his parents to thank. Growing up among the lively intellectual cliques of his scholarly parents he had always been a part of *esquerra divina*, the divine left.

In early days, already well schooled in the Classics and later with a degree in Geoscience, he had given himself over to the study of economics at Stanford, even enjoying certain aspects of that peripheral collegial existence. Architectural suggestions of a warm Spanish milieu reminded him a little of home. But unlike his place of origin, he was constantly bombarded by superficial enticements, always plentiful in the stridently aggressive United States. From this dynamic central stage, far from a meritocracy but founded on high Jeffersonian principles -- higher even than Jefferson himself --, he was able to broaden considerably his acute grasp of global strategies. By now his English was good, his French was easy. Even his infrequently used Catalan was very good, but generally reserved for like-minded friends or old scholars hailed on the Ramblas.

Within an hour, Rafael Arnau i Roca had showered and shaved and left his room in the 9th arrondissement on the nondescript and narrow but conveniently situated *rue de La Tour d'Auvergne*. Settling himself at an outdoor table at a small café around the corner on the *rue des Martyrs*, he ordered coffee and a roll and solemnly pondered an event that had taken place the previous day.

At an earlier date, and by his keenly investigative and facilely persuasive manner, he had become acquainted with a British receptionist at UNIFOLL. Twice, he had followed this oblivious freckle-faced young Brit to a café where she regularly had coffee. Observing where she habitually sat, he returned another day and left his newspaper on her table; when she arrived he retrieved it. He was soon chatting amicably. He had told her he was a professor on sabbatical, and easily lived up to the role -- something near truth, for he officially owned that title. His lambent eyes flashed over her face as she spoke, all the while imparting a very provocative attentiveness and credible interest, so that she sometimes paused in her discursive speech merely to take in his dark masculine beauty. Befuddled, smitten, caught up in

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an inherent charm so natural he had absolutely no need of affectation, the girl, Margaret, was soon his captive, for by her distracted pauses alone, he knew he was well on his way to a fruitful relationship. He quite intentionally sought no useful information in their initial encounters, but later in her spare little flat, in her bed, and for a time thereafter, he deftly managed piecemeal revelations. When he had gained all that was immediately required, he told her he had to leave but hoped to return at a later date, thus leaving his disappointed new friend aggrieved at his temporary loss but necessarily accessible, until, that is, the eventual exposure of high profile.

Although there had been mutual enjoyment, none of his actions did he regard as more than a pleasantly orchestrated means to a viable end. When she eventually discovered his preponderant motive, he would not mind in the least and would even sanguinely explain, if ever confronted, that in the world in which he moved this sort of conduct, along with other minor misrepresentations, was often necessary and therefore acceptable. Because, he would say, the final culmination of his small deeds represented a greater good far beyond his humble self.

Yesterday he had acquired his first good look at the investigator contracted by an affiliate of World Bank to essentially give UNIFOLL a clean bill of health. Earlier, she had been briefly pointed out to him by his UNIFOLL receptionist, but without a name to accompany the striking face; a lanky redhead who on her days off worked out at a gym in his neighborhood. He reminded himself that she would not be where she was without an expert scholastic pedigree and a shrewd and wary nature. Such was his confidence that these presumed obstacles stood before him as only minor challenges in the acquisition of needed information.

He paid for his breakfast and sauntered off down the street, carrying his briefcase laptop and headed for the *Bibliothèque National*, where he spent the day doing research and sending e-mail. Glancing at his watch from time to time, he eventually headed back to his room to prepare for a visit to the bar of a small café where he hoped to find the investigator. Rafael had not far to venture, for she lived nearby and regularly took a glass of wine at this particular bar near the flat where her driver let her off each evening. She was often alone but sometimes with her driver at the same bar. Rafael had studied her soulful face from various angles, quite taken with her porcelain skin and crystal-clear blue eyes, all enhanced by the most amazing nimbus of red hair. From a discreet distance, he had concluded that her somber mood held a certain restless ennui, a dispirited resignation that the wine did not entirely alleviate.

This evening she was again with her muscular driver, a very aware, rugged-faced chunky brute with dull blond curly hair and warily darting hazel eyes. Both man and woman were quite sharply defined in the encircling cone of light cast by a

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green-shaded overhead lamp -- a stagy spotlight, he thought, and they performing just for him. The man said something to her that made her turn around and look across the shadowy room directly at him, but he perceived that she was merely looking at the waiter taking his order. His *garçon* moved over to their table and they both requested another glass of red wine. Rafael sipped his cabernet, continuing to eye them with a critical sort of patience. After a while, he was pleased to see the driver wave himself off and the woman remain behind. He left the bar stool and headed straight toward her table, intending to appear to stumble near her chair, taking care not to spill his wine, then apologize with a broad smile and a very practiced ingratiating manner. At the precise moment he approached, the woman stood up with her head turned away from him and knocked the wine glass from his hands, the wine splashing over both of them. This unexpected and fortuitous mishap so amused him that he expelled a spontaneous rush of laughter entirely consuming his Catalan reserve. Never could he have anticipated anything as opportune as this. It was as if fate had taken over, on his side for a change.

“¡Ay, *Jesús!* Have I ruined your clothes?”

She gave a dismayed laugh and started to speak in a surprised voice, then stopped herself, looking at him with a quick and shrewd recognition, and frowning.

Brushing at her clothes with a tissue from her purse, she sat back down, struggling with rising anger.

“You needn’t have gone to this length.”

“What?”

“You’re Rafael Arnau i Roca.”

“I know who I am. I swear to you,” he said, still laughing. “This was not intentional. I cannot afford to throw good cabernet at you.”

“Then how did it happen?”

“You stood up when it was not expected and now my precious *vino tinto* is all over both of us.”

“I have no illusions about what went on here, but I *will* buy you another glass,” she offered with a cool smile.

“I should politely decline but I am still rather thirsty. You have the advantage of knowing my name. May I know yours?”

Without answering, she had ordered more wine and was still frowning as she blotted at her blue jacket, with a damp towel the waiter had handed her before he went to fetch their order. She stared down at the red stains on her white blouse front, sighed, and took a long swallow of her wine, apparently also favoring cabernet.

“I *am* sorry about that, Miss...?”

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“Oh, why not? I’m sure you’ll know it soon enough, if you don’t already. Semele Taylor.”

“*¡Dios!* how appropriate. You are named for the mother of Dionysus, spiller of wine.”

“So I’m infrequently reminded, and now, as such, I’ve been clumsily, carelessly...well, probably *intentionally* anointed.”

“Accidentally,” he corrected, touching his glass against hers and drinking, then laughing with a quick appreciation of her response. He had ascertained, and gratefully so, that her delivery held a grudging humor.

“*Sí*, Moon Goddess Semele, what a colorful myth you represent. You must know that you are also an oratorio, an eighteenth century secular oratorio by Handel.”

“Yes. I’m a little surprised that *you* pay attention to such things.”

“You think I am an unlearned oaf...because you also believe I have thrown my wine at you.”

“You’re putting ideas in my head. As to the wine, you’re a little better off. That leather jacket repels much better than Cashmere and silk.”

“Ay, I am really sorry. Do you live near here? You ought to go home at once. I can get the stains out for you, if you will let me.”

“That all-to-obvious technique will only get you a lot of hard laughter from this quarter, *Señor Arnau i Roca*.”

“I am willing to do that, make you laugh. It is a gift. Eh, we have both been anointed in one auspicious toss...mostly without design...not to be taken lightly. The classic myth and the penitent son of Barcelona. Even Paris has seen nothing like it. From now on all formality ceases. Please call me Rafael.”

“My God. I wonder...do you offer classes? Is there a protégé somewhere in the room observing this?”

“I have never taught comedy. You know, I think I like you, Semele...*sí*, I am certain of it. May I tell you that? I have never been more sincere in my entire life. Where do you live?”

“I’m sure you could escort me there more swiftly than I could speak the address.”

“Ah. Then, may I?”

“To what end? Certainly not romantic...that would be far too disingenuous. You’re looking at your equal in any game of subterfuge. So what do you propose?”

“Perhaps we could talk.”

“I’m afraid I’m easily bored, unless the conversation is profoundly interesting.”

“I can do that. Let us see if you can withstand it.”

The Water Bearer

"I'm sorry but I can't invite you to my flat."

"No? Well, I have a nice clean room...but a humble place, and I am sure you would not come."

"Not because it's a humble place."

His muted surprise was contained in a long moment of silence accompanied by an equally long stare. He felt the scaffolding of his superficial conquest crumbling and something quite new to him taking its place. The careless jauntiness had slowly dissolved as his eyes narrowed and his head remained cocked over the left shoulder in trenchant evaluation. His casually limber mouth had grown slightly more tense, now carefully restrained from a wish to go on speaking in an entirely different manner.

"You see, you're at a loss, aren't you? *What to do now*, he's thinking."

Her ripe, faintly wine-smeared lips curled in a playful smirk of amused advantage, the silver glint in her mocking cool blue eyes inducing a piercing sharpness in his throat. Rutilant wild hair, disheveled from their lively encounter, flamed out around her pale face, spilling over her shoulders in fiery rivulets. So forthright, quick and bright, this prudent and restrained creature suddenly wine-splashed and tousled, perhaps even slightly drunk. Never had he thought a woman more beautiful, more effective.

His face closed, and his whole countenance grew solemn as the true Rafael Arnau i Roca fought to show himself, or remain hidden.

"Tomorrow is Saturday. Could you not meet me in the Luxembourg Gardens? It might be that in the shadow of Stendhal...the haunt of Verlaine, you would not be afraid."

"I'm not afraid...not yet. Why should I go where Hemingway is said to have killed pigeons?"

He grinned. "I suppose you could overlook that. It does seem unlikely...but maybe he was hungry."

"I don't want you for an enemy, Rafael, but I can't be of any use to you."

"Let us not start there. Let us start somewhere else."

He watched as she arched one pale sepia eyebrow in surprise, then lifted her modestly filed, unvarnished long fingers to push back a wave of hair. His heart quickened. No longer in command of the moment or himself, he stood up to leave, and heard his own evenly controlled voice devoid of its initial carelessness.

"Tomorrow at three before the Palace. Three o'clock."

He felt certain she would come, but he no longer knew what he would say. Eventually he would tell her things, but not now, not today. Beyond the anxious

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excitement, a gross dishonesty lingered, as if he were cheating not himself but the people of Madera. Every wasted day assured them of a protracted misery. As tardiness stretched into half an hour, he was no longer as certain of her appearance. Half an hour late. He looked at his watch -- actually 3:35 -- and swore softly, inveighing against the ridiculous.

“*¡Qué va! ¡Ya basta de disparates!*”

He leapt from the bench, his impatient feet crunching on the gravel as he strode away. Then he saw her, in gray running sweats, her bouncing hair streaming out behind her as she jogged toward him in long graceful strides.

“*¡Jesucristo!* you beautiful gazelle,” he muttered very softly to himself as she drew near.

“*Buenas tardes,*” she gasped out as she continued to jog a little in place, until his expression caused her to stop.

“Speak English, please. I have no trouble with it.”

“I was trying to be polite.”

“Forgive me. Thank you. How are you?”

“Very thirsty.”

“For wine or water?”

“Just a water fountain...running dehydrates.”

They set off walking in silence until he pointed to a drinking fountain, which immediately drew her away.

He watched her drink, the water sluicing the interior of her long neck. Sparkling hair ineffectually tossed behind her shoulders fell back into the curving stream of water. His hands almost caught up the fiery threads.

“Nice to have water so convenient, is it not?” *¡Dios!* not that yet. *¡Cállese!* he silently demanded of himself.

Blotting her mouth on her sleeve, she walked over to a bench set before the circling green lawn and sat down, watching him approach. He stood a few seconds with his hands in his pockets, trying to decide how he would proceed, and then sat beside her.

“That was good. I needed exercise.”

“So, I am good for something.”

“I didn’t mean to insult you. I don’t think I’m cruel or vindictive...I hope...unless I’m provoked.”

“Probably I am used to being insulted.”

“You’re nothing like you were at first.”

“No.”

“Is this the real you?”

The Water Bearer

“You tell me what you discover. I am uncertain.”

“Rafael Arnau i Roca.”

“Sí. What?”

“Nothing...just, I suppose, good Catalan family names. And I guess you’ve made them quite...”

“What?”

“I was going to say infamous, but I didn’t want to--”

“It depends on the person you are asking.

“What did you study to become...?” he queried.

“I have a Ph.D. in Math.”

“Ah, from...?”

“Stanford.”

He angled his head back and said, “Really? I never saw you there. I would remember. How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight...right now feeling ageless. And you?”

“I am thirty. Why did you say ageless?”

“Never mind. I’m just letting off a little steam. What does a...a fomenter study at Stanford?”

“I am not a fomenter. You have been seriously misled. Unless you meant the other definition.”

“What other definition?”

“Applying warm water to the surface of the body.”

“I’m not familiar with that definition.”

“I have a Ph.D. in Economics...another degree in Earth Sciences. I like numbers, too, large numbers. I especially like them to fit in the right places.”

“You continually get at something.”

“Sí. I cannot seem to help myself. Possibly you can help me.”

“There, you see.”

“No, I meant *me*, help me.”

He was a little more relaxed now and began to smile and then to indulge himself, unrevealing and silent, studying a motive of complaisance so fetchingly accompanied he wanted it to continue: a face flushed from running, the head turned a little aside, the eyes cast down in thought, and the *hair*. All richly chromatic vivacity, yet voluptuously refined and mannered in a cool and simple grace. Pre-Raphaelite. As her effortless arms rose up to push back the long tousled filaments, he thought at once of an incredibly romantic red painting by Frank Cowper, and then of Keats’s poem that inspired it: *La Belle Dame Sans Merci -- Her hair was long, her foot was light, / And her eyes were wild.*

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She turned to look at him, his first close daylight view of that ice blue he had only seen reflecting evening shadows. For a moment neither of them attempted to speak.

“Tell me--” they both inquired at once and stopped. Buoyant laughter floated up, rising on a puff of breeze that made all of nature sparkle alive, the flashing grasses and celebrating trees, her eyes. He waited for her to go on.

“Tell me about your parents.”

“I intended asking the same. You know that they are academics in Barcelona, scholars? How much do you know about me?”

“Not much. A little more than you know about me.”

“I want to find out about you...not too much, but a few uncomplicated things. Why are you Semele?”

She wrinkled her nose, and her eyes crinkled, caustic blue chemical pools or curative thermal springs, cleansing. All at once he felt as if his hands were touching her face, envisioned his hands there and his thirsty mouth drinking from the full smile ingenuously offered. He looked away, secondarily with a point of interest: a mother scolding a pebble-throwing child who stood in tearful remorse with his chubby little hands crossed behind his back. At the sound of Semele’s voice his head turned back to her.

“Why am I Semele? That could really be construed as a profound question. But of course you mean... My parents are both professors, and they both have a sense of humor as well as a sense of history and myth. Hence, Semele.”

“Hence, Semele, a living myth,” he teased. And then more seriously: “What do you think of myth? Do self-absorbed fears pervert its usefulness?”

“Yes, of course...hmm, a Socratic method, so facile.”

“I am a rationalist. But for me existence is verified by both scientific discipline and one of the senses...or common sense, which is not very common – maybe a little empiricism, eh? But with a reasoning mind.”

She appeared to welcome a familiar and very logical point of view. “Yes, reason, how I love it. The universe is order and disorder...chaotic but mappable...we see with the slowness of distance...the mystery of it all.”

“We have some things in common, do we not?”

“Do we?”

“You want to argue. Where are you from?”

“Seattle. My parents live in San Francisco.”

“Why do you live in Seattle if your parents are in San Francisco?”

She frowned and then smiled. “I suppose that seems strange to you...your family life presumably far more fixed in Barcelona.”

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“Fixed? My ancestors, my parents, relatives, and I as a child, *sí*.” He waited for her answer.

“You must know we move around in my country. I was born in Seattle where my parents once taught...suppose I got used to it. Actually, my parents came from Boston...left there as young graduates -- both with doctorates -- and traveled. They like San Francisco...like their teaching positions, their colleagues. That satisfy your curiosity?”

“Was it impolite to ask?”

“Not at all.”

He looked at his watch. “I am sorry, but I have to leave you.”

“What? This was your idea.”

He at once intuited her surprising disappointment, and it was more powerful than any artificial stimulant coursing through his veins.

“*Sí*, my idea, but you were late and now I have to go.”

“Only half an hour late. Well, I didn’t really know how long it would take to get here.”

“Then you should have started sooner. I was here on time.” Although he did have a loosely set appointment, he knew this brusque willfulness was mostly for another reason, the need to counteract unsettling emotion, undeniably powerful, a stumbling block he had not anticipated.

“Hmm, you could allow me the possibility of misjudged time. I thought Spaniards were gentlemen.”

Rescued by ethnic pride, his response was swift and sharp. “I am not exactly a Spaniard. I am Catalan and more practical than foolish...eh, the *real* Spaniard.”

Her laughter exposed even white teeth that shone like pearls in the sun. He wanted to scold her for her ignorance of his ancestry. *My God, I am proud.*

“I’m sorry. Excuse me. I know you’re Catalan, and I like your being practical...I mean, I do appreciate that, and I’m often the same.”

He shook his head, grinned and said, “Today I am more foolish than practical.”

“I’m glad you said that...because I think it means that you...you didn’t come here to--”

“Sorry, I really do have to go.”

He felt himself sliding, sliding into some constriction where soon there would be no free air, only a spellbinding red whirlwind of rarefied air, all too necessary, filling his lungs until he couldn’t breathe in any other medium.

He walked a ways, stopped and looked up at the sky, a gauzy blue cover descending. When he turned around she was still staring after him, that other blue,

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steady pale *azul* of glass. He came halfway back and said as he turned to leave again, “Maybe I will see you at your café tonight.”

“What time?”

“Eh, maybe ten,” he called over his shoulder.

Shortly after Rafael returned to his room, a couple who worked with him arrived with sinister news from Madera.

“They are already bringing in heavy equipment at night. It’s hidden in warehouses, but we’ve seen what they are doing,” the young French activist Antoine said.

“One cargo load after another at night,” his female companion Mari added.

“What the hell are they going to do, blast up the land before they’ve even been sanctioned to do the water?” Antoine expostulated, pacing up and down.

“They believe it is a foregone conclusion. They will not really do anything until their bid has been officially accepted,” Rafael explained. “They are not that stupid. But in any case perhaps we better make sure they know we know what they are up to. We will call a meeting tonight with some of our people and mount an immediate protest...for tomorrow if we can do it that quickly.”

They worked at their phones and computers all evening and into the night, and by the next morning had roused sufficient forces for a strong show of opposition in front of the UNIFOLL offices.

By evening an apologetic UNIFOLL representative, Harold Larson, was at the forefront of the responsive Paris media, announcing that his company only wanted to be prepared to meet the immediate needs of the drought-ridden, disease-threatened populace, should they be selected to do so. Unctuously soothing, occasionally righteously indignant – but to a set point of cool restraint – with trim white hair and wearing an expensive gray suit, the placating Larson cut a respectable yet unswerving figure before the camera’s eye.

“It means nothing to have a few pieces of equipment there,” Larson said with a cavalier smile. “If we lose the bid, we’ll rent it to the company that wins...or we can always remove it to another of our sites around the world.”

Articulate and energetically zealous, Rafael’s riveting dark eyes flashed with the unwavering defiance in his voice. “This presumption is extreme arrogance, a nose-thumbing at democratic principles, and at free enterprise – of course, the familiar hypocrisy.” His response addressed the same crowd, cameras, and news interviewers Larson stood before, but, with a friendly audience, commanded far more favorable sentiment. Thus his informed counterattack was an applauded exposition of injustice.

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If cameras made of his boldness a cause-driven valor, that was all to the good, for such would translate into the broader influence sought. Introduced as the spearhead of the campaign to bring a water system to desperate Maderans, his resolute voice amplified a seasoned purposefulness: “The very nature of UNIFOLL’s clandestine method indicates an unconscionable flouting of open and ethical procedure. Yes, the people want and badly need water and sewage -- we have worked hard for this -- but in exchange must they have their farms obliterated, their land torn to pieces for the sake of a mine that will bring them no real profit, only slave labor? The wages these still independent farmers will undoubtedly be quoted for work in the proposed mine will not even pay their water bills...and they are farmers not miners.”

“Our bid has not even been accepted. Why should their self-appointed water spokesman be attacking us?” Harold Larson asked with an inculpable grin belied by his following statement. “Wherever we go, as in Madera, it’s always our chief goal to serve the people, improve their way of life. No one can do business without a healthy profit margin.”

“It is always the company’s chief goal to enrich their stockholders, who all have flush toilets -- probably many also possess swimming pools -- and have never slaved in a mine simply to pay their water bills. Each one of us is sixty percent water in weight. *We* are water; sustaining water is therefore a human right not a privilege. If you do not think so, try living without it,” Rafael countered.

Later cheered by the assembled crowd, he delivered a reprimand. “We still have little to show for our work. The time for celebration is much further down the road.”

At once bolstered by the number of supporters, yet troubled by the threat of what lay before them, Rafael, Antoine, and Mari, along with a few self-styled lieutenants from their crowd, went off to a small, crowded but more reasonably priced Left Bank café called *Chez Michele*. There they drank wine, dined on poached fish, and avidly discussed future strategies. At the café’s closure they adjourned to Rafael’s capaciously accommodating single room. Sprawling over the limited furniture and the floor, their lively speculations extended far into early morning.

Finally a yawning question from Antoine ended the long night: “What is most important for our success?”

“Facts and relentless perseverance,” Rafael answered. “Then you have a chance at the rest. I have found it so.”

Finally alone, he slept until nearly eleven a.m., very late for him, all too soon tossing this way and that in bouts of unrelieved fatigue and ambivalence. He would lift his head, punch his pillow and stare off at the ochre wall tinted with morning light. He would turn over and back again with a sigh, swearing softly as he half reluctantly

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envisioned the dilemma of cool blue eyes and waves of red hair falling into a water fountain. This vision blurred on the blind-spangled wall, into shimmering bits of colored light: Gaudí's *trencadis*, the mosaic art of Barcelona, his Catalan heritage revived from old Arab Spain. She was indeed a timeless mosaic of bright refracting surfaces and those soft translucent planes of mystery that swallowed light. He needed Semele Taylor on his side, on the side of the people of Madera. No matter how the bidding went, she could supply them with information that would strengthen their cause. He could not abide the idea of using her as he had used the British receptionist, not that she would allow him to. With her unwitting display of sharp intelligence, her irreproachable and implacable character, not at all discounting her striking physical appearance, he had far too swiftly come to think of her as a personal encroachment, one suggesting terminal commitment. No other woman in recent times had engendered such careful consideration, and this so effortlessly done that he doubted his own judgment. He swore aloud in a perversity of self-castigation, even as he knew that she had thought of him in the same way. In this rare instance, employing mutual attraction to his advantage could only be construed as highly deplorable, a dishonorable act, unthinkable. With the certainty of shared emotion, the supposition of harmonious sympathies, his own honor forbade it. Without this sort of loyalty, there was nothing much to recommend in any close relationship -- a valid and trusting relationship required it. He flung himself out of bed. Finally he had concluded there was no alternative but to try and suppress his feelings entirely and work in an objective manner to convince her of what was right and just.

"Foolish...foolish. What a lot of foolishness. *Cuántos simpleza*," he muttered as he stood rubbing his chin, then shuffled his bare feet over the ancient and creaking wood-slatted floor toward the partially renovated old white tile bathroom. He stood in the shower, brooding as he slid the soap over his sinewy body, rubbed and rinsed, and flung the dripping black hair out of his eyes. In one brilliant flash, waves of red hair flamed against blue sky. He looked down at his streaming wet body and swore softly. "*¡Jesús!*"

Busily involved in rigorously studying the laws and shifting political structure of Madera, in e-mailing their actively working corps, receiving reports, and answering phone calls, Rafael did not have time to visit Semele's unremarkable little bar, *La Caille*, for several days. When he did go there one evening, there was no sign of her. He dropped in the next night and the next to find the same quietly imbibing regulars and the same balding surly waiter tugging at his perennially soiled white apron with fat blunt fingers. But on the fourth night she was there alone, her back to the door and

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wearing a blue shirt. He would have recognized that dazzling abundance of red hair from the most obtuse angle or distance. When he dropped into the chair beside her, she stiffened at once and drew her head back in surprise, her eyes flashing over the familiar black leather jacket but discounting his silent display of good humor.

Without the slightest formality of greeting, she lashed out at him with bitter words. "I would like to know how you discovered who I am and where I work."

"*Buenas tardes*. How are you?"

"Please answer my question."

"Was it a question or just rhetorical accusation? You already know, do you not?"

He could not abide the look on her face and turned away, raising his hand to request a glass of wine. They sat in silence, her accusing eyes now searching over his aloof face until the wine arrived. He drank a welcome swallow.

"Margaret came to me terrified. She recognized you on television, of course, and was mortified, horrified. She's afraid of losing her job...afraid of what she's done."

"Then her fate is in your hands. I certainly have no intention of implicating her in any way."

"I would like to say that you are despicable, but I'm not to make you angry. I'm supposed to keep you happy, you see, because you're far more transparent that way."

"Were you supposed to mention that?"

He threw back his head in laughter and quaffed the rest of his wine, summoning more while he was still swallowing.

"Is that funny? Is that amusing? To your sort everything is just grist for the mill, isn't it?"

"No, what is amusing is that you think I am doing the same thing to you."

"*You* are doing nothing to me, of that I can assure you."

"*Qué lástima*. You are doing something to me...and I would like to do a great deal to you, *mujer de la madeja roja*, but I have sworn off."

"What's the matter is your English failing you?"

"No, it actually sounds better in Spanish, some of which I believe you understand. Woman of the red locks is not nearly as provocative...is it?"

"Why did you come here?"

"I did not want to disappoint you."

"You...you...oh God, please let me be. Haven't I enough people after me? Someone broke into the flat a few nights ago, and I don't know--"

"What? What happened? Are you all right?"

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“Nothing happened. I scared them off. I can take care of myself. I think it was my fault. The place is supposed to be tamper-proof but I didn’t lock all the locks...only a flimsy one. I’d been drinking a lot of wine and I...it was the night that you--”

“That I did not come,” he said with regret.

“Anyway, Spence came and--”

“The barracuda? I will walk you home and help you check your place.”

“Never mind. I have a pistol I sometimes carry.”

“I use only fists...if needed...when higher profile.”

“I’ve been trained in martial arts...effectively.”

He received her threatening edge as amusing and said, “I am self-trained in defensive measures. Whatever works when aggressive types need to be dealt with in a hurry.”

“Well, we make a stunning pair...literally. We now know that we can brain each other senseless -- strange world. That’ll make for an interesting acquaintance.”

“Or what I believe is called a Mexican stand-off,” he suggested with a more carefree voice.

“How did you find out about the mine? We...my firm was not even supposed to know about that for a time...no one was, but we’re able to find out things.”

“As I am able. I often work just as you do...because it is necessary -- the mine is old news. You could probably employ me to your advantage...if I were so inclined.”

“I’m sure.”

He leaned back, letting his musing eyes rove over her shimmering red hair and then probe her astonishing eyes. “As impossible as this sounds, I want you to know that you can trust me. At least I need to say it, even if you will not believe it. We can have a little exercise,” he said, standing up. “Catch the Metro and walk beside the Seine.”

“It’s getting dark.”

He offered a nonchalant grin. “What could happen to us? Are we not both, as you say, tamper-proof?”

“The gendarmes could arrest us for something, I’m sure.” With that said, it was his turn to be the receiver of cool indifference at possible danger: an arch smile that for the first time opened into a broad grin, matching his own, and for a fleeting moment suggesting mischief.

They caught the Metro and sat across from each other in silence, occasionally staring at each other with expanding surprise, then letting the pneumatic hum and whistle of the cars lull them back into a peacefully dreaming coexistence.

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Later, as they walked along the dark sparkling waters, he glanced sideways at her face and saw that she had sunk back into a dolorous pool of thoughts that produced a troubling frown.

She looked up unexpectedly. "The other day I thought I'd seen the real you. I actually thought you were someone with...with strong humanitarian interests...someone who--"

"I am."

"I was so disappointed to learn what you--"

"That is how it works in this unequal world, Semele."

He stepped away from her, so that his arm was not touching hers, and placed his hands in his pockets.

"I make no apologies for what I do. I use whatever avenues are open to me. You will have to take me as I am."

"I don't have to *take* you any way at all. Those covert avenues you travel include me.

He stopped and reached toward her arm but then withdrew his hand, looking off at the lighted river traffic and sighing. Still looking away, he said, "I want you to understand what is happening to the people of Madera."

"I've been entrusted to do a job, and in that sense I really am tamper-proof. I will methodically and honestly do what I am paid to do...and I won't be led astray by anyone or any thing."

"I do not want to lead you astray. On the contrary... A person of your high intelligence...I believe that you care but... You prefer to exist like a blinkered horse plodding along to the hay barn?"

"Thank you for the lovely comparison."

They stood in the middle of the *Pont des Arts*, and she leaned forward on the bridge parapet, gazing back toward the Louvre while he divested himself of unwieldy emotion.

"Forgive me, but I only want you to hear some truths."

"But what difference can it make?"

"Perhaps...when you have listened and thought it through carefully, you will be able to tell me something that will be of help to those water-deprived peasants. I feel responsible, because I have promised to get them a reliable source of water...and it must be done without selling their souls to every devil who comes along."

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On their return Metro ride, he said, "If you will not let me come to your place, will you come back to my room with me for just a while and let me talk to you?"

She stared at him so carefully, trying to discern his mental state, that he could only respond with laughter, until this appraising examination began to annoy him.

"Please stop that. I am not going to touch you."

"That's what men often say, but then they never follow through with their not touching."

"You are not talking about me...and can you blame them if they want to have you? You are not someone to be left alone."

"But I *am* left alone. Anyway, that wasn't entirely why I was looking at you."

"We have nullified any relationship except one of arm's length, have we not, by being who we are and doing what we do? If I had anything to do with you now it would only appear to be for the wrong reason."

"How do I know all of this candid decency isn't simply another ploy?"

"You do not...so let it be."

She fell silent, solemn and reflective.

"Will you come then, under those circumstances?"

"If those are really the circumstances, I'll come."

She stood in the middle of his large room, staring at the bare ochre walls. For once the room felt almost warm. There was the faint smell of overripe grapes, detected only by adjusting his senses to her appraisal. Red globe grapes lying on the tile bathroom counter, forgotten until this moment. From the same counter a miniature ice box could be heard faintly humming.

He thought how she enhanced the barren place with the vibrancy of even her stillness, volatile chromatic energy.

"You've got nothing here. No pictures on the walls. Well, a sofa...a few chairs. I suppose behind that walnut screen a bed, but...no evidence of Rafael Arnau i Roca."

"I am not a materialist...and...just passing through."

"What are you, a Marxist, a socialist?"

He laughed. "Do they still call them Marxists? You know Marx was not a communist. He was...of his time."

"A few are still around, I think. And you?"

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“I am a human, one of those shackled to the pitiful human race...pitiful because, dream as they will, its members cannot escape the awareness of their end. I am one who has definitely chosen a certain way of living out my life. I am no *one*. I am everyone. I am you.”

With each statement she reeled very slightly backward, as if pantomiming the soft blow of his words. The sharp overhead light fell over her white face, rendering her eyes clear as glass, nearly washed of that intense daytime blue. Dropping her head to avoid the glare, she moved off toward the sofa where she sat with her nimbly positioned black-slacked legs crossed to one side and her hands in her lap.

Sensing that the light bothered her eyes, he switched on a small lamp, the only other light in the room, and turned off the overhead light.

“I have some wine.”

“No thank you. I don’t need it.”

He took that as a compliment and smiled with gratitude, but then fell into a serious contemplation of where he would begin, settling himself at the other end of the sofa, and for a while merely looking at her.

“You’re not a simple man.”

“I *am* a simple man.”

“No, you are not. You have the power to make me look. I can do that...always leaning in that direction, but I’ve tried not to...because I...I want to get through it.”

“You mean unscathed. You cannot. You will not. Not you. And merely getting through it is not enough...well, not for me. As long as you are alive and imprisoned in this strange biological mass, you might as well use it up, use it well. I interpret that as using it in the way I do.”

“You...you make me want to cry.”

Surprised at words he had not expected to hear, he cocked his head at her, his softening mouth relaxing into the answer he would give.

“You make me want to love you. But how can I do that? It would not be good for you. You would not even believe it...but...no way to argue with so powerful an emotion.”

Her brow wrinkled and she looked at her hands, still in her lap but now clenched tightly together, rigid, unnatural.

“Do not fight it so. That is not you, Semele.”

“But this is you...really you.”

He leaned forward and pulled her hands apart and held them, one in each of his, until he felt the tension drain away, replaced by a softly inveigling emotion, then

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let go. He had promised he would not touch her, but it had become a euphemism for much more than this small spontaneous act.

“Let us change the subject and talk of other things, not ourselves.”

“Aren’t we always talking about ourselves?”

“On some level perhaps...the one we cannot escape.

“I know you like numbers, Semele.”

“What? Numbers? Yes. Yes, I do. They tell the truth, and if you know how to read them they’re never deceitful...even when manipulated with sleight of hand.”

“Let me give you some numbers. Three quarters of the world’s poor live in rural areas where there is little or poorly distributed water, or none at all. Because of contaminated water and no sanitation there are four billion cases of diarrhea a year resulting in over two million deaths. Intestinal worms affect more than ten percent of the population of the developing world. There are six million cases of blindness from trachoma. Since 1996, there have been ninety separate outbreaks of cholera. Two hundred million people are infected with schistosomiasis, a disease caused by a water fluke that invades the body and devours its organs. The lack of water, or the filth of it, kills nearly three and a half million people a year.”

She sat deathly still, trying to digest his words, he supposed, and yet not wanting to hear anything like this. Still he had to go on, to make his case, to make her understand the importance of both their positions.

“When you stand under a shower, flush a toilet, drink from a water fountain, pure water, you assume, sliding down your throat, cool and refreshing, cleansing and purifying and easily accessible, you never think of it. It is there. It is everywhere and forever, is it not? No, no, and *no!*

“Finite water is infinitely more valuable than oil, and what there is of it that is not chemicalized or polluted beyond use by sewage and dioxins is a precious and scarce commodity. A few water barons have figured this out, a small group of corporations seeking to privatize the world’s water. What does this mean? Is it good? Is it bad? I think presently it is bad, dangerous. One thing we do know is that right now it is not very profitable without the support of various ambitiously devised arrangements of numbers coming from many different directions. But that temporary problem is in the process of resolution, and when there is a lucrative water economy in place -- as water now trickles onto the stock market -- will it be too late? Will greed prevail? Will wars ensue? Will populations become enslaved by the quest for what it is already their right to possess? In today’s world water is already a four hundred billion dollar business. Pardon the pun, but very soon that amount will seem like a drop in the bucket. As water barons continue to buy up water supplies in your own country, middle class Americans will no longer be able to afford green lawns, and showers will

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be brief and expensive. In caring for this small fragile planet many considerations must be factored in, but one thing is most certain: We cannot live without pure water.

“UNIFOLL wants to make a deal that is lucrative for them, even when they pay their kick-backs to those players with political clout who intend to make a killing with the mine, the mine that is replacing the agriculture of the valley where Maderans have lived for centuries. Once it was a lush wooded country, full of wildlife that seemed like an endless banquet for the people. Many of the trees were cut down, and now more are being cut, but the valley was, still is, rich alluvial soil. Then drought came because the rivers were diverted by dams, the watershed decimated. Water trickles through their country less and less, but it can be brought back.”

“Rafael...listen to me, please. I do value water highly and think of it as precious. I always have. More and more I admire what you do, what you’re attempting, but I cannot yet say, nor could I ever tell you whether or not they’ll win the bid. But in any case, surely you understand that they must make a profit to operate.”

“There are other ways to finance this without chewing up the earth and enslaving humble farmers. What do those folk know of mining? Of course, they can be brainwashed to believe it is progress. Look what rapacious progress has done to our atmosphere. It will take the next fifty years simply to cleanse our air...if we can even convince the polluters that such a measure is needed to survive.”

Even as her eyes grew moist in commiseration there was frustration, anger in her voice. “You’re putting me in a terrible, untenable position.”

“Why is it so terrible? All you have to do is walk away from here with your mouth closed. I had to try.”

She stood up with her arms folded. “I’m going back to my flat.”

“Sí. I will walk you back.”

“No, don’t walk me back. Don’t come near me again. Please...please stay away from me. I can’t help you.”

“You know you can help...not me, but the water-deprived people in that valley...and beyond,” he called after her.

Often in the ensuing days aspects of Semele flashed across his mind, sometimes the red hair that he could not believe he had never touched, and the excoriating blue eyes that had judged him so severely, but more often the obdurate nature of one in obvious sympathy who could so firmly hold to a position he had failed to change.

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He was preparing to revisit Madera, certain people of the valley having grown more insistent upon his presence, and he wanted to see for himself what had transpired at the UNIFOLL office there.

Two nights before his departure he went once again to *La Caille* and spotted Semele across the room, in the company of her burly shadow whom he now knew as Spence. The room was crowded and smoky. He sat out of sight at the bar and discreetly watched them as he drank his wine, trying to determine the nature of their relationship by their gestures and facial expressions. She did not often laugh or even smile, and it appeared that Spence was doing most of the talking. Rafael finished his wine and stood up to leave, but instead he suddenly turned and walked across the room to their table, where he pulled out a metal chair and sat down. Spence was at once livid, his hazel eyes glinting with menace, but his conduct was restrained as he awaited the reason for this bold intrusion. At first startled, Semele's face had become a reprimand Rafael had no difficulty reading. She too waited, tense and frowning at him.

"*Buenas tardes*, Semele. *Buenas tardes*," he nodded at Spence. "Are you having a good evening?"

"We were," Spence said.

"May I buy you both a glass of wine? I wanted to say good-bye to Semele."

"No, you don't say anything to Semele; you don't know Semele well enough to say good-bye. But now, if you happen to be going away...that's damned good news I'd say, wouldn't you, Semele?"

"Spence," she implored softly, her face pale and her eyes larger and grievously dark-hued in the shadows of the dim room.

"I have no quarrel with you," Rafael said, looking with a calm unwavering stare at Spence.

Spence stood up and stretched his bent arms behind his head, as if in preparation for something decidedly physical, then walked around and squatted a few inches from Rafael's chair, speaking in a level but succinct voice.

"You come near her, you have a quarrel with me. I'll dust you up good right out in the street, watermonger."

"Probably not," Rafael speculated with a slow smile. He remained slouched back in his chair a moment longer and then drew his body up closer to Spence, who was still crouched on the scuffed black and white floor tiles like an expectant wrestler. "We Catalans have a name for men who squat like that: *caganer*." He heard Semele gasp and then saw a tremor of smile forming. "Semele knows what I mean. But you are an insult to the *caganer*, because when he squats to defecate we believe he is

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returning something useful that will replenish the earth. You are giving nothing back. *Estreñimiento*. You might as well stand up.”

Across the dim room he, as well as Semele, glimpsed a burly waiter taking his hands from his apron pockets. Her eyes went to Spence’s clenched fists, and she spoke quickly in an effort to defuse an imminent explosion.

“No, Spence. That’s enough. Nothing is going to happen to me. You know we aren’t supposed to make a spectacle of ourselves. Please leave.”

“What? You think I’m just going to let you--”

“Yes. Leave. Now. I can take care of myself.”

Spence stood up, hesitating long enough to throw down a few francs, then slammed his chair into the table and left.

Rafael turned away briefly, summoning the waiter for wine while Semele sat in silence. She had attempted an expression of benign tolerance, belied by enlarged ferine pupils that considerably darkened her pale eyes.

He grinned and said, “So you have seen the many versions of the celebrated fecundater sold at holiday stalls in Barcelona. He has his own museum.”

“Yes. You Catalans are really a little unusual.”

“I will accept that for them as grudging praise for a stalwart nature.”

“Good lord, you demolished Spence; it’ll take me days to calm him down.” She laughed some at this and then her expression grew solemn. “I did ask you not to--”

“I know what you asked of me, but when I saw you--”

“You didn’t have to come here.”

“I know that, too. My feet brought me under protest from *la cabeza*.”

He pushed back his chair and dropped his no longer protesting head over one shoulder, taking in the entirety of her: a remarkably controlled body, extraordinary now, still charged with preparation for anticipated conflict. Beyond this he sensed arousal, but a sentiment withheld.

For once and at last his eyes held nothing back, his face registering a state of mind and heart he knew she had not seen him so openly manifest. Perhaps it was his imminent departure. Every departure was an end, and this one he did not want, not without clarification. She looked puzzled, not having fully grasped the meaning of his look.

“Will you come back to my room?”

“You think I’m going to allow more talk?”

“No talk. I want only to love you.”

Her face dissolved into some strange bewilderment that he thought might contain anguish, and he tried to anticipate what she would do next.

“Eh, clenched hands again. You are fighting with yourself, not me.”

The Water Bearer

As he spoke her white fingers opened and spread on the table, balancing a rapid departure from her chair. She faced away, putting on her coat while he tossed down francs.

“Are you going to come with me?” He watched her turn and reach for her purse. “Or are you going to shoot me?”

Clutching her purse against her chest, she walked out of the bar as he followed close behind. On the sidewalk she paused, her graceful body tipped slightly forward while she looked both ways. He slipped his hands into his pockets and walked briskly away, glancing once over his shoulder. Her agile willowy legs would be able to catch up with easy strides, but she was still hesitant, uncertain, reluctantly moving in his direction – like a lamb to the slaughter, he thought. Perhaps he should tell her to go home, to get the hell away from him just as she had ordered him to leave her. Perhaps, but it would never happen. A hurried footfall and she was beside him. He gave a surreptitious sigh of relief. In another moment she reached for his arm, hardly aware of what she was doing. “No, not yet,” he said, stepping aside. “Please wait or...we will never get there.”

Once inside his room, with her coat removed and only the small orange-shaded lamp tinting her pale flesh a soft apricot, she stood motionless. But the worn-patterned old Indian carpet was charged to vivid life beneath her feet. Her silk-clothed breast heaved faintly in the moderating light, the same pale light that degraded her fiery hair to a smoldering titian bronze. Expectant, half credulous but no less ambivalent, she had watched him remove his jacket, her gaze remote, ardently uncertain. He was never more certain, anticipating the allusive lips that parted as she tossed back her hair. He smiled at the comeliness of that defiant gesture. A brief thought of pausing to memorize for future contemplation urgently dissolved. Stepping close against her, his fingers dipped into garnet silk waves illuminating a very different life, in the blink of an eye infinitely opening to his as mirror upon mirror. Pulling her head back, there remained a thick wind-tangled spindle of filaments tight in his grasp as he tasted the cabernet tinge of cool parted lips; that studied mouth, soft, moist, now swiftly heated and burned by his own voracious hunger. The recurring vision of flaming hair was at last caught in the real moment, and by its capture he drew her along – both kicking off shoes as they went. With clutching hand still tight in her hair, his slightly reckless free hand undid her blouse. Aggressively working his way through her entire undoing, the rewarded fingers of his left hand luxuriated in the actual kinks and waves of pervasive metaphor, a powerful stimulant he would not surrender. Those gripping fingers followed her head even as she knelt down to tug at his black sock. In some secretive fixation she held his bare foot against her breast, engrossed in flesh and tendon, then looked up at him and whispered, “Achilles.”

The Water Bearer

Prophetic? The excruciatingly sweet old-world gaze of vincible rapture rendered him nearly senseless. He jerked her up into his arms. Swift as fluttering wild wings, her slender fingers flew at his clothes – the horn buttons of his black shirt, his Spanish leather belt. His own disobedient fingers then cast off what remained. Entangled as one, they sank down upon his bed; deliciously entangled, now forever tangled, and he feeling himself deep inside this whole fused dream, yet wide awake, entirely here and now.

He awoke to find her lying with opened unfocused eyes, her left arm flung across her forehead. Lifting her wrist he kissed the hand's warm palm and lay back with his eyes closed. Her hand was then pulled from his grasp as she raised up and leaned over to run her finger down his nose.

“How beautiful you are lying like that...sorry, but I'm afraid with your head back that way you really resemble Michelangelo's incredible *Dying Slave*.”

“What an interesting imagination you have. If you must have me a slave, why not one closer to life and yours, *sí*?”

“Poor exhausted Michelangelo would still have been delighted to sculpt this powerfully lean body...certainly this straight dogmatic nose...oh, so lovely.”

“Not dogmatic. Am I now to compare you to an ancient goddess? Already you are a myth. When I look at you here, I think only of you, no other...past or present, no other.”

“Rafael,” she said, struggling up from bewildering emotion, “you...you can't expect to get anything from me.”

He laughed. “All I want are your body and your mind.”

She turned on her side. Eyes of purest sky-reflecting water pierced his heart. “And what will I have of you, Rafael?”

“You? You get only my heart...or I would have given it to you if you had not already stolen it.”

“Didn't you tell me Catalans are more practical than foolish?”

He offered an apologetic smile. “Sometimes this one is practically foolish.”

“Was this foolish?”

“No, *querida*. It begs no description or explanation. It happened and it simply is.”

She threw aside the covers and sat up while he lay motionless and watching.

“Your body is beautiful. As I knew it would be.” He reached toward her and slid his hand up her thigh. “This hair is red also, Spanish red, as I supposed...or dreamed.”

The Water Bearer

“Oh God...have I gone mad? Now I’ve--”

He hastened to place his thumb over her lips. “No, no, *no*. No regret.” He held her face and gently kissed her serious mouth, ravaged over the hours and a little swollen. “This is pleasure...inevitable from the moment we met.”

“Oh...carried off...feeling so content...lost track of time. God, what day is it? It’s very unlike me to--”

“Remain calm. It is Saturday. Lie back down, *querida*. *Cristo! tu eras muy bella*, so beautiful in every way...your *contentarsa* self all mine until Monday...then I must leave.”

“Where are you going? Madera?”

“Does not matter. I only mentioned it so you would stay with me. You cannot leave. I want to think of you here with me...whenever I think of you...here with me.”

“It’s so typical, isn’t it, to be dealt with like this, so incredibly...then deserted? Why do I--”

“I am not deserting you. I have business...and you do, too. But, surprisingly, very, very surprisingly, you have become mine...*sí*, now you are that...with me wherever I go.”

“Rafael...shouldn’t we...I’ve no other clothes, no--”

“*¿Para qué?* Why the hell do you need clothes?”

“Don’t we have to eat?”

He lifted a strand of hair away from one blue eye and said, “Ah, you have *seny*. One of us must have it.”

“What is *seny*?”

“Common sense, wisdom, serenity. *Sí*, you are *plena de seny*, as the Catalan poet Ausiàs March said far back in the Middle Ages: a woman of wisdom.”

“Good God, I was never more lacking in wisdom.”

“Why do you demean yourself, *llir entre cards?*”

“What? Speak English. You’re confusing me.”

“Just more poetry: lily among thistles. I want to have your myth mixed with my history...for you I am a Catalan.”

“And *with* you I’m a little out of my mind.”

“*Bueno*. Be crazy...if it makes you want me.”

“Amazing...at this moment I...I would do anything.”

“Then get busy.” He stroked his fingers through her hair. “Make me so in love I cannot say it, as March wrote.”

Her widened eyes were strange, dazed, perhaps wary.

“Ah, *amor*, do not look so serious.”

The Water Bearer

“You’re...very amusing.”

“*Sí*, I am...*sí*, *hermosa*, here and now amusing, very, very amusing...when I love.”

“How often is that?”

“Not very often...quite infrequently...and never like this...no, not ever like this.”

Clutching her against him, with raucous laughter and a flurry of kisses, he threw himself backwards upon the bed.

“Ahh! *You* are an *hombre brio...brioso*...however you say it...a wild man. I thought you were a serious person.”

“Say it however you like. I *am* serious...but not all of me -- sometimes one plays. We have come to this and nothing can be done about it...absolutely nothing. As you say, madness. It must have its way.”

“You think I’ve gone crazy, too?”

“You would do *anything*? Do you remember last night, the things you said to me? Do you remember your own body?”

“I...I certainly remember yours.” Her expression was of a sudden shy reticence, “but I can’t--”

“Ah, no love? Then you should leave right now. It will take me a very long time to get over this.”

“Rafael, will you stop it, *stop it!*”

He turned her face to his and was astonished to find her truly and deeply disturbed, so disturbed her eyes were brimming near spillage. She pushed herself away from him and stood up, pulling a loose sheet around her.

The room was chilly, as usual. He pulled on a warm turtleneck and jeans and went to get something palatable, familiar, dependable, and hard to find in Paris: wine saved for a special moment – without ever imagining that moment would be the morning of Semele. 1998 *Gran Clos Criansa*. A celebratory offering. And he wanted to calm her. He held the bottle between his knees and sank the corkscrew with swift fingers, and thought how many times he had done that.

Huddled on the sofa, her body wrapped in the sheet, she shook her head, refusing, then took the glass from him and drank with an absent-mindedness that made him smile.

“*Criansa* from *Catalunya*.” He held up his glass.

“I’m honored.”

“I am honored that you are honored.”

“You’re so amused...smooth, silver-tongued. For me, this happening is a serious, complicated...it’s never so--”

The Water Bearer

“How often does it happen to you?”

“I don’t think...nothing like it’s ever happened. Oh, Rafael, who you are? I don’t really know what you want.”

He set down his glass, leapt up from the sofa and took the nearly empty glass from her hands. Dragging her against him, he threw aside the sheet and carried her to the bed, sitting at its foot and lifting her onto his lap.

“You are a difficult one, mathematician, investigator. But I accept that. Make no mistake about this. It was not one night of fucking for something else. Look at me. Do you understand? I am yours. Are you mine? *Are you mine?*”

“I feel...as though I am...but I don’t even know--”

“You can learn anything about me you want to know.”

“Do you have a woman...a...a sweetheart?”

“*¡Jesucristo!* I do now. Now I do. I have no time for very much of that. I do not even have time for *you*...but here you are. What does that tell you? And where is your lover?”

“I don’t have one.”

“*Śí*, you do. Now you do. You are supposed to say, ‘You are he. He is you.’ I am that one.”

“Everything’s happened so quickly that I...how could you feel this way so quickly?”

“How could I not?”

Her pale countenance held the same expression his mother gave when as a child he told her a lie: doubt, grief, pity, and love; oh yes, in spite of his *mala conducta*, there was undiminished love, or even greater love because his denial, his childhood lie had implied such need.

“*¡Dejelo!* Ay, give it up. You think this pairing is too convenient. You squirm in my lap like a nervous cat. Put your arms around me. It is *not* convenient. *You* are not convenient...nor I for you. You are not here because I want something you are unwilling to give. Last night I almost told you to get the hell away from me...but I could not. I wanted you...and now I want you more.”

Rubbing her cheek slowly, thoughtfully over his black-clothed chest, her arms rose to encircle his body, and by that gesture his entire self. She turned her face up to meet his waiting eyes, at last with an open look of trust, the clear beauty of that pellucid blue an irrevocable promise; so compelling he wanted to take her into him with his astonished, restless, reverent hands, crush her against his body and cry or sing or recite old poems. He kissed her soft silky temple -- pulsing warm and love-sweat scented --silently stroking the inescapable mass of cool hair.

The Water Bearer

After a long contemplation, he sighed and tossed his head. “Goddammit, I will have to leave you, *querida*.”

“If you’re so busy why does your phone never ring?”

“My cell phone? Because I turned it off. Otherwise, we would not have gotten past the first...the first kiss.

“Ah, finally you are laughing. Come down on this bed, *mi amor*. I am going to show you one more time exactly what all of this means.”

“You said it was not just one night of--”

“Come, you redheaded *hembra elegante*. I have this feeling for you. I know it was...; *Cristo!* what do you say? *Expugnar*. To...to take by storm. But I believe it happens. I am not such a fool that I cannot recognize it. Do you know? Do you know that? You must know. You *must*.”

“Yes, Rafael...yes, I do know. I know because I feel it too. Still, I can hardly believe...no, I just can’t believe that we...you and I--”

“*Ya lo creo*,” he countered, laughing as he removed his intolerably irritable clothes, the only barriers to that satin skin he craved. “*Sí*, I believe it. You are why.”

In her same clothes he took her to the humble but not quite *gargote* café where he had eaten with his friends, and there he peeled and fed her shrimp sautéed in olive oil and garlic. They sat in a dark corner, kissing with another kind of insatiate hunger, their mouths exchanging garlicky olive oil and the winy flavor imparted as they steadily emptied several nicked old tumblers of table wine.

Her thick hair glinted carmine in the dim rose light. Whenever that curling pelt was tossed, the faint herbal essence of his shower soap reminded him of their intensely erotic shower together. She licked her fingers and looked up from her chipped plate of discarded shrimp tails.

“Rafael, how do you live? On what do you subsist?”

“We have money from sympathetic non-profit foundations. I have small earnings from my books published in Spain, some translated and published elsewhere, some not...occasional foreign lectures...money saved from a professorship...and a diminishing inheritance. I do not earn what you earn.”

“How do you know what I earn?”

“I can imagine. Your clothes are expensive.” Earlier he had noticed that her skillfully stitched gray suede shoes were meticulously leather-insoled, and her soft-gray slacks were smartly cut, well-tailored, perfectly matching a long-sleeved silk blouse. She wore spare but dense gold jewelry.

The Water Bearer

"I'm really very frugal about clothes. I do have a few nice things...a little Italian gold."

"And you have a comfortable flat for your--"

"The flat isn't mine."

"No, but you lease it or rent it."

"No."

"Whose is it?"

"It...it belongs to my boss."

"Your boss lets you stay...while he is there?"

He was very good with languages, both explicit and implied, and by now he was able to read her face as if he had partially learned a new language. He knew that she was most certainly withholding something from him.

"Don't look at me like that."

"How am I looking at you?"

"As if you're trying to get inside my head."

"I *am* inside your head...and not alone."

"Stop it. I stay in the flat because it's secure, safe for me to do so. My boss isn't there."

"Where does the barracuda stay?"

"I don't know. Somewhere around. He keeps that to himself. What is this...the Inquisition?"

"*Lo siento*. For that madness you must blame the Castilians living in 1478...more precisely Ferdinand and Isabella, directly responsible...and Pope Sixtus IV who instituted that racist terror...*autos-da-fé*."

Lifting his clean napkin, he wiped the grease from her mouth, then his own mouth. He slid his hands into her warm armpits and held her that way for a moment, then kissed her until there was nothing else.

"*¡Cristo!*...I think we should walk."

They caught the Metro and walked on the Right Bank along the Seine.

The sporadic breeze carried a leafy pungency, tainted with exhaust fumes and the faint restaurant smell of fish. Although essentially clear, the air held a swatting sour dampness, as though about to transform itself into a layer of fog. Drizzled lights danced over the murky blue-black river. In the night shadows, leaning on a parapet, she turned to him and said, "I don't quite know why I mention the personal, but I have an urge to. Maybe because I can't tell you other things you want to know...or maybe because you're so open and honest with me...or because you simply impose the truth. I've never known anyone like you, Rafael. There can't be another. One-off as the Brits say. I--"

The Water Bearer

“What is this...a confession?”

“Oh, now I suppose...it really isn't necessary. I just didn't want you to think...”

Her eyes caught some small piercing shard of light from the river or the light of a boat, a glint that enhanced the translucence of the iris, as if lit from behind, glowing like the milk-blue of glacial ice in clear water. Beyond the penumbra of the street light, her hair now appeared black, writhing in the breeze, eerily evoking reaching tentacles of something separate and alive. Her indistinct face floated chalky blue out of the darkness, but her warm voice still held its rich velvet softness. This softness made him lead her to a tunneled walkway where he pressed her against the cold stone wall and kissed her until he knew he would not be able to stop. Tugging at the waist of her slacks then provoked the soft velvet voice that further aroused: “Oh, I don't think...not here. What if someone--”

“Sí, here,” he heard himself insisting as he undid her slacks. “Because your thought escapes us and I am thinking hardly at all. What are you thinking now?” he demanded, thrusting himself into her against the cold stone. Jealous animal choler dissolved upon a supple mouth opened to his in a mingling of wine-flavored lust. Frustration melted away in the consuming pleasure that was Semele, only her, only this slender soft-skinned woman almost as tall as he, who loved reason, whose wild mass of hair into which he breathed held the floral scent of the soap in his shower. Murmuring and struggling to wrap herself around him, she could only repeat his name in faint stirring whispers of breath while his answering body fed upon that voice, for a time quenched.

He helped her with her clothes. Still breathless, she stumbled against him, leaning with her forehead resting on his chest. He whispered near her ear, “*Lo siento, Semele, I am sorry, my love. Amor mía, lo siento.*” It was not an apology for what he had done, what they had done together, but for how it began -- the dark Envy of love.

Pushing herself away from him, she tried to look into his eyes that, in accordance with their lust, he thought must still be insatiate with lurid brutish heat.

“It's all right. I wanted you too...by now you know that. I was beyond caring why it had to be here, had to be now...because you thought--”

“No, I forgot...I forgot everything but you. Exactly the way it should be. The way you are to me.”

“Strange.” Her nervous hand rubbed at her forehead.

“What?” He buttoned an open space of her blouse.

“Reared so...so thoroughly immersed in endless volumes of literature...my family, I suppose like yours...all of my life...eventually it comes around to

The Water Bearer

that...sudden literary analogies are bound to fly at me...well, seem to parallel my reality and..." She stopped and shrugged. "Sorry."

"No, go on. What? I will understand."

"I thought of Blake's *Daughters of Albion*."

He laughed softly. "You want to play in the airy realm of William Blake, mathematician...after what he did to your son of a yeoman farmer, Newton? As a rationalist I am no friend of Blake. He would not allow reasoning man to enjoy physical pleasures, or much else solid. *Woman*, declaring you enslaved while reviling the hypocrisy of the New World, he still left you in dreamy Beulah-land without much power to think. Where I see our true animal nature -- ah, *sí*, hopeful, but tending to Hobbes rather than Locke --, Blake was arrogantly anthropocentric. I begrudge him the factual observation that good and evil are firmly locked together -- a condition that sometimes promotes humanity. His high ideals trapped in a perversion resembling the double one of Gnostic escape -- a victim of his own myth, an anomaly, a gifted intellectual snob. Eh, *sentirsi una vittima* is a...you might say: with a chip on his shoulder, *sí*? A naive romantic nature with a superior attitude springing not only from a self-enlightened path but from feeling inferior; a nature that must invent its own passive allegories in which to hide complaint...*sí*, justifiable, but the wrong path for any kind of change. His range of vision produced art. Beyond that, few wretched humans are liberated by poetry; few are equipped to live in the lofty world of free imagination."

"You seem to have given it a good deal of thought."

"Dispassionately, a long time ago. And you still do."

"My mother taught his work...in conjunction with the Industrial Revolution, so ruinous to him. We had a few lively discussions about him. I've always admired his fine engravings...thought he had quite a number of reasons to complain...also fearing punishment for sedition."

"*Sí*, he hated self-serving rulers...false gods...as I do. But what could a mystic possibly do except swim alone through his dense creative imagination, and attack reason?"

"I'd have thought you'd feel more kinship with a fellow rebel. No, he wasn't an activist like you -- he wouldn't have survived long in that era. Being self-educated and mythopoeic, he used an innate talent, a rarefied eye."

"Do not look so disappointed, Semele. I admire Blake's humane individualism. I am a tough one, am I not? But you know I am not a crude philistine. I recognize the art, the importance of myth. Look how *you* have used it. It is a vehicle of psychological transcendence...as poetry attempts to triumph over death...beautifully. But it does not get my work done."

The Water Bearer

“It was just something that came to me because we were...you were--”

“*Mira*. I understand what you mean. I am hardly sanctimonious...not Blake’s cowardly hypocrite in his dark vision. Eh, my cultured mother of Dionysus -- I like the myth of Semele --, you must decide. I say it only to be fair, even if I can hardly live with your decision...even if I lose control. I am not walking away, refuting you...or what I have just done...what *we* have done together. *Sí*, it was lust, satisfied by *both* of us...along with everything else understood between us up to this moment; that is the difference. There was some jealousy, but I will not let it ruin us. You cannot compare this honest act of ours to the poetic tenets of Blake’s vacillating woman...her ravenous seducer...her blundering betrothed. Ay, these poor old allegories of man’s weakness and failure.”

They had come up beside the river, and he saw that she was intense, struggling with something. An unburdening? She tugged at his sleeve, and he wanted to ignore this, only to hold her and forestall whatever was coming.

“I think I ought to...explain a little. I didn’t know you yet -- oh, not that I ever quite will -- I imagined I was in love with someone...may have been. It was different. But of course every relationship is different and--”

“What are you going to do when he comes back.”

“Who?”

He heard her question as unworthy of her guileless nature, a pathetic dissimulation, for surely she knew the subject of her own allusion. Then, supposing this to be a kindness, which he didn’t want, he sighed. “Your boss.”

“How transparent I am. Oh, *please*. Don’t...don’t tell me what I’m trying not to say. I don’t even know.”

“*Sí*, you *do* know.”

They drank coffee at an outdoor table beside a narrow old street where they had wandered in a heavy silence, his mind working over their deflected pairing, as he knew hers was; both engaged in a slow pondering of events encompassing more and more of a completely inconceivable future. He had purposely sat across from her, unable to trust his ardor. He remained there in silence, a silence holding emotion and nothing else. She wrapped her arms around her skimpily clad torso and swayed a little to overcome palpable shivering. Jumping up, he pulled a chair beside her and opened his jacket, holding her inside, his arm and chest absorbing the tense nervousness of her in exchange for heat. He bent his head to hear her low voice: “Forgot my coat,” and nodded his apology for his own forgetfulness, construing this none-too-serious omission as a small error in their newly conjoined lives. “And *I* forgot your coat...but

The Water Bearer

at least it was you who made me forget.” Hearing, feeling her mouth utter a deep sigh at his throat, her body so close to his he either detected or strongly sensed a wildly speeding heart, he pondered what exactly that meant.

“Oh, Rafael, I shouldn’t have done any of this. How did I let it happen? So unlike me, unprofessional and...and careless. At first I thought I was just thumbing my nose at unhappy events. There’s an old Judy Garland film...she sings, *I don’t care. I don’t care.* That was me...still recovering my reason...wildly tap-dancing, repeating that tune in my head until it was too late. Then I couldn’t help anything, understood only one thing: there was you...*you*. I know we’re not...but I can’t play at this either. I think we have to stop. Sorry...*sorry*. Will you help me to stop?”

He did not even blink. He did not let go of her, but by the instinct of his nature continued to hold her inside his leather jacket against his warm black jersey, continued to offer the heat of his body. When he spoke, the ensuing words were not of his own persuasion, yet they were part of himself that he had learned to use very well. His voice was the hard moment of clarity resisting gathering emotion, this time a moment that must swiftly collapse.

“Then let it be. We will end it. But remember whose decision. I will walk you back. I have no time for you anyway...and I will be leaving in the morning. Fortunately, I will be leaving.”

“I could use some clean clothes,” she muttered. He wondered if she had even grasped what he had just said.

Once outside the entrance he felt tired, drained by a merciless theft of reason. What was he doing here, and why had he in point of fact slept with the enemy, or at least an adjunct to the enemy? Ah yes, he wearily reminded himself, originally she was supposed to have been of some use to him, and anyway how could he have passed up an opportunity to have such a woman, this woman, only this woman? He could never again allow himself anything like this, yet there was little concern in that regard, for to him she was nonpareil.

She unlocked her door and turned to him. “I’ve decided I want to come back with you. It’s not easy to just...but maybe when you’re gone... If you’ll wait while I-”

“That is generous, but no,” he said, turning away from her and feeling her hand tighten on his arm.

“Please, Rafael.”

The Water Bearer

“No, you were right...your decision. You are in the wrong place for us...we both are...wrong lives. You got what you wanted: no interference. And I got the unexpected. *Adiós*, Semele...still a myth.” His smile was unsustainable.

He was surprised, after her earnest appeal to end this, to see her serene face, her perfectly smooth skin break into crumpling lines of anguish. The seductive eyes were shut away from him. Tears flashed over pain-distorted cheeks and fell like thin splinters of glass caught in the light from the opened door, denying him the frigid blue ice he had wanted to quell a burning self-reproach; all the soft beauty amazingly shattered, just as if he had hit her hard enough to forever disfigure her flawless face. What his physical dominance would never countenance he apparently could do with a few abridging words, their sting of finality.

She turned away, leaning against the door in a confused state of reassessment. “Rafael...I don’t think I can do this.” He saw her white hands clutching at the dark frame, sliding down the doorjamb, then a red waterfall of hair.

He caught her up and carried her inside, moving through the vestibule with her trembling body now rigid in his arms. Further along, the walls were filled with imposing works of art: period collections of original watercolors and oils. The carpet he stood on was luxurious uncut pile, pale Aubusson. The satinwood and mahogany furniture resinous with polish, self-important, gold-gleaming Empire.

He had grown up in a Catalan home, a home of eclectic scholars who acknowledged and appreciated the traditions of their own history, a changeless comfort of mellowed warmth, family portraits, a brilliant well-worn carpet here, ruddy-painted pottery there, starched and cool embroidered linen, heavy heirloom silver and cherished crystal, everywhere black scrolls of wrought iron, tessellated surfaces and flowery mosaics. All of this resonated with tradition, endless quotidian events woven into an unbroken lineage, descendant blood partaking of preserved old things, of their security and familiarity and recurring celebrations.

She twisted in his tensing arms, struggling to contain disabling misery. “I’m sorry. Forgive me...hard to reason this out...finally...so impossible. Can you understand?”

“I understand. Where is your room?”

“Up there...but you’d better go...I didn’t mean to...”

He went up, thinking of her in the Luxembourg Gardens.

“I cannot quite resolve this either.” He placed her on the bed’s gold-striped counterpane. “There *is* no reasoning right now...not with you...I...” He focused on the room.

The Water Bearer

“Eh...the master bedroom of all this excess...not the place to stop. I will have you here...in the shower...not enough...in the *sala*, in the kitchen -- a last meal. We will finish each other on a single kitchen chair.”

Her eyes closed as he removed her thin coverings; this love-bruised tender flesh suspended in uncertainty.

“*Look at me.* This *caudaloso* cage will never hold you as before. Will it, mathematician, investigator, *myth?*”

“My God...could I hurt you any more with my hands?”

“Find out. *¡Haz!* Do it. I will not feel a thing.”

She did not move, watching him undress and take hold of her while he wondered, after all his careful consideration, who he was at this moment, looking down at her, feeling his relinquished private self as an invasive aberration of her mind. Her cool kisses wherever she could reach were like rain on his flesh, or small teardrops. Slowly he realized there were tears wherever her lips touched. He slid his fingers through her hair and yanked her head to his, a last punishment turned to grief at what was given away. Teeth that had won him as pearly laughter bit without sensation.

“Now I am you. Are you me? You will be...tomorrow.”

He tasted his blood on the mouth drinking his words.

“Ah, *tu eras muy bella*, so beautiful. Remember, this is what you wanted.”

She leaned away with a cry of protest issuing from confusion, frustration, helpless desire. He let her stay that distance long enough for the last indelible remark.

“Wherever your eyes look remember this.”

There followed -- mostly wordless and without thought of anything beyond -- a progressively erotic, convulsive and insoluble night of bittersweet release. At times their love, not diminished but ever increasing, penetrated the wounding impasse and forgot itself in acts of extreme tenderness. When she had at last fallen into an exhausted sleep, he roused himself and left. Even as it was, they could never have refrained.

III

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous.

... Henry David Thoreau

He was flying back from the job in Iran, where things were heating up again. He had been advising a private French power company on a security measure, while at the same time rendering a service to Washington, quietly keeping an unofficial eye on

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certain cryptic developments within the Iranian power grid. From Teheran to Paris on the J2, and he would be there in another forty minutes.

Along with data on transitional global situations, and while sipping his scotch in his cabin, he had glanced at a laptop report on Madera, and had found that within the populace there was a growing faction supporting the mining of *La Nava Feraz*, the high valley agricultural area beneath which lay rich nonferrous deposits. The farmers in the valley were opposed to the mine but desperately in need of water, and the jobless populace streaming from cities and bereft villages was mounting a campaign to have the mine go forward. The entire country seriously needed a viable water infrastructure, and only UNIFOLL and one other of the slated bidding companies were really large enough and well equipped enough to do the water dispersal, sanitation, and waste water treatment while simultaneously building and operating the mine. The Maderan government was opting for both improvements, and quite ready to carve up *La Nava Feraz*, a still compellingly beautiful and once richly productive valley that was slowly going dry. The government had essentially dammed the valley's river to power a huge sawmill far upriver on a well-hidden slope, a curving bend fortunately unseen from the valley, for the deforested hills around the mill were brutally bare, and the mill was proving an environmental disaster. Clear-cutting was leaving a wake of destructive erosion, and the mill was so automated a process that few of the once hopeful job-seeking populace had benefited. The money from the lumber sold to Japan was, without the least gesture of pretense, winding up in the pockets of the president of Madera and a few of his clique. The threat of the ill-conceived mine in the valley had necessitated a concentration of government soldiers, but sympathetic rebels were marshaling in the south to stand with the farmers. The plan now put forth was to divert some of the dammed mill water to run the mine in the valley. For a few seconds he wondered what Semele had uncovered at UNIFOLL, then Jessica buzzed him and asked him to fasten his seatbelt. He closed the laptop and finished his scotch.

Passing swiftly through customs, he found Spence waiting in the freshly washed and polished black Rover, and by the time he reached the flat he had learned a great deal more than he wanted to hear.

"You'll find Semele...completely someone else. A while back she disappeared for an entire weekend. I've got a damned good idea where she was."

"Isn't it your job to know precisely where she was?" Jeff asserted with impatient annoyance, his fingers gingerly rolling his shirt sleeves as if the cloth were on fire.

"She told me to lay off, and she really got tough about it...turned up looking done over that Monday, too. I think that hidalgo hydro-heller has been occupying your little math genius."

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“Clean up your language, Spence, and show some respect for your associates. It’s unprofessional and belies your presumed training and intelligence. I realize you’re a little rough around the edges, but I’ve always been glad for the muscle. Just make sure it doesn’t extend to your head.”

He saw Spence’s jaw working in silence and thought that the poor fellow had probably been taking plenty of hot blood from Semele and now it was coming from the main artery. Spence did require some stroking, but no more than most. Excluding the temper, which he had been warned to control, he was a sure-footed draft, not a thoroughbred like Semele.

“I know you’re just trying to do your job, and you’re very good at it...and I appreciate the information. Just practice clean delivery. All right?”

Spence nodded, squinting hard and clenching his mouth with restraint. He turned into the narrow street, coming to a smooth stop and jumping out to unload his boss’s minimal luggage -- most clothes were upstairs, more on the plane.

Jeff found the flat empty. His housekeeper Jura was so dutifully tidy it was generally difficult to tell who had passed through and what, if anything, had occurred anywhere in the place.

“Want a little sustenance before you head out?” he asked Spence.

Spence stuck his hands into the pockets of his chinos, then leaned back on his heels and smiled. It was clear he had something in mind.

“Yeah. Let’s go to that little estaminet, *La Caille*. It’s close...unless you--”

“Sure, why not?”

It was late and the place was nearly empty, but Semele was there alone, sitting at a table farthest from the door with a half-full glass of wine before her. Jeff gave Spence a suspecting glance, saw disappointment flash across his face and knew at once that he had expected to find another person with her, had very likely hoped there would be a confrontation with his boss. There would have been no confrontation, only a polite nod. Always thinking ahead, he didn’t go in for short-fuse tactics that apparently served all too well to keep Spence in a state of high performance.

“Hello, just got in and needed a little fuel,” he said, sitting down at her table.

She lifted her head and he was shocked at the pitiable expression in her red-rimmed eyes. Her face immediately transitioned to an aloof smile.

“Welcome. Just as usual, out you go as soon as you’re in. Think I’ll head back and get a little shut-eye...if you don’t mind. I wouldn’t be good company anyway. If you look closely you can probably see numerical digits where my eyes used to be. I’m tired.”

“I do want to talk to you, Semele, but it can certainly wait until tomorrow. How about an early breakfast before you head out?”

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“All the more reason to rush home and hit the sack,” she emphasized with carefully mild humor, then stood up and reached for her small handbag. Suddenly turning back from her distracted departure, she sauntered up to them with her purse tucked under her white-shirted arm and her hands shoved into the pockets of her casual khaki slacks.

“You should have taken your boss to a better establishment, Spence. He’s probably hungry and the food here is terrible. Good night.”

Jeff couldn’t resist a knowing laugh when he looked at Spence.

“I think she just got you.”

“She always gets me. That red-headed--”

“A-a, respect for an associate.”

“If she wants my respect she shouldn’t...ah, Jesus, never mind. She’s good-looking and, goddammit, she knows how well that works.”

“Now what are you implying? That I favor her because of her looks?”

“Hell, yes.”

“I don’t think Semele uses that ploy on a very regular basis...quite the contrary. Let’s change the subject and get some food and drink into the empty belly. I’m starved.”

“Maybe we should go someplace else if you’re really hungry,” Spence suggested with a sheepish grin.

In spite of his fatigue, he couldn’t sleep and went down to park his restless body in his soothing gold and blue sitting room, rising once to fix himself scotch and water. He sipped slowly -- with only the wall sconces lit in the shadowy room -- allowing all the major business operations currently in play to parade through his mind, impinged upon now and then by a needling guilt. Mainly because of her recently discovered condition and her proximity, Semele had gradually become one of those ponderous considerations. Had he pushed her into something harmful with his impulsive self-indulgence? He had not wanted her on this Madera thing in the first place, precisely, he now reiterated, because he had foreseen how dangerous it might become. He had quite earnestly wanted to protect her, and this inevitable but uncharacteristic act had immediately personalized their relationship, as well as assaulting her professionalism and her vanity. From that noble position it had been only a short step down into the bedroom, despite the fact that the actual steps went the other way. Worse still, he could not bring himself to regret a single moment of that night or recant his own pleasure at the way it ended. No sane man could possibly regret lying with Semele Taylor. Even in her inebriated state of slight confusion, she

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had been fluidly sensual and wonderfully responsive, tender and attentive, making him suppose himself unconditionally required, the chosen of her desire: the male's ultimate delight. How did this brilliant, prudish, lanky mathematician acquire the art of loving so adeptly, or was it merely an inspiration of misguided sentiment, as she had tipsily proclaimed with her blurted out confession? That recollection gave him strong cause for self-accusation. He had rationalized that he was helping them both out of a nervous and edgy relationship, but that was really a ludicrous bit of self-deception; in his heart he knew that nothing had come to an end; if anything, he lamented the fact that he did not at this moment have her in his arms. He stood up, headed for bed, forcefully flexing his body -- as if in so doing he could rid himself of irresponsible lust. Not that way.

Semele was in the kitchen ahead of him and very wide awake, looking as if she had not slept at all, as if a wild nocturnal chemistry had produced the same condition as uppers might have brought about -- no possibility of that.

Jura had filled a silver pot with the rich black Arabica he delighted in drinking each Parisian morning, between bites of warm buttery croissants.

"How about the terrace off your bedroom...*my* bedroom?"

"I...no. Why not the guest balcony where you are?"

She was staring at the large dark-blue straight-backed chair set against the wall, with a rapt look of such anguish that for a second he wondered if she needed a doctor.

"Fine, my current balcony...but Jura hasn't gotten to my bed yet...if you don't mind crawling through a mess."

She came behind him onto the smaller balcony, both of them followed by Jura with their breakfast tray.

They fixedly bit into their warm chewy croissants and drank from huge yellow cups, this accompanied for a time by only the low sound of the city hive waking up. He caught her glancing at a fresh newspaper atop an array of news sheets fluttering in the morning breeze at the corner of the heavy wrought iron table; these held down by a fossilized ammonoid. Above the increasing roar of Paris traffic he could just hear her clearing her throat as she settled into a deeper concentration over the paper.

"Please put that aside a minute, Semele."

She looked up, her normally sharp and attentive eyes fixed by a distraction that was beginning to alarm him.

What in hell is wrong with you, he had intended to say, but he found himself unceremoniously going deeper, to what he surmised was the root of the problem.

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“Did I...did I cause you to do something foolish?”

“What? No.” Her face had closed completely and she returned only a blank, indifferent stare, her body rigidly straight. He realized then that she was never going to bring up what had passed between them.

“Arnau i Roca,” he said and watched her eyelids flutter slightly and her body slump back in her chair, “is,” he went on, “charismatic, but a single-minded man and very likely dangerously unstable...as those types often are.”

Her eyes burned into his. “Those types?” she said with a voice evoking more acid than he had ever heard from her. “Those types,” she repeated as if he had just spoken a hideous profanity.

“They’re very driven, I believe, driven to--”

“Driven to help others. Without *those types*, who would care at all for the deprived and forgotten masses groveling for life on this inequitable messed-up planet?”

He sighed and drew back his chair, folding his arms with his head inclined to one side.

“From the beginning it was very nearly the only flaw I detected in you...which I hoped wouldn’t affect your ability to perform. This lopsided concern and caring--”

“Caring is a flaw?”

“In this business, too much is, yes. I see that your possible nemesis very quickly discovered that...*flaw* in you, and has used it to his advantage.”

“Then you don’t see anything, but only imagine.”

“There are things I *don’t* imagine, Semele. Some things I know. I know that you’ve been--”

“Damn Spence! It’s ended,” she affirmed, more as if to assure herself. Then the composure she had struggled to retain visibly disintegrated, false dispassion sliding into such misery that it drew from him a sudden wave of pity.

Elliptic phrases poured out of her. “Sorry...sorry. I confess...just human after all...rather generally selfish. I’d begun to feel guilty...not because of who I am...because of my work...*this* work. I tried not to let myself fall into that...but then...I wanted to...he’s so very... You can’t share something that consuming without...doesn’t matter now. He didn’t understand how dutiful I am...plodding along...and therefore all the more careful of an ethic...really a good ethic...but the wrong one. And of course he was repelled by all the...the surface dazzle...our surface...this surface,” she exclaimed, throwing out her arms and staring around her.

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She averted her face and jumped up, asserting in a barely audible voice, “Oh, that’s of no consequence...not a threat to us. I’m going to work. I’ve got to get to work.”

“Semele?”

She had vanished. He looked for her below and saw her enter the street and begin pacing up and down with her arms rigidly folded, her slender body obviously bent forward in lonely anguish as she awaited the arrival of her adversary, Spence. He could well imagine that conversation.

It was far worse than he had supposed. Semele had formed a debilitating attachment that he assumed to be very one-sided. Arnau i Roca was surely not the sort who would devote himself to any woman, even Semele.

Pouring more coffee, he drank several potent drafts, looked at his watch, then leaned on his elbow staring off with solemn disquietude. By favoring the part of herself that he had just imprudently referred to as a flaw, Arnau had given her something he could not. He had rebuked what Arnau i Roca admired. Now she saw him as callous and self-serving, diminished in her eyes by material comfort and a lack of self-enforced privation, or useful involvement with others less fortunate. He did contribute to charities, but he saw his major contribution as something quite different. He thought back to the years when his life had been so much closer to the edge, so often at risk. The cell phone lying beside his cup sounded. Feeling contentious, he tapped it off and, mentally bracing himself, unshelved his past.

Yet one more time out of so many times, he thought of the remarkable person who had inadvertently helped to end his first marriage; not by the all-too-frequent methods of flattered ego, self-serving design, or any ulterior intent at all, but simply by being who she was: the genuine article, the life that would most directly expose him to selflessness, authentic supererogatory selflessness, going beyond duty. Forced to see the intricate natural world around him, he had discovered himself as part of it. This highly beneficial influence, in a very short but indelible period, was serendipitous, redirecting his vision; a result often characteristic of defining moments that redeem monotonous and squandered time. The catalyst, in this case, was a little Dutch female of twenty-six.

After a satisfying immersion in a panoply of college studies -- peppered with a few youthful high jinks -- and memorable summers traipsing around less traveled parts of the world, he had married his pretty high school sweetheart, Joanna. She was at the time pregnant with his daughter Natalie, which didn’t discomfit him in the least; he had always intended to marry his girl at some point, far more certain of everything in those days than he would ever be again; including the conviction that his familiar choice was simply right for him -- he thought borne out: she didn’t argue very often

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and never very seriously; deferred to him with a certain amount of relief at having to make very few major decisions when he was at home; and yet proved capable of running the household with informed efficiency in his absences. He appreciated her willingness to sacrifice his presence for the sake of his growing business. Beyond this, his sudden and sometimes long disappearances only made him more valued and doted upon each time he returned.

Because he had once spent part of a summer roaming around Brazil, and because he was establishing a promising reputation for locating missing persons, when a young female botanist went missing in the Amazon jungle, her wealthy Dutch family, having exhausted other possibilities, managed to find him through the only means of advertising he then employed: word of mouth. It was believed that she had been taken by a roving gang of petty, although far from harmless, bandits who rampaged up and down various wild tributaries along the great Amazon basin. A ransom demand had been anticipated but none had as yet reached the family when he last spoke with them and heard their generous offer, a considerable sum if he would only bring their daughter home.

Living up to his at that time intentionally exaggerated reputation, within two weeks he had discovered where Kiera Fontein was being held. But it had been two trying weeks of methodical inquiry into where she had last been seen (an Indian had come across her deep in the jungle obliviously recording rare flora with her delicate and painstakingly accurate paintbrush) and then tedious sloshing through the receding high waters in one of the great inundating swamps that seasonally come and go in that sweltering tropical zone. Finally, after hacking his way, with two Indian-Portuguese woodsmen, through a tangle of jungle flora often used as camouflage by stinging insects and stalking animals, he came, by a stealthy and circuitous route, to the silty headwaters of the *Rio Gurupi*. He was east of the city of Belém at the voracious Mouths of the Amazon on the Atlantic coast and several hundred miles south upriver, but still practically on top of the seething equator -- one could nearly drown in that torrid atmosphere by simply inhaling. Extracting beneficial information from the suspicious *Urubú* and *Tembé* tribes took a number of useful gifts, delicate finesse, and dogged persistence. The *Tembé*, then living around the headwaters, knew precisely where Kiera was: in the wattled-mud hut of a much-reviled gold washer, a *garimpeiro*, who along with his gun-toting companions had long given the tribe a great deal of trouble and fright. One of the more intrepid Indians was finally induced to lead him close enough to point through the thick verdure and floating lianas toward the *sapé* grass roof of the captor's hovel, the Indian immediately thereafter running away.

He saw that his two companions, hastily hired in Belém, were becoming increasingly nervous, and wasn't surprised when they soon begged off further

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assistance with the excuse of pressing business downriver. They were grudging a smaller sum than agreed upon, and he went alone to conceal himself within watching distance of the hut. Eventually, a swarthy *garimpeiro* stepped outside, grumbling a complaint, then disappeared into the forest. He waited a few minutes to see what else the primitive hut would disgorge, but concern over the kidnapper's imminent return, possibly in the company of more of his ilk, made him decide to rush the place with his revolver in hand. Blinking in the darkness as his nostrils filled with the stench of putrid mold, charred fish, and urine, he hesitated while his eyes adjusted. Her leg was bound to a stake in the floor with a roughly twisted sisal rope, at which she was feverishly working with both tied hands. He called her by her full name and explained who he was as he cut through the ropes with his razor-sharp kris. Her clipped English was delivered in a clear modulated tone, rather more practical than alarmed, and she astonished him by insisting that she had to find her backpack, which contained all of her sketches.

"Sorry, *no*, we've got to get out of here."

"I will not leave without it...the culmination of so much work. I have found new species and--"

"Listen! we've got to blow this filthy hole before the entire pack returns and we end up salted meat for the next flood." As he spoke his eyes swept the room, simultaneously catching sight of her pack flung over a pile of rubbish in a corner. He grabbed it up and dragged her through the flimsy bound-pole door.

One of his fellow travelers had agreed to leave a canoe at the river's edge but, in keeping with Murphy's Law, it was nowhere in sight. The two half-breeds had left him no way to get back downriver, but he couldn't absolutely place the blame on them. These Indians were wont to freely borrow any standing canoe, having an entirely different perspective of ownership. Whoever the culprit, it was at the moment of no consequence, because the enraged and armed *garimpeiros* would soon be breathing down their necks if they did not swiftly become invisible.

There was only one choice. They made their way on foot down the river's curving banks and misleading channels, keeping as near as possible to the water but, in order to remain hidden and trackless, pushing through tangled lianas and the tendrils and leaves of giant philodendrons. He had in mind that they would find a canoe and barter for it. Convincing an Indian that he should permanently give up his current transportation in place of something less useful would be a true test of their ingenuity, and of the Indian's frame of mind and particular fancy. As night descended over the insect-buzzing forest, they heard solitary birdcalls and the occasional grunt of some unknown animal. Once at a sound familiar to them both, she said softly, "*Porco do mato*," and he nodded, recognizing the grunt of the peccary, a rooting wild boar. He

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hacked off broad leaves and they bound them together in a rudimentary sheltering nest. In all of this hectic handwork, footwork, and mental scheming, he had little time to observe very much about Kiera Fontein, except that she was quiet, for which he was most grateful, from time to time demonstrated a useful familiarity with her surroundings, and had so far managed to keep up with him with never a single utterance of complaint.

In the repeated fading light, he cut off more broad leaves, and together they worked at constructing another crude covering that he hoped would protect them from the anticipated rain, often invading the dark hours with a relentless drenching. The storm was even worse than the previous downpour, driving sheets of water sideways and leaving very little of their cover intact. They huddled under a few remaining leaves, feeling singled out and exposed while the punishing sky came apart over their heads.

Mosquitoes buzzed him awake in bright sunlight, and he inhaled the fetid steamy air with a sigh of relief. Looking around, he discovered Kiera was nowhere in sight. Assuming she had gone to relieve herself, he began draping some of his damp clothes over a low branch.

“They will not dry.” He heard the softly accented voice of experience assuring him of his useless endeavor.

He saw first her confident blond head moving through a mesh of tendrils and leaves, her hands deftly working her loose flaxen hair into a long braid as she came toward him. She reached into her pocket, then lifted his hand with the stained back of hers and laid something purple in it.

He studied it and thought it was the fruit of a palm.

“*Assaí*, chew it for the juice.”

“Not bad...if you’re hungry enough,” he said as he spat the remains onto the ground.

“Why do you have no food with you?”

“I had food with me. Dammit, it was in the canoe.”

“What canoe?”

“Yes, what canoe? The one even now traveling downriver with all of our food and water.”

She laughed, and he looked into her sky-blue eyes and found this laughter both amazing and humiliating.

“How could you possibly think...” He had stopped an impulse to question her colossal naïveté at even being in this place – unaccompanied and invitingly exposed – by suddenly remembering what she must have gone through.

“*Ja*, you are wondering why I am here.”

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“At least, why you’re here alone.”

“I was not alone. I had a nice little *cabaclo* companion, a mixed breed of I know not what. She was at once incredibly ignorant in ways that did not matter and incredibly wise in ways that did. They shot her.”

She looked up at him, and while her mouth continued to smile her half-closed chicory eyes streamed, and she rubbed her flip-ended Dutch nose with the back of her purple hand.

“Jesus! Goddammit, that was rotten. Did they...are you all right? I mean that bastard didn’t--”

“He tried, *ja*, but he is very sick with malaria and soon lost interest, except in selling me to someone with a great deal of money. He paid me that courtesy to tell me I am worth a great deal of it.”

He found himself smiling at this wretched and yet very accurate evaluation, and then he saw her other hand, again mischievously held out to him with the offering of a plump passion fruit.

“*Maracujá*,” she said. “We will not die yet.”

Wiping the sweet juice from his lips, he glanced at his shirt hanging limply from its branch and decided to put it back on, because he knew very well it was not going to dry for some time, if ever, in this humidity. They had to press on. While he was buttoning the shirt, he saw her pick up her backpack and take out a pad, a jar, and some watercolor brushes, then set off through the vines with a jaunty step.

“Wait a minute. Where are you going?” he called.

“Ah, just below the *cachoeiras*, the rapids downriver, I found a wonderful *ingarapé*, a channel filled with so many surprises. Simply by following its perfume, I found a lovely *epidendrum fragrans*, which I am going to sketch.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, “because damned soon here we may be losing our skins.”

He felt increasingly incensed at the complete lack of understanding and of even a little gratitude for what he had just been through in getting this callow woman-child out of her life-threatening predicament. My God, went his interior monologue, this ingénue was even now totally unaware of what was bearing down on them.

He tried another tack. “You don’t seem to understand how worried your parents have been.”

“Oh, my parents,” she said, backing up and returning to him with the quick laughter that he would soon discover was always waiting to bubble up out of anticipated despair -- like a gratuitous artesian well, especially under pressure. “Ja, my parents are so very protective. They overreact.”

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“They overreact!” he exclaimed in an outraged voice. “Maybe you have somehow forgotten that when I found you your inflamed, nearly septic ankle was bound to a stake in the dirt floor of that filthy hovel.”

She smoothed her hands over her soiled jeans and folded her arms against her holey tank top. “I would get away.”

“And when was that going to happen? After a pack of ravenous animals took turns raping you? Or maybe after they sold you to a white slaver.”

“You do not believe that I appreciate what you have done. I do. Very much. I am glad you came to me and sorry I have not made that clear. I do thank you, and I believe my parents will reward you with enough money. Now I want to go on with my work. There is so much to do...so little time in which to do it.”

“The hell you will. You’re coming with me.”

“Oh? Am I kidnapped again?”

“Do you at least realize that you are considered a lost commodity, one worth coming after?”

“I will get a pistol. Perhaps you will give me yours.”

“Not a chance. I’m not running around unarmed in this open season on humans...especially with you in tow?”

“I do not think they are coming. I have put my ear to the ground and I hear nothing.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. You hear nothing when I’m shouting into both ears.”

“How amusing you are. Tell me your name again.”

And so they argued and trailblazed and fished their exhaustively obstructed way down the banks and rich side channels of the *Rio Gurupi*. Sometimes they slept with Indians in a *maloca*, a large family dwelling of the natives, for Kiera, with yet another dimension of her sensitive being, knew precisely how to win over the often recalcitrant and suspicious Indians. Sometimes they traded catfish for sweet potatoes and fruit. When Jeff cut his left hand badly on knife-like grasses, Kiera knew at once what to do.

“You must let this leaf stay on for a while to prevent infection.”

“What is it?” he asked, nearly mesmerized by her small nimble fingers as she knelt binding the curative leaf to his hand with the twisted fibers she had fashioned.

“I have no idea, but my little friend taught me that it works. Now you will sit here and wait until the pain leaves you...a good rest.”

“Where are you going?” he asked, watching her fling onto her head the floppy frond-woven hat she had made, and knowing precisely that another obsession had taken hold of her. She was already snatching up her worn sketchbook and placing it

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under her arm. He grabbed his own battered and torn Panama hat, settled it upon his wary head and stood up.

“You must let me be. I have found a *Gongora maculata*, and the perfume of this orchid has driven me into a kind of madness.”

“Then I’m coming too. Maybe the fragrance will take my mind off this damned throbbing hand.”

“Come then...but I am going to wash my clothes in the *ingarapé* and hang them over a limb to drip while I paint.”

“Is that supposed to be deterrent? I’ve seen you in your underwear when you’re swimming. Why should I care if you sit around painting in next to nothing?”

“Then you can make yourself useful and chase the stinging flies from my back.”

This he did without protest, only a lethargic smile, occasionally kneeling on the bank and brushing a fern across her back to unsettle a frenzy of small black river flies, stinging clouds that rose out of the morning mists.

“How old are you?”

She turned her head back, her plump sharp-nippled little breasts rising beneath her thin shirt, with the Delft blue eyes pondering his question as if he had asked to have a very private thought revealed.

“Twenty-six. And you?”

“The same. I wonder what that portends.”

“I am a realist. I have no absurd mystical ideas about coincidence, about anything intangible...only wonder at what I see before me. That is quite enough.”

“I think you’re older than I,” he suggested.

“Ah, but now you have given yourself a new dimension, wisdom in one so young.”

“You certainly don’t see yourself as old?”

“I see that there is not enough time. This I see very well. It is the main sadness amidst all my happiness.”

Inhaling the powerful lily-like fragrance, he stared over her shoulder at the delicate work being painstakingly executed, and then at the thick golden braid snaking down her slender back, and then at the tan-burnished, once pale skin of her entire body, until he could no longer feel the pain of his injured left hand. He knew he should not have come with her, allowed himself so close to her. A newly married man, he had never before been long-suffering in the privation of lust, and wondered what he should do next.

A large iridescent-blue *Morpho* flapped its butterfly wings above their heads. He dropped his sweating body backwards on the tawny sand and stared up at the

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powdery-winged electric blue creature bobbing on a fugitive whisper of humid air, then at the hanging vines linking perforated curtains of vivid flowers lining the channel, and then again at Kiera. She was entirely a shimmer of blinding whiteness, as if her own absorption had absorbed the light, and the sun could not escape her flesh. Waves of something close to pain passed slowly through him, a diffusing combination of the total luminescence, the sweet tropical scents, the ethereal music of Kiera's high soprano, of which she was hardly aware--an old Dutch lullaby. It was as if every atom inside of him had been realigned and he was gently, gently levitating above the earth. He felt inebriated, drunk with the hot inescapable light pulsating over their refuge.

"Let's go for a swim...haven't seen any crocks." He began tugging off his shirt and unbuckling his jeans.

"Yes, I am getting warm, and you are not consistent, punkah-man. The furies are after me."

They dove into the cooling water and swam round and round, splashing each other then floating in silence until he caught her by her braid and pulled her completely under. She rose slowly, kicking gently and climbing his chest, bubbles escaping from her laughing mouth, her languid, expectant eyes looking up at him, large almond shapes glowing turquoise in her green-tinted face. He lifted her slippery silk-skinned body against him and held her for a long moment, feeling that strange pain of euphoria pass through him once again, as if he existed everywhere at once, was attached to everything in the universe, and yet lived nowhere but here in this all-encompassing endless present.

Her lively mouth was wet, cooling, deliciously willing to explore, unhesitant and natural in its sweet rewards.

"Jesus," he muttered, "Oh, Jesus."

When they finally stopped to rest, lying on the sand exhausted but still thinking of how it would continue, they lay quietly staring up into empty sky.

"All this will be gone," she said at last.

"What?" He lifted his dreamy head and looked around, still feeling himself with her, *of* her and nothing else.

"It cannot stay this way. That is why I search for and paint these rare beauties. Each one a deep mystery that will die forever. All destined to vanish...all this gone."

"Isn't that a little morbid?"

"Do you not see? Can you not understand? This is all the mystery there is, the magic. These are the secrets. The medical enigmas that thrive undiscovered, the great beauty striving up from such rough beginnings...this beauty tender in its infancy, so humble, a bulb, a tiny shoot, a seed, a root...so fragile...yet so powerful, encoded

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with all the largeness of life. To look at a rare plant or a flower just once is to glimpse the essence of all mystery. And when the coming desecrators burn this away we will never see its like again. When they do that those who follow are blinded. In this way, we as a species have our eyes put out. Remember how Oedipus put out his eyes in grief? With greater blame we do this to ourselves, and with very little remorse. It is called progress. Once a great civilization, a mass of humanity lived on the riches of the Amazon. Do you not know this? It is really important that you educate yourself with recent discoveries. A great civilization is thus distinguished by its wisdom in living in harmony with its environment. We, our people, have destroyed flourishing civilizations with our invasive pestilence. It will happen again...to all of us.”

Transported from his Paris balcony, he could see the mauve sunsets, the massive trees lording over the tangled verdure, the roiling river mists of silver mornings, the clouds of iridescent butterflies, the small green lizard *papovento*, puffing out his orange ball of throat, and Kiera laughing and joyfully complaining, “*Tucanos*, these pretty birds are stealing our fruit.” He could easily hear her say good morning, “*Bom dia*,” see that softly curling smile of shameless voluptuousness, hear her hushed breath of wonder when they came across *onça*, the sly jaguar, recall her cry of “*Guará!*” as she pointed into the sky where hundreds of shimmering scarlet ibis soared up and over their heads in a dazzling shower of red feathers.

On and on they had slogged, slashed, and explosively argued, suffering viciously biting insects and unending near disasters. They had cursed and laughed, and pleased one another, forging their swiftly vanishing path through the low-lying fetid and perfumed land, orphans of that fragile separate reality constructed in the heavy humid air of an unmindful present. Eventually there was a hard-won leaky canoe, tugged over stubborn mangrove roots in the stifling heat, their feet plunging into warm black mud and the little crabs scurrying around their toes. First solemnly observed at a distance beyond tangled green drapery, the inevitable cobalt expanse of water finally loomed before them, a cruelly stunning blue horizon drowning any linked future.

He had left her in *Belém*, capital of the state of *Pará*, the bustling port city at the mouths of the great Amazon, left her there because she would go with him no further. She had come only to resupply and assure her parents of her free untrammelled existence, to find another useful traveling companion and head back out into that vast silver-green density, the beating sun, the drenching cloudbursts; a small, dauntless figure skirting the edges of the enormous rising and falling swamps, plumbing the depths of the true mystery, always with her pad and brushes in hand, swallowed up by the manifest urgency of her intrepid life’s calling.

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He had ended so close to her that alone he was sorely in need of some mental prosthesis to supplement the sundered part of him she had innocently carried off. The Brazilian concoctions he drank in Belém did nothing but leave him bellicose, over-reflective, or groaning in silent misery.

When he walked through the door of his home in Rye he was quite another person from the man who had left. Baby Natalie was in the care of a sitter, and Joanna was out for her weekly escape to the tennis courts with her girlfriends. He didn't begrudge her this; she needed to get away from time to time, but he felt himself an incompatible, footloose interloper, completely disaffected in that prosaic domestic scene. He thought of his strong little Kiera, every ounce of her alive with irrepressible self-induced motion, tropic sunlight, and that bone-marrow laughter. A slow-burning ache swelled in his heart, an ache continuous. The very thing that made her his was that she belonged to no one, was that her radiant soul and will to reach beyond herself loomed large over all her ephemeral life. He knew that he would never see her again, but that she would from time to time invade his thoughts and dreams more palpably and more authentically than his own wife lying beside him.

Here amidst the clanging civilization of Paris, he knew what it was about Semele that stirred, fascinated, alarmed, and held him. Her life pulsed with the same deep soulful nature as his Kiera's. Unfortunately, this very quality was anathema to his demanding business. The dangerous new restlessness in her was no less than a consuming desire to assist the deprived by uncertain reparations; this desire Arnau i Roca had awakened. It was a fire inextinguishable once kindled, not without the slow death of a caged heart.

After he and Joanna parted, it was this very trammled aspect of himself that made him turn back from his restless ways for a time and marry an attractive and moderately wealthy young widow, a woman who could not have been more conventional or predictable. She needed something to do besides spend money, she insisted, and begged to work in his office. He finally gave in. They would build an enduring empire of sorts he boasted, standing at the helm of his schooner *Bom Dia* while Marta handed him yet another glass of French champagne. But when the empire was only half built, Marta moved on to a companion more frequently accessible. Out of this marriage came his dark-eyed daughter Betina, his two precocious daughters, fair and dark, being the only salvaged treasures of his wrecked domestic life. What bad faith to have assumed he could so glibly defy his own voracious will with the seldom visited trappings of a tame domesticity. He had his empire, rationalized as a peculiar variation of social responsibility: to make the world a safer, better place. There would be no further domestic encumbrances to thwart those long periods of unavailability: willful brinksmanship, gainfully teasing the dragons' tails.

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Jeff slipped into his foyer, yanking at his unknotted tie. Coming from a meeting with a representative of World Bank, and having rather tensely argued for accuracy rather than speed, he wanted a shower and a drink. First, he needed to call an associate waiting to hear from him, in minor trouble in Caracas. He heard Semele's firm voice, encouraging in that it resembled her former voice. She was in the sitting room on an international call. He listened to her prompting words and smiled.

"But he will eat out of that bowl if you don't fill it too full. Otherwise, yes, he'll paw the food out and knock it around. Sometimes he likes to play that way; generally it means he's not really hungry and just wants to attack something. Please, Dora, although the temptation is great, I know, dear, don't overfeed him...or we'll have an obese Catney on our hands."

When her voice went silent, he stuck his head into his sitting room and called out a friendly hello upon entering.

"*Bonjour*. What a day. I was at the other end of your assignment for an hour or so. They want it done yesterday."

She looked up from a thoughtful meandering, and he saw that her eyes were momentarily brighter, her somber face more contained. It probably meant she had become accustomed to dealing with her misery, but not to the misery itself.

"Yesterday? If they're in that great a hurry I would say let them suffer the consequences...but I'm a little too high-minded, or at least thorough, for that."

He liked that confident demonstration of pride in her work, at least temporarily supplanting personal distress.

"After a couple of calls -- an attempt to cleanse mind and body under hot spray -- will you join me for dinner?"

"If it isn't too elaborate."

"No...just good food."

They were seated in a small café that he liked, one so bereft of any embellishment -- save the necessary bentwood black chairs and tables arranged within slate blue walls -- it actually assumed a high-toned air. He had just asked her judiciously if she preferred not to drink.

"What? In a French restaurant?" she questioned with surprise.

"I simply don't want it altering your mood."

"And what mood is that?"

The Water Bearer

“Well, you look a little more together than you have.”

She dipped her head into the menu without answering. He conceded and ordered a red Bordeaux. After a leisurely glass each, he ordered two glasses of white burgundy, which they drank with a light supper of plump snails roasted in garlic butter. At the finish came a crisp watercress salad, and still they had uttered only a few pleasantries.

“Semele, will you tell me if UNIFOLL is going to come clean in this operation,” he suddenly asked.

She laid down her fork, took a swallow of burgundy and looked at him, her brow knit with intense concentration, as if she were about to walk a high tightrope without a net.

“What is it?”

“I’m...in the middle of something. It wasn’t that difficult for me and I’m wondering if it’s because I’m that good, or if they’re just so sure of themselves that...”

“Is it serious?” he asked, not believing that it could be and therefore allowing his mind to indulge in something else: her emerald green silk blouse, which he thought did wonderful things to her hair but imperiled the blue of her translucent eyes.

Reading his drifting response, she said, “If you’re tired of hearing about this, then I won’t bother to—”

“I want to hear anything you think worth reporting,” he protested, snapping himself to attention.

“While working on expenditures, I found an interesting ellipsis in the numbers. Eventually this led to... They have a company in Jamaica, existing, I believe, for the sole purpose of funneling money to certain useful...well, really of funding favorable political agendas.

“You say you believe.”

“Yes, I’m not completely through with my trace apparatus. While I was working on some aspect of this I found it necessary to become the secretary of a Maderan politician.” Her quirky self-assured smile was delicious, almost playful. “I’m not sure my Spanish accent was quite stupendous but I think it was pretty good.”

“Were you careful about the phone you used?”

“Oh yes.”

“Damn it.”

“You believe the bidding is a foregone conclusion, too,” she shot at him with an accusing voice.

“It’s just that...I wanted you to get out of this smoothly. World Bank is ready to do business with Madera. Everyone in the Paris office has implied that it’s damned

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near in UNIFOLL's pocket. You still have to go to Madera, and that could be a hell of a dangerous place."

"If this turns out as I think it will, why would I need to go to Madera?"

He ran his fingers through his hair and rubbed his chin with increasing discomfort. How much should he tell her about the way things worked if by now she hadn't already figured it out?...with all that intelligence. He looked at her in silence, while the waiter was allowed to refill their glasses with gurgling rushes of white burgundy.

"Semele, you need to know that sooner or later things get done the way they were originally intended to get done."

"And screw free enterprise," she said, slamming down her wine glass so that it sloshed over onto the white tablecloth.

"Don't you understand that there is hardly any company willing or equipped to do this job?"

"Then why not acquire it honestly?"

"It's just another form of insurance...for a damned impoverished country that will take anything it can get."

"Or its leaders will. The people never see any of that baksheesh. Don't make me laugh."

"Look, World Bank wants to know if UNIFOLL is solvent and if it can follow through. What it doesn't need to know is if they're paying someone for the privilege of doing business. *Jesus*. You're a little too good at your job."

"On the contrary, I'm beginning to think I'm de trop, useless. *Useless*. Those farmers are going to have their valley scraped away and a mine crammed down their throats no matter what I do, aren't they?"

"They'll have a water system."

"With nothing left to irrigate."

"It isn't any of your concern."

"Oh, but somehow I think it is. A person has to draw the line somewhere, if only so that she can sleep at night."

Her face was tragic. *I'll help you sleep at night*, he wanted to say, but it was a little late for that.

"Goddammit, that man's gotten his hooks into you and--"

"You think I can't feel and think for myself? You think someone else has to come along and teach me morals? Oh, Jeff, what happened to your own?"

"I'm running a business here and, whether you believe it or not, ultimately what we do does a lot of people a lot of good."

"The right people?"

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“A helluva lot of the right people, people exactly like the ones Arnau i Roca is trying to assist.”

Her expression of justifiable indignation had dissolved into sadness, and her brimming eyes shone with the destitute appearance of abandoned pride.

“You know where he is, don’t you?”

“Of course. I’ll always know exactly where he is until all of this is over...and probably beyond that.” Then more generously and almost as an afterthought: “He’s still in Madera...as I’m sure you must know.”

They had returned to the flat in a weighted silence. This time it was he who suggested coffee. He watched her vacillate and then agree, as she nearly always did when he suggested something she did not really want to do. Jura popped out of her exotic little hideaway off the kitchen -- Semele had remarked on her glimpse of beaded curtains, an engraved calabash. Jura was an abused Sudanese refugee he had hired in outrage -- there was a gruesome story there he did not feel inclined to relate. Their coffee was brought to the sitting room while they were both in their bathrooms.

When Semele reappeared she had changed to a white shirt with casual tan slacks and sandals. She still wore her modest gold hoop earrings and a gold bracelet, standard for her, and he found himself considering a pair of diamond stud earrings for her delicate pale shell ears. Silently owning up to this hypocrisy, he seated himself some distance from her in a straight-backed chair, a handsome period piece but not nearly as comfortable as he would have liked.

“I didn’t mean to hog this pretty chaise lounge,” she offered, sliding to one corner. “It’s a little more comfy, spacious...as this sort of furniture goes.”

By now having decided that he was being ridiculous, he got up and sat in the other corner, which was also nearer the coffee. He could smell her perfume, freshly applied, a wonderful light woody scent, recalling spring mock orange blossoms, but mingled with a citrus musk...grapefruit?

Rolling up his shirt sleeves and then reaching for the coffee, served in blue and white fine bone china on a silver tray, he said, “I think some of the problem is math.”

“Math? There’s nothing wrong with my math.” Her expression was quizzical, sliding into a very fetching peevish indignation that made him grin.

“An early life of math, I mean. It’s a way of escape, isn’t it? Into a comfortable abstract world, definable, predictable...and nonthreatening. But while submerged in that sanctum you miss things in the real world...how it generally works, the experiences facilitating an open mind.”

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She set her cup down and said, “Are you suggesting that I’m narrow...that I’m naïve?”

“Of course not narrow. A little naïve, yes. It’s rather refreshing in a way, but it could also prove fatal.”

“What brought all of this on? Oh, I suppose you think that’s a *naïve* question...since your displeasure’s obviously the result of my dislike of UNIFOLL’s business practices. I am *not* naïve. People do rotten things...but it seems to me they do them more frequently than they used to.”

“No, only more openly and discourteously. There isn’t much sincerity or courtesy left in the world. They’ve been replaced by carelessness, vulgar lies, outright rudeness.”

Semele held to her defensive protest. “I read people very well, you know. Can I be so naïve and do that?”

“Apparently.”

“Oh, this is...what do you want me to do, look for a business course in sharp practice?”

He regretted having to torture her so, always trying to make her into the perfect associate, really more perfect than he had any right to demand of another human being. Unfortunately, it involved expunging something rare and precious, but he knew it was also a matter of survival. The soft gold light of the lamp struck her face at an angle and shimmered over her hair. She was so very desirable and sarcastically honest at this moment that he was sorry he had ever hired her, but then he would never have encountered her. With only one word during that incredible night of lovemaking she might have been his. He was the foolish one, having self-assuredly left her to another. Feeling at once compelled to fix that, he was surprised at the urgency of the notion, not certain it could any longer be accomplished.

“As soon as you’re finished here, and before you go to Madera, I want you to go home for a while.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Didn’t you tell me earlier that World Bank was wildly impatient to have this over with?”

“I can take care of World Bank. They have plenty of irons in the fire. They can let this one cool a bit. You need a different perspective. Don’t just go home to Catney. Go visit your parents in San Francisco.”

Her eyes were flashing that chilling blue ice again, her arms folded, her tight lips withholding a rather just irritation at the invasion of her personal affairs.

“Why are you doing this?”

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“You can think about that, too, while you’re away.”

By early morning he was already winging his way back to New York and, shortly after arrival, on to a meeting at the firm’s office in Toronto, but throughout these long hours of travel and phone conversations and the requisite personal encounters, Semele, Arnau i Roca, and volatile Madera often intervened in his harried thoughts, with sharp pricks of irrepressible concern. Spence had told him Semele was being followed, presumably by some agent other than World Bank, which he already knew did keep cautious tabs on her private endeavors. It could be the South African or German bidders, or even someone from UNIFOLL, or the Maderan government. As Spence had suggested, the fastest way to tell was with a hand on the throat, but unless something far more serious occurred, overt action was not presently a prudent move. Despite this external threat, he was thinking now of her personal condition, her state of mind, for which he felt responsible. Even though she had apparently fallen out with Arnau i Roca, he felt her alignment with the mandates of the firm slipping away. He wanted Semele to have a serious discourse with her academic parents -- with her mother, who taught philosophy through the rich vehicle of literature, and her father, who taught ethics --, reasoning that renewed exposure to such revered and reasonable parentage could not fail to soothe her troubled mind. Yet, by possibly enabling a counter-productive result, he questioned his own reckless inexperience; he knew that her parents’ position on moral obligation could not fail to go against what they would deem a lesser stricture: his of duty to profession.

IV

*The early child wise-love-ingrained
may love its span unselfishly.
And by the nature of that love
keep wonder from banality.
..... KMK*

There were no cooked books per se, Semele concluded a week after dining with her boss. Those figures that had been leaked into other accounts neither impaired the present soundness of the company nor detracted from expenditures and accruals that operative figures so far represented. Figures leaked, however, led to books sheltering other agendas, not all of which she had yet verified to her own satisfaction, and which might eventually reveal a serious hemorrhage. For Jefferson

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Davis Smith, this was not yet of any significance. For her, it was already a grave breach of corporate conduct.

At morning coffee on her balcony, she saw pictures of Arnau i Roca in the *Herald Tribune* and *Le Monde*. He was back in Paris. As she was perusing these stories, a few splatters of rain fell over the newspapers. She looked up, frowning at the cover of soft gray; not a Seattle sky but just as unpredictable -- unlike her former less complicated self, now inextricably altered: Extended? Diminished? Extended, she thought, in spite of everything. Essentially, she was finished with her work in Paris. Now, although unexpected, it was time to go home. She had always assumed that when she left here she would be headed for Madera. With an insightfulness that only engendered more grudging respect, Jeff had discerned something in her that must already have been forming: a desire to converse with her parents, a visit she had put off for some time, without admitting the reason for her avoidance. It was her work, which she knew they could not freely countenance, even without ever hearing their disapproval. The thought of Rafael now only a short distance away was a painful wrench she couldn't assuage. Trying to concern herself with more immediate matters, she stood up, took a last swallow from her cup, then hurried through her room. She intended to wrap things up at UNIFOLL, tender a final report of this phase to the World Bank representative; and then, and then she would see.

What made one do things that threatened livelihood and disrupted normal procedure, with no assurance of the desired result? A moot question. Such risky attempts were enacted for a certain kind of propriety, she told herself, the kind that allowed one to look in a mirror or sleep a little less restively. Caught in an anxious state of dissonance, she had thought and thought about doing something. Finally, she had gone to the office of the official whom Jeff had told her she would not be seeing unless UNIFOLL -- very unlikely -- was found unacceptable. By this decisive act and before she had even begun to speak her mind, she had indicated her own negative judgment of UNIFOLL's suitability. So be it. Initially, she was received with a dismissive forbearance so glibly administered it threw into doubt any hope of success.

Maurice Girard had the pouching belly of a gourmand, on an otherwise narrow body; a sallow-faced man with a pompous, back-angled stare emitted from squinting dark eyes that offered small encouragement, and even less possibility of capitulation. When those appraising eyes initiated assault, as predatory black beetles rush to ambush their prey, she was jolted by aversion; but then as swiftly mobilized to deliver her own appraisal, coming straight to the point.

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“I think you’ll agree that surreptitious payment for the privilege of doing business is hardly an act of fair and competitive enterprise.” She had kept the tenor of her voice agreeably tentative, an invitation to concur.

Girard smiled, a ripple of delight spreading over his flavescent face, a satanic yellow glee of condescension.

“Ah, the American naïveté...or the stratagem of it. Calvinistic roots. One continually wonders how this arrant Tartuffery is carried off. Always the hypocrisy...it works, I suspect, because you are all at the same self-deception, professing to adhere to the same Puritanical ethic – assurance in numbers, *non?*” By this brash and impolitic pronouncement, in thickly accented English, his jaundiced long jowls were tinged faintly orange with irritation.

“Is this how it’s going to be, then, no regard for the people of that valley, for their way of life...not even a semblance of decency...all for sale on the world market?”

“Ah, you seem not at all an employee of Jefferson Davis Smith & Associates. *Vous n’avez rien à faire ici.* You would be well advised, *Mademoiselle* Taylor, not to carry these remarks any further. Your inutile finding is, quite realistically, unimportant...and not a surprise. UNIFOLL is, I believe, a solid company. They do business around the world and they know how it is done.”

“Then I and my laborious task of scrutiny are simply window dressing.”

“On the contrary, *la filiale*...eh, our affiliate is *laborieuse* in following the rules and regulations of doing business, especially when there is very large expenditure.”

“So the precious commodity water is to be paid for with another horrible deprivation...and even with blood.”

“A precious commodity to be paid for. I will go that far. The rest of your phraseology is melodrama. Like oil, clean water is finite, *Mademoiselle* Taylor. It will become increasingly more valuable, a finite product with infinite demand, pure economics in its purest form.”

She studied him for a moment with deepening animus, as he clasped his hands impatiently, like a glutton detained from his abundant table of edibles. There was, in fact, a silver plate laden with smoked duck and cheese resting on his desk, a cheese so strong that even she, a cheese lover, was repulsed. The odor summoned the repugnant possibility of chrysanthemum stems rotting in putrid milk.

“Yes, I see, *gloutonerie*. Sorry to have interrupted your lunch. *Adieu, monsieur.*” She turned on her heel and thrust her hand hurtfully against the thick mahogany door.

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An evening of steadily drifting mist slightly blurred luminescent Paris. With a fearful ache in her chest, Semele walked through the narrow avenues and down the slick light-dazzled streets. Her uncovered hair was spangled white with minuscule beads of water, even her long eyelashes holding tiny droplets that occasionally spilled onto her cheeks like infinitesimal tears. She walked with her hands held taut in the pockets of her sodden velour jacket, barely mindful of the wetness, or of the water splashing from gutters and the honking cars making a soft swoosh through standing water on pavements; all of this an indistinct background for dolorous ambivalence, indecision. There was no one behind her; she had made certain of that. As though remotely programmed, her steps altered course, quickened, faster and faster, her heels clicking on the narrow shining sidewalk until she found herself below Arnau i Roca's room. She lifted her cell phone from a damp pocket and punched in his number.

His voice, in slightly accented French, startled her by its departure from Castilian. She heard a provocative tone of some other expectation, causing her to hesitate.

"It's Semele. I'm downstairs...I need to talk to you."

She climbed the stairs and stood at his door, for a moment turning her head around toward the staircase and considering a swift retreat. When she looked back he was there before her, the light behind his tall dark figure limning him in a certain aura further heightening her desire to flee. This dauntless iconic image, embellished with her own sympathies, had begun to erode an already diminished self-possession. Her nervous body turned away toward the stairs, but his restraining hand prevented that retreat.

"¡*Jesús!* you are wet."

She looked past him and saw a young dark-haired woman in blue shirt and jeans standing with her hands on her hips.

"Excuse me," she said. "Never mind."

She wrenched her arm away, spun around and headed down the stairs, but he caught her and held her against the wall.

"You are drenched. Please come back."

"No." Now she didn't know if the water running down her cheeks was from her dripping hair or if it might actually be a rage of tears. She felt only disgust with herself as he implored her not to move, his voice softened and appeasing. "*No se mueva.* Please wait."

With an emphatic hand raised behind him, he left her a moment and went back inside the room. He said something to the dark head and another person, and Semele saw a thin angular man appear in the doorway. The man, very serious, left with the young woman, nodding to her as they descended past her carrying their coats.

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She quickly turned away to hide her face. Still she hesitated, looking down the stairs until Rafael's hand drew her against him and led her inside.

"Ay, you are a stubborn woman. You are drowning."

He pulled off her water-laden jacket and led her to the bed, leaving her on its edge while he fetched a large towel. Vigorously toweling the dripping kinked hair, he stretched out a springy tendril. "*Rizado*...wet, more like a spaniel."

She had said almost nothing, her heart pounding with the audacious purpose of this ambivalent visit. Her hands brushed at her damp slacks as she sniffled and then sneezed. Her disheveled head was turned away, her eyes staring past the edge of the half-folded screen, for to look into those burning chestnut eyes now would be the end of reason.

He knelt before her, clasped a hank of wet hair and tipped her head toward him. Her eyes flicked over his other hand, familiar supple fingers sliding into his shirt pocket.

"*Aquí*, blow your nose, *querida*."

He remained kneeling before her as she blew her nose then tossed the tissue on the nightstand and again turned away. An insistent hand reached out to realign her face.

"*¡Jesús!* I have missed you."

"Rafael...I came to--"

"Can you know how deep inside of me you are?"

"...came to tell you something."

"And not to love me?"

As if he had no memory of their final parting, had forgotten the fierce heat of recrimination, remembered, as she, only the long night of its incredible aftermath, he pulled her down upon the carpet and against him. Shivering, she felt his entwined fingers tighten around clutched hair.

"Rafael...will you...*wait*...I have to say this."

"No. Let it be. We need each other. Please, Semele, please *querida*, let us have this...first us...only us."

His hands had not waited, working to free her damp clothes. Quite soon their consuming hunger neared the fulfillment each had craved, then her wildly elated cry of release sent his responding mouth hard against her own.

"You were to help me let you alone," she half whispered as her breathing grew more even.

"When I saw you I could not help anything...except to help us both in this way." He kissed her trembling fingers. "Ay, Semele, you are still cold...after so much heat."

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He lifted her up onto the bed, pulled her against him and covered them with the bedclothes. They lay holding each other in silence, until he muttered against her scalp, "Your hair...your beautiful hair...I think it is steaming." Exhausted mentally and physically, she turned around and drifted into sleep held against the length of his body, his arms locked around her, her head beneath his throat.

In what seemed only a very short time, she opened her eyes and felt as if she were floating in a neurasthenic ether lighter than air, this strange medium holding her aloft in a state of hot confusion. He touched her forehead.

"Too hot, burning up. You are a strong healthy woman, what has happened to your resistance? You are getting sick with something. *Un resfriado.*"

Not a cold. She sat up, feeling dizzy and remembering a careless secretary sneezing above her desk at UNIFOLL.

"Oh, I've got to...I have to go, Rafael. Help me find my clothes. I feel so light-headed. It's hot in here. Can't you open a window?"

"It is never hot in this room. I hung your clothes in the bathroom to dry while you were sleeping. Lie down. You have a fever."

"I've got to--"

"No. It is raining and your clothes are still wet. Stay there. I will take care of you."

His cell phone went off, and she heard his initially mild-mannered voice turn hard and acerbic.

"Sí, she is with me. Of course. It is none of your business. Find something better to do with your time and leave us alone."

"Who was that...Rafael?"

"Your shadow...Spence Bailey. How in hell did he get my phone number?"

"Easy. He was just showing off. Darn it. I was supposed to meet him for a drink."

"He sounded as if he had already drunk your share."

She slept on and off in a feverish light sleep full of fragmentary visions, and somewhere in between discovered that Rafael had gone out. When he returned he mixed a pale green powder in a glass of water and held it to her mouth.

"Drink."

"What is it?"

"An old remedy. Never mind, just drink."

"Oh, it's awful," she exclaimed, wiping her mouth.

"Swallow the rest. It will help you breathe and make you sleep."

"Sludge," she gasped, obeying with reluctance.

"Now try to sleep. I have to go out...back in an hour, or maybe two."

The Water Bearer

"I should go. Isn't it awfully late?"

"Sí, for you. Do not even think of leaving this bed."

He held her hand against his mouth and kissed the palm. "*Gracias, querida mía*, for coming to me." Then he was gone.

In the early morning she felt his body gently slide in beside her. Trying not to awaken her, he fell asleep almost at once. The chalky, mucinous herbal concoction that he had mixed must have helped her sleep, but now she felt restless, still nervous, her brain in flux, although with a somewhat mitigated fever. Her thoughts raced. How right Jeff was to call this singular man charismatic, but she had fallen under his sway in a far more personal way than that of devotee to eponymous leader. She would have done, would do now, almost anything to help him, but in reality there was really very little she could do, except for the one piece of information she felt certain he ought to have.

She got up and went into the bathroom, ducking under hung clothes to snatch a tissue and blow her nose. A common cold had not caught up with her in ages; probably from the stress of recent events, and that sneezing secretary. She tugged one of Rafael's heavy gray sweatshirts from a shelf, put it on and went to huddle on the sofa, staring off in thought. He found her there when he awoke. She had fallen back to sleep with his leather jacket pulled over her.

"Why could you not lie in the bed with me?"

"I was thinking...didn't know I was going to fall asleep here."

He pulled on his black turtleneck and jeans and sat with his arm around her.

"We cannot ever part that way again. You have suffered as much as I. What a pair...economics and mathematics."

"Economics *is* mathematics. Economic theory meets mathematical analysis. *Buenos días, señor.*"

"Sí, together we become econometrics. Useful."

She sniffled and lifted her arm to wipe her nose, but remembered just in time that it was not her own shirtsleeve.

He laughed and went for a packet of tissues.

Placing his hand on her forehead while she wiped at her leaking nose, he asked, "Are you feeling better? Your fever is almost gone."

"I've caught a cold," she moaned, astonished.

"Sí." He was smiling. "Even you."

"Tomorrow, no today is my birthday. Isn't it dismal?"

"Ah, Scorpio, how could it be dismal? You will spend it with me and be healed sufficiently for a birthday toast."

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“Surely you don’t believe in all of that astrology nonsense?” she reproved with a mildly accusing voice.

“Of course not...but your man Kepler played there, I believe. The zodiac is moving, as all else in the universe. It is *una casualidad*, a fateful coincidence that I came into being at the sign of Aquarius. The Water Bearer, *sí?*”

“Oh, yes...yes, so appropriate. Where were you last night...wise Prince of Serendip?”

“My amusing *cómica*...I had to meet with a few restless confreres. You are a little better now. Are you hungry?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“It is not a part of your world, Semele.”

“No, you’re wrong. We’re all in this world together.”

“Ah, *correcto*. Not enough are aware of it. We cannot seem to turn ourselves around...heading for disaster.

“Already forty years ago it was that the president of France, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, warned of worldwide catastrophe. He was talking about something that happened a year earlier, October 17, 1973, when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries imposed a partial oil embargo creating a phony world crisis. Many like him said it was the beginning of the end, but the world has lumbered on, oblivious to that misplaced warning of man-made global decline -- the Middle East holding the world over an oil barrel. Now the severity is water; as ever, few will heed the ominous signs. The Israelis quarrel with the Lebanese to contest their riparian rights. *Water*. Our misuse of the earth, our arrogant refusal to create harmonious sources of energy, our greed and myopia will kill us all. Perhaps as such a careless species we deserve to vanish forever...ah, but to knowingly let it happen is madness.”

This was the less familiar part of Rafael -- she knew it was the principal part -- that she had mainly seen on television or read about. The animated manner and ardently gleaming eyes alive with the mission of redress that drove him. Yes, Jeff had said *driven*, and she knew how right he was in this, but not that Rafael was dangerously unstable. He was forthright, lucidly accurate and very realistic, resolutely carrying out the project he had chosen for his life’s work. How could she dispute the rationality and rightness of the words he spoke? She could only admire him, only offer her support by speaking as she did.

“UNIFOLL has paid members of the Maderan government handsomely for permission to build the mine and do the water infrastructure. Apparently it’s of no consequence to anyone but you and I and the people of *La Nava Feraz*.”

“As expected. Have you proof of this?”

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“Yes, but I can’t give it to you. You’ll have to appear to have found out for yourself. If you implicate me, you’ll impair the professed neutrality of my company...and me, of course. Actually, I’ve nearly done that already -- me, I’m not worried about. I can only say what I’ve said.”

“I cannot bring you harm, my love, so you will have to tell me where to look.”

“Rafael...I also have to tell you that...I think no matter what you do it will have no effect.”

“Ah, but that negativism is how things never get done. We will talk more of this later. You need to drink a lot of that precious fluid now and get more rest.”

“I only have a slight cold. Whatever you gave me must have some rare ingredient...a magic potion?”

He laughed. “You can thank my uncle, a doctor who set great store by herbal remedies. He taught it to me.”

He turned her face up to study her in silence.

“You did not think you had to do this for my love?”

“I wanted to do it. It should be done.”

“Will you come to bed for a little while...red-haired angel of mercy with slight cold? May I love you?”

“If it isn’t...only because of what I’ve told you.”

“*¡Cristo!*...what do you think? Is not my need of you here in my eyes, Semele...starving heart...neglected body?”

When they had slept more, they went out for a late breakfast, Semele loping beside Rafael in her long stride that just matched his brisk pace. He was not one to dawdle, look in shop windows or study passersby, as she sometimes liked to do while on the move, but when they were seated in the café she noticed that he was very aware of those around him. Then, he had a way of narrowing his eyes and studying anyone doing or suggesting something that caught his interest. He would do this as he stirred his coffee or shifted in his chair, without making any comment, a slow smile forming in recognition of a certain type, or a look of commiseration, as now, softening his intense face.

“She’s quite pretty, isn’t she?” Semele remarked as he studied a thin young brunette in a gray woolen dress.

“She is nearly blind,” Rafael said, watching carefully to see if help was needed. “Look at the way she moves...the uncertainty. She is listening rather than seeing.”

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Semele was about to disagree with what she believed a hasty assessment when she observed the young woman's precise movements more closely -- her hand searching for, pulling out a chair -- and saw that he was right.

"You're finely tuned to your environment. It's part of my job to do that, but I don't do it as well around you."

He grinned and said, "I will take that as a welcome admission...that I am able to divert your attention for a little while."

"Why do people *fall in love*?" she asked, the inflection in her sardonic voice making it clear that she had a number of her own rather condescending opinions.

"One of the great mysteries. Some people never do. A condition often so painful and time-consuming...but very sad to have missed floating in the stratosphere."

Because of his earnest response she felt a little ashamed. Wondering if he might really consider himself to be *floating in the stratosphere*, she very unexpectedly found that she was afraid to ask. She could hardly look at him, setting down her cup with a great lump forming in her chest, like a punishment. Her quivering hand lay pronate on the table, and she stared at it as if it belonged to someone else. When she felt his ministering fingers closing over that disjoined hand, reconnecting it, jump-starting her dying expectation, she was startled, for at that precise moment his touch was like a blow to the head. She met his direct gaze with a questioning look, her eyes brimming with a hopeless, nearly rueful acceptance of whatever followed.

"*Sí tal, querida,*" he answered her quizzical silence, with a skyward flourish of his head. "*Sí*, I am up there."

Sniffing a little with the symptoms of her cold, she found that his very perceptive words had made her eyes swim, thence a runny nose and sneezing. Feeling lightheaded, she had to speak, to suppress overwhelming thoughts with the wrong response. "We weren't going to see each other again. If I hadn't come to you and--"

"No, you cannot believe that. I could not ever have convinced myself of the end of you...no matter what we said. I know how to find you...would have...given a little time."

Her thoughts divided by joy and pressing concern, she switched to a sinister subject. "Someone's been following me. Spence says...but he wouldn't have to it's so obvious."

"You cannot suspect any of my *compañeros*...and I am here with you." He was in a good enough humor to tease.

"Probably it's someone from the Maderan government. I see them as quite devious in this whole affair. They've got a lot to lose...possibly imagine frightening me into line."

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“A certain element there would certainly like to see me disappear...but, about yourself, I think you are wrong.”

“Rafael, the danger to you...you’ve no idea what I’ve come to imagine...how I constantly worry about your--”

“Stop. I am used to this. It happens wherever I go. You know, it might be someone from UNIFOLL following you. They have many reasons to do that.”

“I’m going away, Rafael.”

“Where?”

“San Francisco...for a while...to see my parents.”

“Was it your idea?”

“How incisive you are.”

“Your boss does not want you around me.”

“He doesn’t care what I do.”

“You are naïve.”

“He said the same thing.”

“Then I retract the statement...instead you are not willing to recognize the truth. How soon are you going to my old city of *la juerga*?”

“What?”

He laughed. “Friendly drinking...you call it a *spree*.”

“Oh, I see. I leave in a couple of days.”

He clenched his jaw and briefly looked away.

“It is more difficult.”

“More difficult?”

“To let you go again.”

He tossed his head with a constrained smile of forced acceptance, then briefly considered a thought that remained unrevealed: “Maybe we can...ay, *no*, it is good for you to go...timely at least...your leaving. I have a hell of a lot to do and difficulty concentrating when you are near.”

That evening in a dimly lit Left Bank café – really only another of Rafael’s meeting points, and where she waited while he talked briefly to a small group of his followers who then departed --, he ordered a bubbling dry champagne with their humble fare of white fish. He touched his glass to hers and said, “Happy Birthday, *querida mía*. I wonder if it would seem disingenuous to ask what token I can give you. I really want to know. Please tell me, Semele.”

In the dim light, his eyes were searching depths of moist umber, so completely earnest she knew the offer could not be merely a polite gesture. “You’ve already given...so much more than you realize. There’s nothing I want or need. Oh,

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but wait a minute, yes, there's something: just one more night with you...if...if you can tolerate this slight cold."

He looked at her a long moment, subdued in speech by surprise, limpid black pupils dilated, eyes narrowing a little to further sharpen the image of the self she offered; a self frankly given, without any reservation or provision beyond the sweet reward of what had already been presumed.

"No, you are the one who is giving...what I would have taken...needed and taken...but to hear you say it... Eat then, if I am to give what is already yours --
¡Vámonos!"

Semele's parents lived in the handsome Victorian townhouse of a wealthy widow in Pacific Heights on Pacific Avenue. The woman had once been a student of Semele's father, an adoring protégé whose concurrent physical desire went unrequited. At least Semele assumed so, her mother being the most consuming yet subtle force in her father's life. So strong and unrelenting was the student Marion Brown's attachment that when her entrepreneur husband was killed in a private plane crash she implored both her former professor and his wife to come and share her home -- at the time they had been looking for a new residence. Thus ensued a different sort of ménage à trois, one which seemed the most normal arrangement in the world to Semele, for it had gone on for many years and Marion Brown was like a clever and very sophisticated aunt to her. Aggressively developing into a prominent lecturer on humanitarianism, Marion was often away, just now at a symposium in Beijing. Her family and mainstay, whenever she returned from her well-attended lectures or global conferences, consisted of the two people sharing her big house, Semele's parents, George and Martha Taylor. There, they lived beneficially and comfortably and, Semele had always supposed, quite happily, with very little outlay of expense, although they could easily have afforded a reasonably comfortable home of their own.

The Taylors were themselves sometimes inveigled away from San Francisco as guest lecturers, but they preferred to remain in their chosen locale and lecture in the city. The tall white house overlooked both Alcatraz Island -- somberly afloat in the drowning slate-blue bay, its unsettling penal specters still hauntingly pervasive -- and the Golden Gate Bridge, that imposing artifice of linked-up population, spanning the watery depths while affixed at both ends to provisional earth -- mercurial reminders of the region's volatility were sudden earthquakes. The solid house had withstood many temblors with only minor damage. These sudden forces were leniently countenanced by the Taylors, who, with a long habit of enlightened overview, saw such random

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activity as the protean earth's natural province, gratuitously offering discoverable evidence of cosmic causes and effects: torn and drifting fragments of ancient Pangaea.

Sanguinely opposed in their quiet second-floor library when at home, Semele's busily engrossed parents regularly worked at facing desks. These were placed at opposite ends of a book-lined, antique-Persian-carpeted and otherwise sparsely appointed rectangular room. It was here that she found them upon her arrival, and the three removed at once to an adjoining sitting room also overlooking the bay. This airy white room with its thick sapphire carpet, sparkled with abundant light and was markedly different from their walnut-paneled library: the serious scholars' workplace, always greeting her with odors of crisp new hardcovers and moldering old Moroccan leather; smells inviting rich varied journeys of the mind. But the white room was a social nave.

Her father lit a fire in the sitting room's Carrara marble fireplace. Father and daughter then settled into large brocaded white chairs while Martha fetched their tea.

An only child, Semele had arrived late in her parents' lives. Now sixty-six, Martha at thirty-eight had been quite astonished to find herself with child. The two scholars had never really intended to have children but were delighted with Semele's appearance, and had taken great care not to spoil her detrimentally with their devotion. In those days, they were still frequently traveling to some of the remotest places on the planet, as well as large and teeming foreign cities. Semele came along, at first in a back-carrier and then toddling alongside or between her mother and father. In the early years, she was essentially schooled by her parents in a most heuristic and well thought out manner, having been strongly encouraged to think for herself and to reason carefully. Very early on she began to amuse and startle with precocious questions, an endless curiosity.

Semele stood up and went to examine more closely a newly framed photograph: herself at the age of five. The snapshot had caught her sitting rather petulantly on the first stone riser of the extremely high steps of a pyramid at the ancient Mayan city of Tikal. Surrounding this open area was the encroaching jungle of northern Guatemala.

Her mother entered the room carrying the tea service, observed her daughter and said, "Yes, I've just hung that. Can you possibly remember how angry you were that your poor little legs couldn't climb those high risers? And of course we didn't dare let you attempt it. There was nothing to hang onto and you might have fallen."

"I remember as if it were this morning, Mama. Oh, how I wanted to reach the top on my own two legs. I hadn't yet grasped the concept of time. I thought if I could only get to the top I would be able to look out and see the people who made that remarkable place."

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Martha was laughing as she set the tea service on the coffee table and came to stand beside Semele. They were about the same height. As a gangly teenager, Semele had envied her mother's figure and effortless beauty, but not without a tinge of guilt for such wistful envy, and before very long her mother might have envied her. Martha had kept her hair red, although beneath the tint it would have been slowly graying. She had once explained to Semele -- and in so doing exposed her indomitable character as endearingly vulnerable -- that it made her happy to keep her hair its original color, and that she hoped it was her only vanity. She was a graceful woman, not a pound overweight, with even features, high cheek bones, a healthful, only slightly lined fair complexion, and intelligent blue eyes with a trace of gray in them; eyes presently fatigued, with a soft darkness beneath, and not nearly as striking as her daughter's. She stood with her arms folded, a beige cashmere cardigan flung over her white shirt, and wearing tan slacks and honey-brown penny loafers. Semele, dressed similarly, wore a white silk blouse, her hands slipped comfortably into the pockets of customary beige slacks. They both turned around at the same moment and smiled at Semele's seated father, he studying them with an expression of great fortune and pride.

"Set yourselves down, my girls, and we'll have tea and some of this prune cake Martha buys...at the most wonderful little bakery we've discovered...but we try not to overdo."

George was a tall, iron-gray-haired man the same age as his wife. Behind his gold-rimmed glasses Semele noticed the little pouches beneath his sharply attentive slate-blue eyes, pouches that became more pronounced when he had been reading too steadily, eschewing the eye exercises his wife entreated him to practice. "Good God, I leave that to REM sleep," he would tease. "As if that has anything to do with changing focus," Martha would argue back. His was a narrow, intelligent face with a whisker-darkened angular chin and a long straight nose leading the eye to a currently relaxed and contemplative pink-infused mouth; a pliant mouth that supplied frequent whimsy and irony. His body was trim but his skin washed pale, for, while he and Martha walked for exercise up and down the hills of San Francisco, he was no longer an outdoorsman, and even the walking was at the behest of his nurturing wife. Below the hems of his gray slacks Semele noticed the brown leather slippers she had given him last Christmas, now scuffed and well broken in. She watched with fondness as he unbuttoned the sleeves of a gray shirt made of some suede-like fabric, and carefully folded back the cuffs. A flash of memory had Jeff doing the same thing. She thought how in casual moments they both preferred to wear their shirts with the sleeves rolled.

She added a little sugar and lemon to her Ceylon tea, tested the heat with frugal sips, then set the fragile porcelain cup back in its gold and black-rimmed saucer and took a bite of fragrant warm prune cake; delicious, with a buttery cinnamon and

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sugar crust. How nice, how comforting, how predictable and pleasant her parents' world was compared to the newly alarming chaos of hers.

"You're frowning, my dear," Martha said.

"Oh...am I?" This mumbled while holding her fingers delicately across a mouthful of cake. She swallowed and rolled her eyes with pleasure. "I was actually feeling so good being here with you two in this cozy atmosphere."

"I can well imagine, after what you must have been going through," George observed. "From a tumultuous existence to our tame little haven of tranquility."

"Well, something like that. I suppose if there's been tumult I've caused some of it."

"We make decisions that allow a great deal of what befalls us...whether we're aware of it at the time or not," Martha said -- an introduction to maternal assistance. "Is there something we can help you mull over...help smooth that furrowed ivory brow? -- your lovely skin has never tanned."

Semele was stricken by a sudden and perplexing feeling of approach-avoidance, a wish to pour forth all of her recent tribulations, and simultaneously a strong reluctance to say anything at all, rather a desire to let this halcyon hour of tea and cake and unconditional love flow over her with the sweet release of a comforting childhood afternoon.

"Well, dear parents, I'm feeling...somewhat guilty."

"Oh? A useless condition. Let's try to rid you of some of that if we can," Martha offered.

"First of all, I...well, I got a little too involved with my boss and I..." Semele stared off in unfocused self-restraint, feeling like a child who had broken something dear and must own up. Worse, the recollection was painful.

"Mmm...yes, you were quite taken with him the last time we spoke," her father remarked with a more careful voice.

"Was I? God, I feel like I'm doing a confessional."

Martha smiled and gently gripped her daughter's arm. "You know we aren't going to judge you, dear...and certainly not exact any penance, for heaven's sake. If you don't want to speak of this, let's talk of something else."

"I *do* and *don't* want to. But I...I think I need to."

"Your superego is requiring a little input," her father posed, snatching off his glasses and holding them up to the nearest window light to locate a smudge. He pulled out a white linen handkerchief, exhaled on the lens and wiped at the smear while Semele brought her indecision to an end.

"Papa, don't get too clinical or I might not--"

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Her father's laughter broke in. "Isn't that better than regressing to a wailing infant in my arms...or is that what you need, dear? If so, my arms are here."

"Thank you for saying it at least." Semele pursed a smile, soothed, encouraged, having already jumped up to pace her way into her next remark, but then sitting down again.

"Do either of you know who Rafael Arnau i Roca is?"

"At least one of us does," Martha said. "High profile in Paris at the moment, isn't he? He's been bringing some much needed attention to water crises in the world."

"A foe...or too much of a friend?" her father asked with his laconic intuitiveness.

"Much more than a friend, Papa."

Semele saw her mother and father exchange knowing glances. She winced inwardly at her revelation, for she had also perceived how quickly they grasped its repercussions.

"You're a child of chronically idealistic parents, Semele. It's the bane of academia...why we try to keep it at bay. Long ago we rationalized that it would work itself to your advantage...yes, I'm afraid it was in a time of more optimism," Martha soothed, with something close to apology.

"It has done...has been to my advantage, until--"

"I would think not to a great extent in your current profession," her father interrupted. "Do you know, Semele, in a way I regret that you became so familiar with variables of culture out in the wide world without the accompanying experience of any very close relationships as a youngster, other than ours. For that I *am* sorry. You see, it's one reason you could turn so exclusively to Archimedes. A loner habitually, with high mentation, you felt more comfortable there...with Newton and company. Your idealism could then happily flourish without much interference from some of the more confining strictures of the reality principle."

"Oh, Papa, please...the *reality principle*?"

"Sorry, my darling, I was lightening up with bombast."

Oddly enough, Jeff had cast similar aspersions on the presumed culprit mathematics. She had encountered all of this before, from various quarters, remembering what the censured author Norman Douglas had written in his veiled book *South Wind*: that mathematics was the poorest form of mental exercise and that for a general education one might find a Chinese grammar more useful. Nevertheless, she felt that her general education had been far better than most had received, and that her easy immersion in math had proved highly beneficial for useful employment.

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“You couldn’t help but agree with Doctor Arnau i Roca, if that’s where the problem lies,” Martha proposed with fully cognizant and dead-on accuracy.

“I gave him a piece of inflammatory information. Oh, I don’t think it will have much bearing on the outcome. But, yes...you see, in that old habit of idealism I thought it would. Now maybe I’ve only set retaliatory forces in motion with no positive benefit whatsoever...very possibly even a dangerous effect...and for Rafael...*God*.”

The more Semele explained her painful plight, trying not to appear dramatic, the more distraught she became, as if this welcome momentary release must itself be paid for with a dire result. Her attentive parents thoughtfully applied their familiar wisdom to her dilemma, with consoling praise of her unhesitating sense of proper ethics.

“If, as you say, the company in question has acted in this manner, you could have done no less. We’re certainly in agreement with you,” her father asserted. “You’ve gone against your own firm’s neutrality for a higher moral ethic. Does your boss know what you’ve done?”

“No. Do you know, he...he actually suggested I visit you...but I think for a different reason. Of course, he doesn’t approve of my relationship with Rafael.”

“Ah, two very exceptional men interested in you...and in rather conflicting positions,” Martha observed.

“What? Lord, it’s all just like looking through polished window glass to you two, isn’t it?”

“That should come as no surprise. We’ve spent our lives analyzing human conduct. If we couldn’t apply it to our own daughter’s situation, we’d both be quite the poseurs, wouldn’t we? But how can we help relieve this anxiety?” Martha asked, squeezing her daughter’s hand.

“I don’t actually know. I think telling you has been helpful. Rafael...isn’t like any man I’ve ever known.”

She saw that her restive mother was preparing to be very delicate. “Darling, this isn’t a projection, is it...a sort of student-professor relationship...with which we are all so familiar? I’m sure Doctor Arnau i Roca has many--”

“No, Mama. I haven’t been a student for a long time. For both of us it was more like heading downtown on a busy day -- a certain project, a serious objective in mind -- and having an unstable building suddenly fall on our heads.”

“Ah, I see, *both* of you in love. It’s rare, you know.”

“Whatever on earth is it, Mama, being *in love*? I’m also very drawn to another...oh God...my God, if I’m *really* honest...I still have strong feelings for my boss. But you see...Rafael’s the one consuming my entire horizon.”

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“What a paradoxical creature you are, my girl,” her father said, “After all these years of never falling for anyone you’ve let your starved libido fully gratify itself.”

She was startled to find that this remark had summoned a ruinous experience long buried. Once it had loomed large, almost leaving her a frigid misandrist, a repulsed hater of men. Gradually, by an adoring father, by a stubborn will, by considerate males realigning her world of early-instilled optimism, she had righted herself. An impressive history student, a doctoral candidate from Russia and mentored by her father, had become obsessed with her. At a summer party given by a colleague of her parents, the engaging young man had inveigled her teenaged self into a canoe tethered on a clear little stream bordering the professor’s property. He paddled off to a willowy shore where, while strolling among the tender young saplings, he suddenly professed his great impassioned need of her, and proceeded to forcefully satisfy himself. Earlier, seated at one of the chattering picnic tables, she had offered him only a simple, rather shy smile of foolish admiration -- virginal in point of fact -- and, like the complete ingénue she was, had gone on nibbling tuna-fish canapés, which she ever after hated. The lurid echo of his thickly accented voice as he forced himself into her above her sobbing protests could still make her flame with rage: “*Krasota*, my unopened little white flower, I must have you, I must have you, I must have you!” On the way back, as she clutched at the gunnel, her rigid face turned away, he advised that she must keep this a secret until he could marry her and take her back to Moscow. She had never uttered a word to either of her parents. She simply could not do it to them, imagining that it would be even more painful for them than it had been for her. While they continued to rejoice in their happy, healthy child, she would try to resume that condition, retaining her felicity by a willful method of ongoing self-suggestion -- later she discovered that the process she had rigorously employed had a name: psychocybernetics. For days she had worried about her period -- a rite of passage newly given to that fearful vernal season --; when at last it came she wept with relief. Frenetically avoiding the occasional presence of the Russian student until he dissolved from her life, she was left with a more brutal passage: a miserable wound that with practiced self-discipline became a triumph of healing.

“Love at last. You must feel rather swamped in the sundering of that internal dam.” She thought this remark from her bemused father a bit euphuistic but, if high-flown, surprisingly aware of what lay inside.

“I certainly feel estranged from an otherwise engaged self...like, well, like looking up to find a gorgeous blue twilight with two moons. Exciting but scary...a view with a different axis of gravity...Rafael, a mesmerizing attraction I can’t change,

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don't want to change..." Again aware of her parents' serious looks, she quickly dropped the subject.

"Papa, do you know, I think you're right; some time ago I probably should have gotten myself into a more effective profession...humanitarian. But still...I love what I do: the long intervals of meticulous research and observation, then the occasional galvanizing exposure of serious fault, those sudden periods of unpredictable activity...more rarely the threat of violence...then, a mental/physical response becomes a sort of contest...mostly with myself."

"My God, you *are* complicated, daughter," her father said, pushing his glasses against his nose and tilting his head back to study her. "How did you and I make such a fascinating young woman as this, Martha?"

"By encouraging reason without discouraging that very important fantasizing aspect: the creative imagination. Remember how curious this untainted little mind was? We did teach her truthfulness, courtesy and concern for others...of which there is currently far too little. How sad that so many children aren't taught to reason...only to parrot. Those not totally ignored are often uneducated wildlings spoiled by guilt-ridden parents who are never there...except to atone with material tokens of their failure at all else."

"Well said, wife."

Semele stood up and walked across the room to lean against the fireplace mantel, staring down into flickering orange flames snapping with rich memories: pungent logs of juniper, cozy winter holidays. Brain synapses were snapping as well, but where was reason now? Her patiently reflective parents waited for her to reopen the conversation.

"Do you two ever have any...well, *real* problems?"

"Good God! You don't want to hear any of that," her father exclaimed as she turned around to face them.

"You do have?" Semele questioned with a climbing voice of surprise. She was at once self-mocking of that surprise, knowing that in her fixed high regard she had left them no fair balance of the pleasant and the perverse, an unfairness often residing in admiring offspring lovingly reared.

"Please don't imagine us in that haunting ivory tower," her mother requested.

"For years your poor mother was jealous of Marion."

"George, for heaven's sake. All right, she's bright and comparatively young, and she adores you more than ever."

"Don't tell me you're *still* in that condition."

"I know...aren't humans pitiful?"

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Martha was laughing, but Semele knew this to be really a sardonic moment of self-disgust. She speculated that her mother's furrowed brow was for the discomfort of mistrust, rather than suspicion of an errant act; still, she pondered the possibility of that act.

"You know very well how Marion admires you, *loves* you, and you care as much for her, Martha...my silly wife."

"Of course I do. Who said I didn't? But it doesn't preclude that devilish old emotion associated with the color green. Oh, let's help our daughter. Who started this?"

"I'm afraid I did," Semele admitted, wondering how deep her father's and Marion's relationship had really gone.

"You're looking quite forlorn, my girl," Martha wisely observed. "What an extraordinarily interesting man Arnau i Roca must be. Why don't you call him, darling."

"Call him? I never thought of doing that...it never even crossed my mind. He's incredibly busy. I'd be interrupting. He was actually glad I was leaving."

"I don't believe it," George protested.

"He told me he couldn't concentrate on his work with me around...I wasn't performing so well myself...problems."

Martha smiled at Semele's wistful face. "Call him, dear. That guarded manner will vanish...I promise you."

"Let's have a little neat scotch first," George suggested, ready to fetch shot glasses. Glad for her father's desire to see her relax, Semele did not protest.

"Scotch? In the middle of the afternoon, George?"

"It's later than you think...and the situation calls for it," he answered, winking at his scolding wife.

Semele stood within the comfortable wine and gold striped walls of a guest bedroom and stared out of the window, nervously punching the power button on her cell phone on and off, on and off. What would Rafael be doing in Paris at one o'clock in the morning? Why was she calling him when she so hated to impose herself? Was this supposed to make her feel better? Would she have even attempted it without the scotch? She felt as if she were coming apart, her mind and body once again in a wretched torment of indecision, floundering in that alien sea of lost control. Finally, she exclaimed, "Enough of this," and punched in his number. He answered with a Spanish *Hola*, alert Spanish; he had not been sleeping. Perhaps she was truly interrupting.

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“Rafael...it’s Semele.”

“Semele! *¿Qué hay?* Are you all right?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry to disturb you.”

“*¿Dios!* do not apologize for thinking of me.”

“I guess...I just wanted to hear your voice. I don’t think I quite realized it. I was talking with my parents and my mother told me to call you.”

His soft laughter tumbled her heart.

“Thank her for me, *mi quimera* -- I have dreamed of you, an erotic dream. My cautious red-head, you are so honest.”

“Apparently I don’t know how to be any other way, unless of course something in my work requires deviousness. It’s only that I...that I miss you.”

“Ah, now I am wanting you.”

“Mmm, I shouldn’t have called and reminded you that I exist.”

“Please, no games...not now over such a long distance, *querida*...when I cannot have you in my arms...my bed.”

“Sorry, I’m being a smart ass because...I suppose right now I’m really all emotion.”

“I hope you will come back before I leave.”

“Are you going to Madera?”

“Sí, very soon.”

“Please, please be careful.”

“Will you come?”

“I’ll be here just a few more days.”

“Then it could be I will see you again.”

“You’re frightening me, Rafael.”

“What? I did not mean to frighten you. Come here and let me love you...make you happy...both of us. *¡Jesús!* this distance. Ah, I would like to have that look...you looking at me that way one more time before I leave.”

“What way?”

“You know what I mean.”

His words made her tremble. “What are you doing?”

“*Hablar*. Talking...planning.”

“I wish I were there with you.”

“Then come back.”

Speaking with Rafael had given her some measure of relief, but only while they were talking. Upon hearing his voice she was transformed into that farouche and excitable creature furtively dashing around under the loose franchise of Paris, her mind cloven by love and sinister mathematics. In her parents’ home she was fully at liberty

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to reclaim an indulged insouciance, a spontaneous manner; allowed, in many ways, the same unconditional benefits as those of childhood. She always tried not to abuse this privileged treatment. It was not good practice for the world at large.

Far more unsettled when she hung up, her responsive body ached for Rafael's very unselfconscious tenderness, his arousing physical aggressiveness.

"This was supposed to help me, Mama?" she muttered softly to herself while pushing aside the shot-silk wine drapes and gazing at a huge cream mansion across the street. A brisk woman, rather small and stooped, dressed head to toe in black leather, was coming through the front door with two bouncy white Scotties on short leashes. Ah, Doctor Miller, the indomitable retired obstetrician, Semele mused as she tried to distract herself from consuming and therefore debilitating thoughts of Rafael. Doctor Miller, her mother told her, would not travel because it involved leaving her dogs, so, at age seventy-five, she had taken up parachuting.

Restlessly searching, Semele found two old books in the library and carried them back into the sitting room, both by Arthur Koestler: *The Sleepwalkers* and *The Act of Creation*.

"Thought I'd reread these...haven't looked at them in ages; both provocative, I remember, like the man himself."

Her father tipped his head to glance at the titles.

"Ah, Koestler. A most interesting work on the pivotal astronomers...apparently inviting some argument. And *The Act of Creation* -- there's a scholarly romp for the mind. Genius: inception and efflorescence. I think your mind is well in tune. Take them along when you go, Semele."

When Semele had settled into Koestler, at one end of the long couch, her mother asked, "Shall I cook for you?"

"A rare occurrence worth consideration."

"Oh, please, George. I have been known to flit around the kitchen from time to time. An omelette? Or should we go out to a fancy restaurant? We'll take a taxi. Did you know we haven't a car anymore? -- your father's response to the energy insanity; although our students kindly insist on driving us around. Hypocrisy?" When she found no answer immediately forthcoming, Martha demanded more testily, "Well, and dinner?"

Semele snapped shut one of the books she had been contentedly perusing and said, "Please, Mama, I've had enough fancy restaurants in Paris. Let me help you cook."

"I don't think I've ever seen you cook very much of anything," her father remarked.

"I think I'm capable of making an omelette, Papa."

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They ate at a table in the high-ceilinged pale yellow kitchen, where the Taylor's old German housekeeper normally reigned, but who was away visiting relatives. Martha, it turned out, had mastered a fluffy light omelette, with a distinctive dash of dill weed and shredded cheddar cheese.

"This coffee you seem so fond of won't keep you awake, will it?"

"No, Mama, but something or other will. I don't sleep very well lately."

"Not even with your...mm...lover to help you out?"

"I don't know what you imagine is going on. I don't spend every night with Rafael."

"Perhaps you should."

"I do have a very demanding job, and I've been busy."

"Don't tease her, Martha. Our exhausted prodigy is stressed. We need to spoil her a little...if possible."

"Not teasing, George...only a bit of lightheartedness."

She turned to Semele. "The weight of your concern is too heavy, darling. Let's walk some of that off. We'll go over to Golden Gate Park and stroll the paths until you've exercised enough for a sound sleep."

"If only exercise were the answer, Mama. I work out regularly...keep my body in pretty good shape; I have to, another marginal aspect of my job...survival."

"For God's sake, I never thought a daughter of mine would take up a profession that required skill with firearms and fisticuffs," George protested. "I had in mind for you something a little more cerebral, Semele."

"It *is* that, Papa, very much so. That's the challenge of it -- the mental exertion. But sometimes there's the physical side. You see...it's a part of me you don't know, isn't it? I'm not the mousy little bookworm you always thought I was."

"I never *once* thought that; certainly not mousy, my beautiful sporting girl. I saw in your multifaceted self a sharp hunger for action...along with a stunning intellectual curiosity...never could have imagined how these would finally be expressed. I don't suppose...you haven't had to use that...*dangerous* weapon you sometimes carry around?"

"Yes, in a manner of speaking," Semele answered, and fell silent. She was not in the habit of discussing the particulars of her cases, but wished that she could share a little more of that hidden aspect of herself. There was the temptation to relate every significant detail simply to make herself known as much as possible to those who had given her life, those entitled to some knowledge of the outcome. She was certain that the more they knew of her the closer she would be to them, but this also suggested an endless process beyond realization. So much remained buried in the guarded psyche, the strange intricate turnings, evaluations, close-held desires continually motivating

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unpredictable acts; subtle forces at play, and so much never revealed to the Other, that mysterious Other beyond the struggling self – be it parent or lover or friend.

Later, sprawled on the plaid blanket Martha had spread over a manicured emerald lawn in Golden Gate Park, Semele was again justifying her profession. Her father, expressing further concern, had just reintroduced the subject of her work, and prodded her for a factual story.

“Recently there was a case...well, it doesn’t really matter, but the man had a common name: Johnson. He was very adept at embezzlement, from a high position in his company. Periodically, he fraudulently appropriated company funds, several million altogether, but he could never be caught at it or pinned down by suspicious associates because of a very clever method. If he’d used his genius in an ethical and positive manner he might now be worthy of resounding praise, instead of behind bars, where essentially I put him.”

“Good lord, Semele!” Martha fairly shouted, staring at her daughter as if encountering a laureate acclaimed in a new unproven category. “Did it...come to any violence?”

“Oh yes...yes it did. A person like that, with so much to lose, will do anything to save himself when exposed.”

“Amazing. So then...you did have to use your pistol?”

Semele smiled a little ruefully, feeling a rising wave of alienation as she looked at her astonished father. She was thinking how far apart they had grown in regard to this consuming profession with its rather deviant aspect.

“Yes, Papa, I did have to use it...and also my body.”

“It was late at night and I was finishing my report while sitting alone in an office of Johnson’s company. We’d met over lunch that very day, and I believe he saw it in my eyes, although I’ve become fairly adept at displays of blank indifference. By then he was well into paranoia. My manner was so self-assured that he must have known I had him dead to rights. I’ve since decided to knit my brow more and hide the cockiness,” she interjected, laughing. “Johnson came straight to my desk and suggested that we go for a leisurely drive...to a popular old-fashioned roadhouse offering a wonderful jazz band and good drinks, he assured me. This would have been a trip along the coastal highway above Los Angeles. It was dark and raining...hardly sightseeing weather. He suggested that we take my rental car – his scheme for my disposal fairly obvious. When I politely declined the invitation, he pointed a Baretta at me and said, ‘Then I must insist.’ I followed along until we reached the front entrance of the building, then I realized that front-desk security was absent. He’d purposely set off a door alarm somewhere without making his presence known. It’s now or never, I thought. After that there was little thought involved...but action...preconditioned

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reflex. I delivered a spinning back heel kick to his gun arm. So effective it surprised even me...never really believed I'd find that maneuver useful. His gun went skittering off while I got the SIG-Sauer out of my pocket. That settled him down, with no resistance. I called the L.A. police."

"Our peace-loving Semele, the decisive figure in a very dangerous and...rather disgusting physical drama," Martha remonstrated with watering eyes. "I'm far from naïve but I can't quite imagine *this*...especially involving you, dear."

"*Well*...after that we can hardly repose here applying Sartre or Marcuse...or even Freud," her father said, sitting up from his prone position. "Although, really, all surely had a few pertinent remarks."

"Adler and Nietzsche might be more interesting. One present dilemma is that what you've taught I apply, Papa."

"Yes, of course it follows, my wonderful brave girl. And I wish to hell you'd get into another line of work."

After one more day of long talks with her accommodating parents, who had even occasionally unplugged and turned off various ringing phones for her, Semele was back in Seattle. Seeing her parents this time was like revisiting a familiar and cherished work of art and all at once focusing on an unfamiliar element that redefined the painting: the altered impression of Marion. That newly heeded element would always hereafter be inescapable, adding a jarring aspect to a beloved work. It was an observance that left her less removed from her parents in one way and more puzzled in another, but with more compassion for their human foibles.

Having kept most of her personal affairs at a minimal level of discussion while in San Francisco, she now sat in her living room reviewing one of the subjects she had deemed exigent and mentionable: the extreme scarcity of unpolluted, life-sustaining water --, always viewed as magically bluing the planet as a necessary and accessible resource, but now provisional. This had led straight to Rafael.

"I know that you know these things but...I *need* to say them, to hear your agreeing voices. You can easily see how lately I might feel completely ineffectual. Vast numbers of dehydrated people spend miserable lives walking in search of water. They drink from muddy holes, if any can be found, drink disease and filth. A concerned few have finally begun to attack world ignorance...something Rafael first began to do alone, bringing relief...while always reminding the world that refusal to see and act is our own destruction."

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“Darling, your father and I try to illustrate this with our lives...with private efforts...but it seldom works by tedious preaching in the classroom...of course, we’re quite didactic when conservation parallels the subjects we teach.”

“It’s difficult not to rant, Mama, when we’re wallowing in waste. Half of the world’s demand for increased oil last year was from the United States. Fifty-five percent of the vehicles driven on our freeways are inefficient SUVs.”

“But more and more people *are* waking up...starting to choose smarter cars...hybrids,” Martha reconciled. “If only we could stop slurping up pollutant fuel. Everyone knows there are viable alternatives...if money is used for *them* instead of murderous wars for petroleum. By now we should be well into ethanol, produced right in this country from American farms...cellulose waste...but it, too, must come without more pollution. As to water, even one dehydrated person is the loss of our human dignity, our civilized body politic.” Martha’s delivery held informed concern, sincere personal conviction leaving aside professorial detachment.

“Thank you for understanding...for being the comfort you always are. Maybe I’m headed in the right direction.”

Which way am I really headed? she silently demanded of herself, back sitting on her couch with her hand ruffling the thick fur of Catney’s purring head. Catney, who had at first been stiff with indignity at his abandonment, would presently not part from her; she felt a proportionate guilt, knowing she would soon be leaving again. “But you’ll have Dora. Yes, you will, yes, you will,” she teased, briskly rubbing his silky belly while soft-padded paws mock-fiercely encircled her wrist. With only one tender bite, his rough tongue on her hand assured her of no malice. “Dora really adores you, Catney-cat, you crazy little mass of fur.”

Her phone sounded and she moved to answer it with mild-voiced distraction, surprised by the resonant response.

“Oh...Jeff...hello. Good heavens, what time is it there? I assume you’re in Paris.”

“You assume correctly. Two thirty in the morning. How are you?”

“I’m...essentially much better.”

“Then get your much better self back here pronto and wrap this business up. They’re all champing at the bit.”

“I seem to recall it was you who sent me off. You did not have to stay up so late to tell me what I already know.”

“I didn’t...just flew in from -- never mind where -- and Spence dragged me off to a well-stocked bar. We’ve been busy closing the place down...think I’ve been feeling remiss at sending you off. As you may’ve detected, I’m slightly below the

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mahogany...going to bed...wish you were in it. When you *are* in my bed, I'm not. What a goddamned waste."

"Oh, how sweet and touching. You've had a memory lapse in regard to this, too. Yes, I think you'd better sleep it off, Mr. Smith."

"Don't be too rough on me or lecture or...*Christ!* Supply me with encouraging news and I'll hang up."

"I'm ready to bring things to a close and go to Madera, if so required. How's that?"

"Provisional...well, it'll do...I'll dream the rest. Good night...fading myth. Semele? Forgive a loose tongue."

She was smiling. There had been a definite tone of approbation, however induced by alcohol, an immediate and pleasant response, a hint of something she no longer had any right to anticipate. Her abandoned smile slowly ebbed away, for presently hanging over her perplexed head was a highly disturbing new problem of which she had only recently been apprised, very serious and of gravest consequence.

"Oh, don't do this to me," she whispered to no one in particular. "My God, this is confusing."

At that moment, and with her startling new dilemma temporarily gainsaid, she experienced a deep remorse; of course it sprang from Jeff's loss of inhibition, the alcohol revealing his true frame of mind, however belatedly.

Catney suddenly meowed a long mournful complaint, seeming to sense desertion.

"Oh, don't *you* start," she scolded.

V

I have always heard, Sancho, that doing good to base fellows is like throwing water into the sea.

DON QUIXOTE . . . Cervantes

He knew that he should never have begun a precipitate relationship with Semele, for her sake if not his. But his decision was an imperative of far more than heady impulse and gratification; it was an imperative of enduring value: this captivating redhead with her impartial equilibrium of brilliance and humor and gravitas; this dazzling young woman of remarkable independence who had somehow

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come to embrace the temporal uncertainty of himself. A rare intimacy not to be discounted, if it were even possible to do so. Beyond a high intelligence, he had found pure veracity and uncommon understanding. Thus, the irresistible phenomenon of Semele in his world, a personal gift stolen from the desperate needs of others and given to himself after eight nomadic, rather solitary years of hard and purposeful engagement.

In the days after her phone call he had learned who in the Maderan government was accepting monetary inducements from UNIFOLL, and also something seriously threatening his association with Semele, that someone affiliated with World Bank was having her followed. They had their own interests to protect, and to appear effectual in her pro forma work at UNIFOLL she had to remain absolutely clean; certainly that meant she must never be seen with him. And then there was the British newshound dogging his tracks. He needed to warn her to stay away, and hadn't exactly determined how to do that. There was little time left; she was about to come back into his life. He decided upon a straightforward action, and went to find an inconspicuous place to survey her flat, confident he would easily recognize Jefferson Davis Smith.

He had never set eyes on her boss, but catching sight of an athletic figure with close-cropped brownish hair and a graceful prowess of mobility -- going out midday with the nettlesome Spence --, he knew he was looking at Semele's sophisticated employer; a distinctly braw fellow who would certainly hold her attention. A man accustomed to managing extensive projects and conveying that practiced authority, presumably at any given moment aware of his environment.

Subject and employee soon entered a luncheon café, not the worked-over little watering hole where Semele liked to muse over wine, but of better quality with edible food. He followed them inside and sat facing the bar mirror, nursing a rather expensive drink. Soon the blocker, Spence, arose and headed for *les toilettes*. Rafael at once stood up and approached the table, knowing that he would not have to introduce himself. Jefferson Davis Smith gave him a sharply appraising glance, his gray eyes flaring with recognition, then motioned for him to sit down. The two strong-willed adversaries assayed their unusual encounter in a brief silence, hard-focused interest traveling both ways.

"What were you drinking?" Smith asked.

"Just a little cabernet."

The waiter was summoned to bring Rafael another glass.

"What got you here, doctor?"

"You know the answer, of course...I am here to ask you to tell Semele to stay away from me."

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“With pleasure...but your tactic’s got me curious.”

Rafael saw that Smith was a discerning man. He would now realize that the relationship with Semele was much more than one of convenience; undoubtedly troubling for him.

“I didn’t imagine you’d go this far,” Smith persisted.

“I hope they are not dogging you at this moment.”

“World Bank’s ancillaries? Hardly me.” He laughed.

“Why do you not call them off her if you know what they are doing? Your own employee.”

“I consider it extra protection. It got you here and away from her. That ought to tell you something.”

“Then I did not need to come. She knows, *sí?*” Rafael stood up, watching Spence approach, the wary henchman’s teeth rigidly bared in a taunting watchdog grimace.

“What the fuck!” Spence barked.

“Calm down, Spence. Doctor Arnau i Roca was just leaving, but I admire you for coming, Arnau. I’ll give you that. And, yes, your information Semele already knows.”

“What’s that?” Spence demanded with surly contempt.

“It is none of your business.”

“Here and now it’s my business, you damned--”

“You were let out of *la dehesa* a little too soon, *vaquero*. You need to stay in the pasture a while longer, your training is not yet completed.”

“I’m afraid he has a point, Spence. Please sit down and finish your wine.” Jeff Smith’s level but firm voice held a transparent politesse of unquestionable authority.

Rafael nodded at Smith, turned and walked away, smiling a little at the irony of the situation, but with increasing sadness that would not soon leave him. He could no longer expect to see Semele before he left for Madera. Once he was heavily engaged there, perhaps he would never see her again. That final thought resounded with self-indulgent hyperbole.

Late one night, three days before his departure, he left the frequented smoke-filled café after a long and argumentative supper with a number of his loosely appointed lieutenants; the controversy ensuing because they wanted him to stay away from Madera, at least for the time being. The hostile faction in government was growing more threatening, and his operatives feared for their leader. He countered, productively, by vigorously insisting that the ineffectual and haphazard Maderan

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resistance needed a more structured base, one consistently held together on the spot by decisive management, and that nothing further was to be gained by remaining in Paris deriding UNIFOLL. As he was moving along with brisk steps, mulling over the vindication of wrested solidarity, having finally won support from the most extreme element of his followers, he noticed a young man of perhaps twenty approaching him from the alley near his flat. His defensive instincts were immediately called into play as he braced himself for a physical confrontation that now seemed inevitable. When the anticipated knife came up against his throat he could smell liquor, a mistake in the ingenuous that took the edge off any blade. With an instant surge of adrenaline, he threw up his arms and thrust his knee into the assailant's crotch. The young man cried out in pain, falling to his knees and spewing forth a stream of Maderan invective.

"*¡Levántate!*" Rafael demanded in emphatic and deriding Castilian as he yanked the man back to his feet. "*Pobre de tonto.*" Inclining to paternal sympathy for a valid reason, he was lenient in declaring his attacker a pathetic fool.

"Stay out of Madera, *señor*," he heard in Spanish.

"Why do you want to fight against your own people, Maderan?" He kicked the fallen knife away and pressed his fingers firmly into the engorged and sweating throat of his belligerent assailant. "I understand. The government pays you for this miserable work, and you have a family...or yourself a hungry belly."

"Let...go!" the humiliated fellow gasped in a rage of defeat.

"Listen to me," Rafael adjured, easing his grip. "For a short time you will feed your belly but your mind will die. Finally they will kill it. Only enough bread for enslavement is a pitiful existence."

"What do you know of hunger, you rich Catalan?"

"That is certainly a relative assessment. But you, *hombre*, you are a waste. I think you should come with me."

"What will you do? I will piss on you. I am bound to kill you when your back is turned."

"Unless I stop you while your mind is turned. *¡Ya basta de disparates!* Enough. I said come."

"Where?"

"Just back to my room. *Bueno*, young and strong, useful but ignorant as an unweaned calf -- you can still learn something of value...something good for *el pueblo*."

In the dim street light Rafael watched the wavering novice in his shabby patched clothes, unwashed, smelling of garlic and sweat as he flung his long greasy hair over his shoulder and glared back with a stunned look of wariness.

"You are a fool to trust your own killer."

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“I am not killed yet. But I have very little time for you. Come with me. I will tell you something useful. We need you on the side of your endangered countrymen.”

He watched the boy, for indeed he was yet a boy, and knew this one planned to follow through with his thwarted attempt whenever chance allowed. Rafael’s tired smile and heavy sigh were delayed reflex; enervating digression lay ahead, possibly fruitful; his own persuasiveness must now overthrow the other’s conviction, or lack of it.

By early morning, he had nearly turned his assailant to a favorable outcome, if not yet a position of trust, talking through most of the night and learning a few more useful things about his detractors; this while Carlos Garcia drank up most of his limited store of inexpensive but acceptable wine, from time to time making vain boastings of his prowess with a knife. Now the young malcontent was snoring on the floor of his room. He threw himself atop his own bed with complete exhaustion, and slept fully dressed.

In the late morning he sent the gamey fellow into his shower, and when he emerged gave him a fresh change of underwear and a too-large but clean shirt and pair of jeans, instructing him to bind his unruly hair in a ponytail.

“You are not bad looking when you clean yourself up. Are you ready to do something useful?”

“Shit, I was *borracho*...if I had my knife...”

Rafael laughed. “*Hombre*, if you are going to kill me you had better hurry. In two days I am returning to see what can be done for your countrymen.”

He sat drinking his bitter coffee -- brewed on a small hotplate on the crowded bathroom counter -- and eyeing the callow assailant who stared back with an ever younger pair of credulous eyes; wounded brown eyes blinking still with vestiges of misdirected anger, its slow dissolution into sheepish contrition: the first stage of acquiescence.

“Or you could help me. Come with me,” he suggested with designing intent, thinking how that pliant brain and puissant body begged to be delivered over to usefulness.

“Have you any money now, or did you drink it up?”

“You want my blood money? It was for my family...a whore stole it. I have a plane ticket. I deserve to die.”

“I intended to give you enough for breakfast.”

Carlos looked back at him, his eyes widening with surprise then darting away in embarrassment. Laying one loose fist inside the other, he held them to his chest in near submission. Before him: the only face of authority ever legitimized by a startling

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act of kindness. Decision wavered between defiance and an awed plunge into trust. In that vacillating moment, Rafael rightly adjudged uncertainty to have made a slight move toward allegiance; this, partly detected by unclenched hands, open palms crossed over the heart, an oblivious abandoning of threat. Carlos would never be Cervantes' base fellow, water thrown into the sea.

“Here is money for something to eat. Can you read?”

“Sí, I can read. I am not a dog.”

“When you have eaten go to the library. Spend the entire day there reading in the Spanish collection and on the computer all the latest information on water. Do you understand? The situation of water on this planet. When you are thirsty, drink, and think about how that feels. How easy it is, clean water down your throat -- you are water. Then think how it would feel to have none at all, to thirst enough to drink filth that will swell your empty belly in unbearable pain...and keep reading. Your people need water, not my carcass. You can sleep on my floor until we leave.”

At dusk he was descending the stairs that ran beside the *funiculaire* below *Sacré-Coeur*. Deep in thought from a meeting just ended in the rooms of Mari and Antoine, he did not at first see Semele. Then something caught his eye, a flash of red like the flicker of a cardinal's wing. He looked down the long climb and saw her in her gray jogging clothes, ascending, taking several steps at a time, her head down, her amazing hair streaming radially in a flaming aura. Instead of moving out of her way, he stepped over into her path and watched her fly above the steps, weightless as a pursued winged creature launching itself from the heft of earth's gravity. He gazed below and saw no one anywhere near her. She was alone -- hardly imaginable that anyone would be capable of following a sprinter so fleet of foot. Only her toes touched down, but forcefully enough to propel her body up the steps as she raced on toward his undetected smiling impasse. Lifting her head at the last moment before collision, she came straight into his arms. Her instant reflex was to hurl herself away, but he held her fast, his fingers clenched in her hair and his opened mouth smothering a fusillade of initial shock and protest.

Her arms had flown above her head in a fighting stance, then settled over him in relieved recognition. Drawing back to speak, her breath raced with surging energy, forcing a gasping barrage of words. “Rafael! Oh God...oh my God, I thought...I really thought I wouldn't see you.”

“And you must know how sorry I was for that.”

Hugging her chest, she spoke between slowing breaths. “I know...you're going...to Madera. If, before you go--”

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“There is someone staying in my room...the young dupe of an agent provocateur...ordered to kill me.” He laughed at his indifferent statement, such perverse black comedy.

“What? How could you let someone into your room who... I know you’re not foolish...God, why?...what’ve you done?”

“Turned a coat, it appears. Nothing to worry about. They gave their naive *hombre* a little monetary inducement to do the job...leaving his education to me...their mistake.”

His laughing eyes and generously curling mouth were meant to reassure. Her sudden vibrant presence had made everything amusing to him, even pervasive threat. He stood savoring mutual arousal, its anticipated gratification.

“Rafael...come over to my place. No one’s there. Jeff is gone. After your unexpected appearance, he felt very comfortable in carrying on with business elsewhere.”

He heard the resentment, perhaps regret, in her voice and wondered exactly where it belonged in a professional and personal association that little by little was revealed as more complex.

“No. I will not come there.”

Her agile fingers settled momentarily on her hips. She tossed her hair back and kicked at the step’s edge. “Will you please? You can come after dark. No one will see you.”

“I will not come like a thief and fuck you in his bed. You know what happened last time. That arrangement makes me *demente*...I do not like myself in that setting.”

“Rafael...you don’t want to be with me?” Her clear pleading eyes reflected the smoky-chrome horizon of dusk. They were beautifully sensual in their haunting seduction.

“Come to my room.”

“But what about your--”

“I will take care of that. Stay away from me now. Come as soon as I leave. Rest here until I am gone.”

He had given Carlos money and said, “Go find yourself a woman and I will see you tomorrow. Enjoy yourself. You will have no such pleasures when we are back in your humble city of La Ceiba. Take care. Now you have changed horses.”

He waited with increasing impatience, regretting the steadily heightened anticipation that he feared would soon degenerate into a kind of wildness. Semele did

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not come for some time, and when she at last arrived he learned that she had gone to her flat to shower and change her clothes.

As always her kinetic body resonated with a vitality suggestive of constant motion, the shimmering, disparate vivacity once again adorning his nondescript room. He responded to her tardiness with a frank combination of irritation and disappointment. "You were in no hurry."

"I wanted to come to you clean and fresh," she teased. "I was all sweaty from such furious running...running myself to burnout because I thought I wouldn't see you...and...and because of other troubling things...until there you were."

He listened to countering apology, the relief in her hesitant voice, and ended his disappointment in a compelling explanation. "It is just less time with you. I would not have minded your sweat. We create the same condition."

Then, because he had to consider many things at once, he said, "Are you sure you were not followed, Semele? I want no difficulties for you."

"No. I was careful. I always know when I'm being followed, a sort of sixth sense, if not outright awareness."

He removed her black-frogged, bright-blue wool coat and was silent a moment in admiration: her hair, still a little damp, darkened from showering; the deceptively slight body clothed in a twilight-blue silk blouse and pale gray slacks; her enticing smell of citrus subtly charging the stale air. The sudden aloof withholding of herself surprised him, and made her so desirable that he took a single step backwards so as not to overwhelm her with hungry aggression.

Standing before him, once again in the dim light of his one lamp, she had become more shy than he had ever seen her, as if she were already naked in his presence, and for the first time. Her open face was uncharacteristically obscured by some unknown sentiment, strangely, disturbingly removed from him, uncatchable eyes roving over the room, anywhere but him, holding restless uncertainty, a secret.

"What has happened to you?"

"Happened? Just home to San Francisco to visit my parents...back to Seattle to pet my cat...nothing much."

"You are thinking too hard. I will pour us wine. I had to buy more on the way home. Carlos drank nearly all of it. Or will you have a little manzanilla?"

She shook her head in hasty refusal, and said, "Who is this person you've taken under your wing?"

"A misguided young Maderan badly in need of a bath and an education...principles of conduct."

"And you trust him?"

"Now I do."

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“Because like me he’s in your thrall. Is that it?”

“You are not acting that way. Are you suddenly for some reason angry...hurt...afraid? What?”

She walked away and sat in a shadowy corner of the sofa, leaning on her hand and looking back at him.

“What is it?” he persisted, kneeling down before her to make himself less threatening. He studied her a long moment and finally said, “You are in love with your boss.”

“That’s not it, Rafael. It’s...no, I can’t... I’ve thought of you so constantly that I’m afraid of impaired judgment...and of what comes next. I don’t understand where it’s going. I mean, it isn’t going anywhere, is it?”

He stood up and sat down beside her, taking her hand.

“Where is life going? Where is anything going? Do you have some prescient answer? Is life really going anywhere? It expresses itself in the present; simultaneous in some concept. You know who I am. You know what I do. You can know whatever else you want to ask of me. You know I will not stay in one place...live in a house and raise a family. You know that because you know what I have chosen to do.”

“Of course. That isn’t what I intend either,” she assured him, her clear eyes dark, the enlarged pupils burning away over some withheld provocation. Fear?

“If you want commitment it is only this: that I love as I have never loved...it goes beyond our passion, Semele.”

“My *God*.” Her voice curved down into her throat, and he saw a drop of misery fly from her turning head. “I don’t know why I’m even having this conversation, because there’s nothing I can do about anything anyway.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Oh, damn it! Why does everyone else’s life seem so tidy and not mine? I’ve finally discovered -- oh, yes, believe me I have -- that if your personal life admits of more than a cat you get into deep shit.”

Turning aside and biting a quivering lip, she looked about to release more tears.

He laughed dismissively and took her into his arms.

“What do you mean, there is nothing you can do? You can love me. Do you love me?”

“I ought to stay away from you. But I can’t do it because of this feeling, this...oh, yes, *love*. And yet...I think I’m out of control. I’ve never been so confused. And I *am* afraid of you, afraid you’ll swallow me whole and spit me out and there I’ll be, a silly fool with only a grateful cat...but...with myself in far worse condition.”

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He thought that just now more sense-making would go unheeded, reason spiral off in a circle of useless dispute, and that he had held himself back from her long enough.

“And still you have humor. That I love. Take off your clothes and get into bed. I will pour us some wine.”

“Is that your answer?”

“Right now it is. Shall I help you undress?”

“I feel angry.”

“Then go back to your flat.”

In an impulse of heat, she raised her hand to strike, more at this sudden facile rejection than at its messenger, where the blow would never fall. The flareup halted, the offending hand diverted, he drew her against him, his words muffled in a tangle of sweet damp hair.

“Please stop it. Stop it, Semele. I only said it to wake you up. Please do not try to kill this. If you do it will be a far worse act than foolish Carlos attempted. Do you not realize I too wonder why the hell I have let myself do this? The answer is that I have little to say about it. I have tried to tell you that love is the driver and we are only the passengers. Love is not something one decides. You cannot plot it out like a map. Love is an emotion. It is here. It is now. Live in it. Let us live in each other in the present moment.”

He did not venture into, nor had he ever sharply defined for her, the more comprehensive reasons she attracted him. Just now it was her perceived struggle in doing the right thing, her poignant confusion in the grip of love, even that hot anger at his supposed rejection, and always the valiant gratuity of, in her officially opposed occupation, finding him worth the risk taken. Courage.

She slipped away from his grasp and leaned against the wall, as if she needed that distance to speak clearly.

“Oh Rafael, how wise you are. You’re absolutely right. You see it’s my mathematical head. In math everything has a solution; everything balances out or resolves itself with a beautiful simplicity. Our remarkable species has invented this wonderful method of explaining reality, and it works so well. In math--”

“*¡Calla, querida!* Shut up, please. Come here, my impossible red-headed dilemma. *¡Jesucristo!* I have such need of you and we have already wasted so much time.”

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They awoke tangled together, each amazed to discover the other, and began to make love again. Finishing with jagged gasps of accelerated breathing, he leaned over her flushed damp face, transfixed upon her insatiate cries, the agony manifest in emotion near fulfillment. Finally, sweat-darkened hair turned in russet coils over the pillow as her sated eyes burned into him with the climactic pleasure of his giving. Her soft-fleshed mouth was hot, emitting a faint tremor against his own, and he held himself back to let her breath. They were at once aware of someone else in the room, and they both sat up in astonishment.

“Goddammit,” Rafael muttered. “I gave the fool a key.

“Remove yourself, idiot!” he shouted at Carlos in Castilian. “Have you no manners, you ignorant *cabrón*?”

“*Lo siento*,” the boy apologized, but answering in eager Spanish said, “This one has beautiful long legs, and I have never seen such red hair. *Ab, una puta bella*. When you are finished with her I will have her.”

Rafael leapt from the bed and slapped the enraptured fellow sharply across the face. “*¡Fuera!* Out! Now! Or I will bruise you beyond recognition.”

Moving awkwardly away toward the large room’s exit, and with one last wistful glance, their gaping interloper left.

“*¡Jesús!*” Rafael exclaimed from the disarrayed bed.

They leaned back into their raised pillows, for a time speechless. But soon they were laughing, recalling in high amusement the young ogler’s excited plunge into voyeurism.

“I didn’t understand that word you called him.”

“Eh, *sí*, an insulting Catalan goat-word.”

“I hope you haven’t made him back into an enemy.”

“No, *querida*. The hungry savage has been permanently tamed...responsive as a young hound ready for the field.

“We never drank our wine last night. Let us have some now for breakfast, a celebration of throwing out fools.”

Her face was at once pale, and she looked as if she would faint away of some terrible darkness held inside.

“I’ll drink a little...not too much.”

“What is wrong with you? You were certainly very well a few minutes ago.”

She got up, putting on his shirt snatched from a chair back, then walked away to the sofa where she curled into a corner, huddling there drawn tightly into herself. This clever investigator, this brilliant mathematician, this athlete of such physical prowess, now a mere pale lump of uncommunicative quivering flesh.

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He pulled on his jeans and came out to her, bare-chested and hugging his shoulders. "Talk to me, Semele," he insisted, lifting her thick waves of crimson hair from beneath the collar of his appropriated black shirt.

"I want you to know that I don't expect anything of you, Rafael...nothing. I want you to know that. I thought that I wouldn't say anything...but then I thought I would because you're going to Madera. It's so dangerous and if something happened to you...I think you ought to know--"

"¡Jesús! Semele, you are pregnant."

"I thought of doing something about it but I couldn't. I couldn't destroy anything of you, Rafael...every...every part of you so loved. Oh God, I feel so...so derailed."

This beautiful strong woman with flaming red hair, who in this moment consumed him, competing with everything else in his life, was shaking uncontrollably, her pale agitated fingers covering a face breaking apart with regretful sobs, fearful confusion at what the future might hold.

"No, not derailed, *querida*, only another track...and because of me. You have made a choice and I must give my support. I will add my name to yours...to our child."

His resolute words of commitment, undeniably startling, were spoken instantaneously and without consideration, the consideration having come much earlier; loyalty, acceptance, reliability all understood by him -- however previously ill-defined -- and all a part of the initial desire, or if it could be said the decision to have her in his life.

"Marry me? Oh God, I almost laughed. You didn't ask for any of this. It's a cruel trick of fate. You have so much to worry about beyond any such consideration...any such limitation. I know that. It will be all right."

"No, not a fatherless love child, but *loved*; both our names recorded with its own. It is my country's custom, *sí*? Perhaps you think it an old-fashioned concept, but for me it is something very new, formal commitment. In any case, I would never forget the child...and because I love you--"

"You needn't worry about supporting me and a child. Oh, this is ridiculous. I'm a professional person."

"That is right. You are a professional person, and if you had told me that you had decided otherwise, I would have respected your opinion. It is your body that must do this, and you have decided to do it. As to what is better for us and for the child in the societies through which we move, I will take care of that. However you want to protest, it is an easy thing to do and I have no problem with it. There is no reason to argue over it. What I will also support, or ease, is your state of mind,

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Semele. It is not going to be a very conventional relationship, but I will always come to you. Why would I not marry you? I will love this child of ours. As long as you are agreeable so am I. I hope it is a little *niña* with red hair.” This sentiment was added with a consoling smile. Placing his hand over her smooth flat belly, his stolid countenance, induced by the shock of this news, softened in amazement. “I have never thought much of doing this, but that was before you, *querida mía*.”

She shook her head and slid her arms around him.

“Rafael, what have I done?”

“Only two can do this. We were a little careless. Now there will be three, two of us in one more. I thought you were taking birth control pills.”

“I was but I missed some days because...I was with you. For a person who loves order, my life has certainly gone to hell. Can I blame it on math? I don’t know,” she pondered, lowering her head and staring at the patterned old carpet.

“Maybe I shouldn’t’ve told you. We don’t have to--”

“No. You were right to tell me. You have inside you a part of me. I had a right to know...a privilege to know. *Sí*, I like the idea of it.”

“Marriage?”

“*Sí*.” He bent his head to capture her eyes with the unwavering truth of his. “I think I will insist.”

He now realized that he felt tremendous relief, because he had thought he was going to lose her over something beyond his influence. Regardless of the directions their lives took, the child drew them irrevocably together, made her inescapably his in a way that as time allowed he could favorably augment.

He also saw that here was a woman who had always imagined herself in control of her life, this deception accomplished simply by abstaining from deep relationships, but who had, since her arrival in Paris, perhaps out of some innate biological signal, thrown caution to the winds of fate. Still, with her fine and reasonable mind in very understandable disarray she was trying to be equitable, thinking of another, of *him*, an attempt so admirable his heart was consumed by this clear and undiminished virtue.

“Rafael, whatever happens, promise me you won’t try to be anything against your nature. I couldn’t stand that.”

“And you would not love that man...but is fathering a child against nature? Wherever I am you will always know.”

He threw back his head and laughed with a new thought. “My family would certainly be glad of the news. They have given up on me as an extension of their history. I have been careful never to let this happen, until you. *You*, Semele...you who have been so careful yourself. Do not look so serious, my love. *Soy amado*, I am

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loved and here is the amazing proof of it.” He continued to laugh, his exploring fingers again sliding over her slender satin-skinned abdomen. He had only to look at her to feel the calming effect he could induce. It filled him with much more than resignation, an ecstatic sense of endurance, and one near certainty in an uncertain world. “We will laugh at this. What a mother you will be, my red-headed angel.”

“And what a father you will be, my Catalan lover.”

To her astonishment, they had quietly married in the briefest of ringless ceremonies. Semele’s boss, assuming her inviolable by reason of Rafael’s own relinquishment, was several thousand miles away otherwise engaged. The marriage took place in Paris. They had to dash around securing the required documents by special dispensation, and then they had quickly departed, separately. Rafael arranged for them to meet his parents in Barcelona. Semele was then supposed to be on her way to Madera, and interrupted her commercial flight to be with Rafael before they parted. When she was introduced to his overjoyed mother and father, they were offered the guest room in the large old family apartment.

Semele still had to finish her work at UNIFOLL’s Maderan office in the southern hemisphere, of course not arriving there in Rafael’s company. It was an engagement that he seriously regretted, for he did not want her in the country at all. Yet she insisted upon finishing her work, and appeared to have no intention of curtailing the ongoing assignments of her demanding company. This remained for him an unsettling silent concern, for with his own unpredictable lifestyle, and up to a certain point of her endangerment, he knew he had no right to demand of her any more changes than he himself would make.

“I’ve always wanted to know more of Barcelona...much more than earlier brief visits. It’s still a very tempting mystery. This ramble through the old *Barri Gòtic*, and some of the newer areas, makes my early impressions a great deal sharper...but, even better, I know more of you.”

They were sitting on a ceramic bench in *Guëll Park*, a tawny-colored hillside place, enchanting for Semele because of its fantastic mosaics by Antoni Gaudí, and its charming view of the skyline; yes, enchanting, he had agreed, when not overrun by worshipful tourists. “I once met a Japanese artist on a plane who showed me his watch band, designed with mosaic pieces pried from this legacy of Gaudí’s.”

“Could it be called blind devotion?” Setting reproval aside, she said, “Our national histories are so different.”

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“Sí, in a comparatively short time your America had its Constitution.

Barcelona has endured several thousand years of human struggle, all the way back to its watery beginnings in the first century. My brawling Catalan tribe has a very long tortuous history, bloody at times. War performed as a solution is still the easiest thing men do -- discounting process. Ay, sometimes killing for worthy causes...for freedom, equality. Catalans have always sacrificed their lives thus...until the materialists became too comfortable to prevent the fascist *Caudillo* from having his way.”

“Come now, *mi marido*, the fate of Spain could not have been altered by degrees of Catalan resignation. Much more than your simplified version prevented Franco’s ejection.”

Whether simplification or exaggeration, he nodded his agreement, kissing with inexhaustible pleasure the clever mouth now through with its soft redress and ready to praise.

“Will it ever be finished, the incredible *Sagrada Família* aspiring over there? So unlike other cathedrals.”

For a few silent moments they both gazed at the heavy perforated spires darkly piercing the pearly sky. He made no attempt to hide his disdain for what those curious totems had become, a tourist attraction tainted by commercialism and seeming to mourn the loss of their devoted creator.

“*Sagrada Família* was limping along even before Gaudí died in 1926, when he had taken to begging for funds on its behalf. Ten years later, when the anarchists destroyed his archives, the path was decisively cleared for Barcelona’s *Towers of Babel*. As with all his work, the design was the man...a man ultraconservative, ascetic, and with a peculiar tropistic brain that turned like a plant toward the light. *In the style of Gaudí* is facile, wishful thinking.”

“No, I can’t see Gaudí’s work very effectively sending a Dawkins’ meme of design reverberating across the world.

“The work is unique, belonging only to my city. It is convincing evidence of human singularity...even if *Sagrada Família* is reaching its finish not quite as intended. When Gaudí’s coil of life is unwound, it seems his curvilinear organic work rose from the dark earth, growing as he did.”

“Curves so alive...those natural suggestions of the animate, the living. Generally, angular buildings are too sharply opposing, fortress-like, unfriendly, really inhuman, I think. Gaudí’s work has a blithe sort of gnomonic wisdom, the Garden of Eden in a building.”

“Sí. I like that. You have felt his spirit.”

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There was evidence of fatigue in the unusual way Semele held herself, trying not to lean on him. He did not want all of this ambitious exploration to end in weariness.

“You are tired. Shall we go?”

“You shouldn’t worry about me, not at all. I’ve really got plenty of reserves if I fasten on something--”

“How well I am coming to know that.” Testing for such reserves, he uncurled her fingers and stroked a damp palm.

“When I’m fired up I can cover a lot of ground. I really love revisiting this city...its amazing history, from the shoddy to the good to the grand...and to be here with you, to have your informed criticism, is just--”

“Does the shoddy make the good better?”

“No, the good is solely good...the shoddy grieved for how it came to be, or should have been; for those once fully in it...as a great shipwreck with strewn and missing cargo.”

“I like very much the way you say things. Are you not hungry?” he asked standing up.

“Yes, a little. What time is it?”

“Time for *tapas*. Six o’clock. Come, let us go eat *camarónes* at *Caracoles*.”

They entered the heavily visited restaurant through wood-framed glass doors leading directly into a seared and seasoned sepia-tiled *cocina*. Here was nostril-filling blue smoke and nearly singeing fire. A crew of Castilian voices issued sharp declarations above clattering pots and pans. All was a blur of rapid motion in a peppery hot cave, as select victuals were brought to perfection in explosions of light. Reaching his hand between brimstone flames flashing above crackling pans, Rafael greeted a red-faced chef. He turned back to Semele, his eyes offering the comfort of an old familiarity, something good to be shared. “Gastronomic artistry...but Dante’s *Inferno* if you overindulge.”

Further along, in a sparsely lit nearly dark room, were clusters of indistinct chattering and gesticulating bodies. They sat in a booth with an orange-tile-topped wooden table, and were served dry red wine -- “Just a little for you, *mamacita*,” Rafael teased. A large platter of sizzling *camarónes*, shrimp sautéed in herbed olive oil, soon arrived along with oiled warm bread crusts. Beyond the shadowy fluxion of happy diners, a young Segovia aspirant earnestly plucked at the strings of a spotlight blond guitar.

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Rafael peeled a pink shrimp dripping with olive oil and held it to her lips, holding his other hand beneath it.

“Careful, not on your blouse. Do you want paella? Do you want oranges? Have you ever witnessed the flesh of an orange opening to desire under a very sharp knife? I will pare an orange for you.” He beckoned to a waiter to bring a good cutting blade. “*España* lives in the sweet essence of *la naranja*. Seen, it is poetry...eaten, it is philosophy.”

She stared back, overcome by this voluble aspect of a native son; he, owning fully this old-world otherworld, this musical earthy night of fired *camarónes* and golden oranges.

Dissatisfied with the appearance of the waiter’s knife, he reached for his pocket knife, flicked out its blade and deftly pierced the juicy citrus globe. Supple unhesitant fingers then swiftly spun out a single coil of severed rind. A prosaic act transformed into one of mesmerizing beauty.

“Michelangelo’s hands...Rafael’s sculpting fingers,” she murmured, her eyes brimming with the night’s magic.

“Is it all right if...if you kiss me?”

He let the shimmering denuded sphere slide from his grasp onto its blue plate, touched dripping fingers to his tongue, then bent to her oily warm lips -- the garlic, the tarragon, the red wine, the orange she herself would taste.

“Inclined to kiss you...kissing you...or kissed, all is right.” “*Ab, su beso de él,*” a woman’s throaty voice gave notice of his amorous responses; the final kiss prolonged in their candlelit corner. “All is right, *esposa bella...sí?*”

A gray-bearded scholar in neat slate-blue shirt and charcoal trousers, an old friend also of Rafael’s parents, approached to offer a greeting. His familiar compassionate face was somewhat altered, Rafael thought, now bearing more heavily the weight of the world’s contemporary madness; and yet there was a resigned acceptance, manifest in the sharp irony of well remembered wit. They conversed in Catalan, the professor’s hands held waist high and extended outward, the long pale-tipped fingers embellishing his words with graceful gestures. Having brought forth the topic of the most salient political maneuvers in the city, he then dipped his head in sudden recognition of Semele. He smiled as he was introduced and exclaimed, “Beautiful!” in English -- this to assure her awareness of his appreciation. “*Sí,* a gifted mathematician,” Rafael responded, his proprietary offering made in an effort to satisfy both his listeners. “Ah,” the wiry gentleman remarked, pausing to give more careful attention. He tilted back an appraising head, gray eyebrows raised, dark eyes glittering with a quiet message of compassion reserved for the pitied young.

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Having thanked him and received his immediate aura of liberality and warmth, her hand rose up – unbeknownst, as if warding off the evil eye so prevalent in old Catalunya. But the inoffensive hand only sought release from flattery and such unnerving scrutiny. Her accompanying smile added to Rafael’s sense of fortune, and amused the professor.

Later, they strolled on a famous history-laden avenue. Like the pervasive artistry of architect Antoni Gaudí, the dusky, leaf-fringed, continuously bustling Ramblas uniquely defined Barcelona. They sauntered hand in hand as Rafael occasionally explained the chronology of a building or the manner in which a street came to have its name. From sedate architecture to spectral throngs once pouring sweat-drenched from commerce-shaping textile mills, from the consistently influential structure of patriarchal families to the zealous trade unions, from peculiar idiosyncrasies of politicians and theoreticians to poetry and music and centuries rife with religious mayhem, his precise, rolling timbre of commentary competed with the modern noises of the seething Ramblas to deliver, with a touch of chauvinism, elements influencing the Catalan mind.

When they reached the graystone apartment building of his parents, a broad fixture squatting outside of time on its chamfered corner, he hesitated at the entrance. This place so familiar to him and seeming always to have existed, he now tried to see through her eyes, and thought it must present a formidably sober entry into the solid milieu of his family. He had meant to reveal something earlier but procrastinated, and now studied her in a last changeless moment. Claspng her shoulder, he drew her closer.

She leaned back, discerning his altered mood with an empathy he could barely countenance, undeserved: exoneration without any revelation; unconditional dispensation. In the dim artificial light, her irresistible mouth and palest transparent eyes cleansed his mind of indecision.

His appraising smile was for the wind-teased red mass he had to restrain himself from musing further in a sudden exuberance of possessiveness – alive with the *élan vital* of here and now. He pressed his temple against hers, a pulsing warmth, and glanced behind her down the street. There was the herbal scent of her hair. His eyes closed. Unused to expressing familial sentiment, his voice formed alien words.

“Semele...this morning I told them you are pregnant. I know how they will be. It was a gift to them. I have given them so little for all their attention. Will you try to understand, please...or at least tolerate their effusion?”

“They’re your parents, Rafael. I understand. They’re so interesting...how they speak of you...so easy to like.”

“Ah...*gracias*.”

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“I didn’t say it to be kind. I never thought you would be like this. I think I’m still amazed. Being of a...well, a free-thinking, fully committed persuasion – so focused and so involved – you must have been oblivious to even the idea of a child...certainly opposed to marriage.”

“I love the *idea* of you...*you* here now...and in all the conjoined future incarnations. Everything of you inspires a contradiction in me you have not understood...precisely what has surprised you...has surprised *me*. *Vamos*, mythic wife.” Laughing above her soberness, he took her hand in his.

She squinted at him beneath the high dusky ceilings of the dark marble foyer. Her echoing voice soared, slightly dubious although untroubled: “Are you laughing at me?”

“Only laughing,” he amended, grinning and looking down at her in his newly quixotic manner. “Just now I am happy. A condition I have generally rejected as a damned slippery business – as I suppose you might express it...a condition even more precarious than being in love...which is not the same as happiness but a chemical *montaña rusa*.”

“Roller coaster?”

“Sí, *amor mía*...of wonderful and terrible extremes.”

Once inside and seated in the vertically spacious and warm-toned old mahogany parlor, he saw that his rather awed parents, reveling in his surprising news, intended to express their approval by addressing Semele in careful English. His parents, Carmen and Miguel, were at last showing signs of age, or had he been prolonging an earlier self’s need for permanency by all along refusing to notice gradual changes? His mother’s thick black hair was streaked with white. She wore it pulled back from her erudite face, and rolled into a loose knot; her solemn, for him readable, narrow visage was made strikingly distinctive by a long slightly aquiline nose. She had parted from her frugal wardrobe of blouse and slacks to don a slender sapphire dress that he had never before seen. His father’s plentiful hair was completely white, but his rather long-jowled sensitive face held ample humor, jet eyes glinting with the same devilish pleasure that pertained in more youthful days; a generous and devoted rosy mouth, puckering and curling over each timely witticism delivered by the clipped but aspirate voice of his mother. When his father first stood up and came forward to greet them, Rafael had noted that over a blue shirt he wore a gray tweed jacket much lighter than his charcoal slacks. He had thought this good tweed appeared only on special occasions; perhaps, then, this startling event was deemed one of those.

His mother held out a gold mosaic antique plate arrayed with thin slices of *jamón serrano* – the Spanish version of prosciutto – then offered them delicate crystal glasses of fine sherry, from its noble birthplace *Jérez de la Frontera*; this, after they

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were seated in familiar chairs of creaking umber leather -- in one of them, until the age of five, he had often sat upon his formidably magisterial uncle's lap. He thought of his indefatigable Uncle Felipe, a retired doctor with varying interests that ranged from magnetic phenomena to entomology. At puberty -- Rafael's presumed awakening -- he had advised his nephew: *My boy, if you are going to do something diabólico in this your foolish youth, do it in another country, but one that is civilized to the point of forgiveness.* Not long ago, his vigilant uncle had revealed a more serious contemplation: *I disapprove of how you use your life, Rafael; but it is only my selfishness, a fear of early loss that must culminate in deep admiration.*

Rafael looked across the room at the eighteenth century Thomas Lozano longcase clock, which had begun to strike the late hour. He hadn't heard the bell tone of the prized old masterwork in over a year. The sound sent him swiftly back to his pensive childhood, the curious boy staring far up at the pagoda-topped polished mahogany elegance with its three shining brass finials. He thought of the gifted hands of Lozano, who had repaired damaged marine chronometers for the Spanish navy in 1786. This skilled artisan first studied clockmaking in London, where the clock was made, and then returned to work in Cadiz. The clear strike of the handsome eight-day clock, which was never allowed to run down, had taught him as a boy something more than mere awareness of exquisite cabinetry and meticulous inner workings: the linear concept of fleeting time. Long, long before his birth and all the while of his partings and arrivals, all the while of his argument with the chaotic world, its anchor escapement had measured out each beat like a living thing. An envisioned moment of the future surfaced from an ongoing half-conscious stream: would his child wind it? Never much prizing material objects, he still could not bear to think of it in some auction house.

"Your parents are scholars who teach," his mother was saying in her succinct Catalan manner. "It is good to have this in common. Will they come to Barcelona?"

Semele disguised her surprise with an apologetic smile.

"I'm afraid they don't travel very great distances as often now. We did so much of it in early years."

"Ah, you traveled, too," his father said.

"Oh, yes...everywhere in the world...cities and very remote unsettled places."

"And your parents never despaired of taking you?" his mother questioned, shaking her head in amazement, for it was nothing his parents would have done.

When they traveled even short distances he, as a small child, was left with an eccentric aunt who fed him rich chocolates to entice him to relieve himself at a convenient hour. Perhaps this well-intentioned exclusion from the mysteries occurring beyond his closely watched childhood was one of the reasons he had sought

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out a distant university. Perhaps it was why he began to wander the earth as soon as he was able to escape the confines of school and the archaic proprietary interests of his devoted extended family.

Rafael sat quietly amused, feeling no urgent need to participate, and listening to the interplay of veritable strangers: his parents trying to gather Semele into their midst, tentatively venturing down various trial paths of conversation. They were looking for an opening that would somehow make her known to them, somehow offer ingress to their tight-knit world. She responded very adroitly and graciously, carefully meting out that significant part of a self that he had come to know a little but would never finish coming to know. It was the part others could enjoy without fully understanding, and the part he loved most of all: the often vivaciously heady, instinctual, self-unaware superiority that made itself known without the least stroke of condescension or hint of mean-spiritedness. It would perhaps overwhelm those less self-assured. On the contrary, her special self-assurance was the very thing that made her considerate of others -- there was nothing of the prevalent desire, so often found in the idly dissatisfied, to forever tamper with a self bemoaned as dysfunctional or imperfect.

“Tell us of your life in Seattle,” his mother coaxed.

Semele smoothed her hands over her dove-gray slacks and tugged at her suit jacket in thought. “Well...I’m not often there, but when I am it’s very mundane. I have a house, a sort of Tudor style on a hill, Queen Anne Hill, overlooking the city and Puget Sound...and I have a gray cat with orange eyes. For me, the Northwest is a watery place of dark, dark green, temperate and...under my skin...mountains...clouds.”

She turned her head away from his parents to glance at Rafael, who had placed himself in the chair across from her so that he could enjoy the view. Although swiftly imparted, it was a look that made him want to stride across the room and snatch her up in his arms, carry her over the thick Persian carpet, past the much contemplated, time-swallowing clock of red mahogany -- the color of her hair in shadow --, down the hall and into the guest room, once his bedroom. Alone at last, he would thoroughly entangle himself within the grasp of her long pale limbs -- a selfishly delicious thought once evinced sorely required. Had his responding glance told her this in so fleeting a moment? He thought so: she was not looking at his parents but briefly at her revealing hands, clasped resolutely in her lap.

“And of your work,” his mother continued as his father looked on with some doubt as to this avenue of discussion. “It must be most interesting.”

“Very interesting...but do you know, I’d rather hear about Rafael, his...his growing up, his--”

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“La incomodidad,” Rafael at once warily intervened, this as a terse dismissal of his own prosaic early history. “I was a lot of trouble.”

“No, you were not,” his father objected. “You were quite different, *sí*, as now...often serious...concerned.”

“And it led to trouble,” Rafael disclosed. “I saw to that. I was not the angel you would have me.”

“We taught him to care for others,” his mother firmly attested, “and this he did...does with his whole heart.”

Semele offered a broad smile at this unsurprising revelation, appearing to await more praise from his extolling mother. He felt a growing uneasiness.

“We never know if we will see him again,” his mother herself seemed surprised at blurting out. He looked at her face -- a constrained visage, but exposing a hint of deep inner sufferance -- more and more astonished as she went on. He suddenly knew where the conversation was headed, and was thinking of a polite way of stopping it when she confided, “We were so thankful to have him back safe, freed from that horrible place...the torture, the terrible inhuman--”

“¡Madre, no! ¡Bueno está! Sería mayor para callado.”

“*Lo siento,*” his mother apologized, but he saw that Semele was already leaning forward, now fully aroused from her drowsy disposition.

“What?” Semele asked. “What is better left unsaid? What happened to you, Rafael?”

He felt a quick irritation at her adept grasp of his Castilian. He would now have to devise some explanation for what his mother had unwittingly brought to light, she having assumed that Semele already knew. The unexpected revival of maltreatment, one of many such events in his life, he had no desire to revisit, yet any response was bound to invite more questions. He shrugged, making an effort to abbreviate.

“*Sí*, it was a dry little town in Africa -- never mind where. The villagers had an ample well -- without much else they did have water. It served its purpose and was in a way the center of their social life. A large company came in -- French -- installed a pump and sealed the well. They then attempted to charge the villagers for what had been free as air for as long as memory. Of course, the mercenary company had paid the local headman to do business. When we -- I and a number of the angry villagers protested -- we were all of us thrown into a filthy hole and...not treated very well while in that place, that...condition. Fortunately, there were enough of us missing to finally attract the attention of Amnesty International, and we were eventually freed.”

“How long was eventually?” Semele asked, her face radiant with pain.

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“Eh, a year or so. We worked hard after that to get their water back...affordable without slavery as a result. And we did. They are still drinking from that well, but now the water is pumped nearer their dwellings.”

Semele’s eyes had widened to hold a brimming moistness, and he shook his head at his regretful mother.

“I am sorry, Semele,” his mother again apologized. “I was thinking you knew of this. I am always wishing it is the last of such cruel times...and now again this present concern... But let us speak of other things.”

Gradually, by a circuitous route of divergent subjects, Semele was drawn away from her dismal state of mind. They ended speaking of the gardens in Spain. So many and so beautiful and so old. Semele brightened and related having once picked a lemon at the *jardines del Alcázar* in Cordoba. A thick slice had ended up in a drink back at her *parador*.

“I considered how it grew in history’s rich loam. I’ve never forgotten the sharp citrus taste of that cool gin and tonic on my high balcony – *ecstasy*. I sipped, gazing over the warm earth’s layered colors: low rolling hills in shades of pistachio that fringed terra cotta, swelling into a rosy peach horizon. Sunset on the plain. An expanse so peaceful and natural...as if never trod. I thought of windmills.” She smiled, turning away to stifle a slight yawn.

“The sherry has made us tired. We have already had a little wine,” Rafael quickly explained, standing up.

His mother stood up at once and came to embrace Semele, who had left her chair and warmly extended both of her arms.

“My dear Semele, we are so happy to have you in our family, so happy, so happy to--”

“*Ś*, mother, *gracias*. *Gracias*, father. And now we are going to bed.”

He found that he didn’t care for this odd display of gratitude, almost fawning, coming from his generally sophisticated parents; clearly exchanged for his sudden appearance of normalcy, whatever that might be, in marrying Semele; two intelligent, rather undemonstrative people, always identifiable by a comfortable restraint, who had never before acted in such an ingratiating manner.

His new wife – the title indeed momentarily startled him – was staring fondly at his father who had gripped her elbow and winked at her. They were trading familial smiles as Rafael drew her away, propinquity clearly established.

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Semele emerged from the steaming white-tile bathroom and pulled off her robe to reveal a satin nightgown, a pale daylight blue at odds with those star-sapphire evening eyes – commiserative now, but with a slight censorious flash.

“Rafael, that was a little...well...you could’ve let your mother finish. They’re so happy to see you...and you very nearly dragged me away.”

“Did I? We talked a great deal. You are tired and it is late. I thought I was very polite, considering what I was thinking of doing. I *was* thinking of dragging you off, dragging you by this hair...*this hair*.”

“Wait, darling, wait!” she entreated, lifting his half playful, half eagerly possessive fingers from a thick hank of her hair. “You didn’t care for their happiness.”

“I did care...do care. Can you not understand?”

“Yes. They were different for you...because of me. You don’t like any of this. Why did you do it? I could have gone on without this...if it troubles you so.”

“It is only that the son is never an adult. Forgive me...please forgive me. You see what a problem I am.”

“Do you like it, this contrariness...this being so difficult? You make yourself nominally a problem, a generic problem, so now and forever we must all excuse you.”

“All who?”

“I...your family...the ones I’m sure who’ve always done so. You’re so far above criticism no one could ever--”

“¡*Jesús!* You *are* criticizing. Please do not make me into a saint in this ridiculous attack. I am neither an ideologue *nor* a martyr. I saw inequities in the world – fixable – and chose to live my life in a certain way.”

“But that way is an extraordinary virtue...a sacrifice your parents and I can hardly ignore...if you’d only--”

“Ah! So, by your unnecessary assumption, I succeed in making you a part of my family. Do I now marvel at such an unintended result...or what...offer my gratitude?”

“I didn’t mean to make you...we’re arguing.”

“*Sí*, it appears that we are. A minor marital spat. Are you going to lie on your side of the bed now, denying me the pleasures I have signed for?”

Settling into humor, he was surprised to find her eyes glittering with moisture, tears ready to fall on his behalf.

“I wanted to know more of you.” Her explanation came with a deep commiseration that only served to irritate.

“¡*Basta!* Stop it. You *do* know me...enough to know what I feel for you...and now enough to know that I will fight these...these *desastroso* effects...destructive turns raw love takes...strangling itself.”

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Thinking of the women in his life and how he had unintentionally abused them by indulging in their lush carnal offerings without ever really returning their love, he felt uneasy. He was now to be punished for his own economy of life, his use of time set against this intricate, demanding love; punished for obsessive self-indulgence -- he countenanced no punitive force but his own inadequacy. He knew that fear was making him act in a certain way -- not the narrow debilitating fear that Semele's William Blake exposed as the primal nature of flawed man, but a lingering foreboding of brevity and loss --, fear that this sparely tended, highly pitched relationship was a sublime pairing so elevated it might be unsustainable. The seldom addressed reality of true marriage demanded refined time, even bare time no longer his, thus his inadequacy. He had begun to loathe the needling angst that itself brought diminishing effects, rendering him combative, intractable, sarcastic.

Semele had put on her slacks and was reaching for her blouse.

"What are you doing? Why are you getting dressed? Are you going to leave me? Where will you go at this hour? You know you cannot just walk away."

"Oh, damn it! You and your practical--"

"*Sí*, I am Catalan...but *¡Jesús!* I think not always so practical."

"That *excuse--*"

"Raise your voice a little more. I would like everyone to understand that *aquí* we are not merely two lovebirds cooing in ecstasy...because *real* love is damned hard."

Semele stared back at him with an importuning look, pitifully aggrieved and slightly amazed. Her alienated face then turned very pale, her eyes crushed shut, her brow now furrowed in pain as she pressed gripping fingers against her stomach. Stumbling forward, she rushed into the bathroom. He could hear her vomiting. His troubled mind still held the afterimage of her transparent skin, burned to ashen fragility by the heat of his obdurate and passionate nature.

He walked in and knelt before her, lifting fallen hair away to examine a strained face, then stood up and went for a damp washcloth. Her gently scrubbed lips responded cool and faintly sour. He held her trembling body, there on the cold tile floor, leaning forward on his knees, swearing in self-recrimination with his mouth in her hair.

"*¡Jesucristo!* have I caused this? You are not supposed to do this...except perhaps in the morning."

He lifted her up and carried her to the bed, removing her angrily donned clothes and then his own. There was no detectable response as he held her slack body, his fingers threading through her hair. He wanted to believe that she was devoting all of her strength to a single thought.

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“Can you sleep now?”

She turned her head and looked at him in silence.

“What, *mi amor*?” He cocked his head, waiting with a willful patience resorted to in previous confinement.

“I think...I’ve come to realize...more of you.”

“*Bueno, querida mía*...you have a little more of *us*.”

Her silent assent, given by bringing her mouth against his as her hands slid down his body, roused him from the inaction of self-reproach. In a moment he heard a whisper of something indistinguishable, understood only by the way her body moved with his into that required state of exclusivity. Somewhere beyond euphoria lay undivided sleep.

“I realize very much of you,” he offered in a voice thickened by much more than arousal: Semele, the sudden culmination of a heavily engaged life’s barely conscious longing. “From the first spilled wine I knew who you were. We both do see beyond the romance of self-delusion. We both can recognize a commonality...its high value; because of that we need to give more than our bodies. For us there is a constant: always that recognition, that need. Happiness is easy, *no*? – to have each other, bliss. *Querida*, I hope what you have come to realize is that in all the difficult places...in whatever separation, we are never parted.”

“Yes, I *do* realize. Rafael...oh, this irritability isn’t me...I think it’s from suppressed empathy. Please tell me what happened to you. I want to know...*need* to know. I can’t stand to only imagine what you must have--”

“*No*, it is the past. Let us do this now...only this.”

In the early morning he awoke and heard Semele again in the bathroom, vomiting. Should he go to her or leave her alone? It was something still so new to him, this difficult compassion scoring his heart. There was also deep regret that this beautiful healthy athlete was crouched over a toilet bowl regurgitating her insides because he had allowed his need of her, that deliciously primal part of his nature, to override reason. He flipped the covers and sat up just as she entered the room.

Offering a wan smile, she clung to one of the carved walnut bed posts and said, “I hope that was it for the day.”

“Come back to bed.”

When she had settled in his arms he said, “Can you know how sorry I am that you have to do this?”

“It won’t go on forever, from what I understand.”

“I do not want you to go to Madera.” At last he was uttering words that he had tried for some time not to say. It didn’t escape his thought that he might very well have to oppose Semele in that uncertain field of operations, might even be obliged

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to affect open hostility at her appearance. The scene he envisioned was untenable, ludicrous, and far more dangerous for her than if he had never set eyes on her.

He felt her body tense up as she attempted to push herself away, as if to elude the problem by mere physical distancing. But he refused to let go, holding even tighter. The brushing of her lips against his bare chest, lips from which he wished to hear only concession, fluttered with opposition, like the wing-thrashings of a trapped bird.

“I thought we had a more or less tacit agreement that we were not going to interfere in each other’s lives this way. What if I said I didn’t want *you* to go?”

“I made no agreement not to interfere...anyway not at this point. What could we be to each other if love did not interfere? I must go; you know that. And anyway I am not the one who is pregnant...except with misgiving.”

“I’m going, Rafael. I intend to finish my work. I won’t allow them the satisfaction of getting rid of me so easily. I mean to be a thorn...however small.”

“I admire your tenacity...and hate its effect. I will see you and not be able to see you. That is unendurable. I will worry, and I may have to... I would rather you were nowhere in sight.”

“I’ll find a way to see you. I have to.”

“For the most part, impossible.”

“No. In some wooded place, in a cave, a...a dry gulch or under a tree at night, a tree with sweeping pendulous limbs – our little home away from home. Oh, that’s right, we don’t share a home...and probably never will. I don’t care, *mi amante*,” she teased in bittersweet laughter, threading her fingers through his hair.

“Your *amante*, *sí*, but your *marido*, my pregnant *esposa*, and this is serious. I am serious. You do not understand the things I must do. My life endangers yours. What has happened to you, Semele? You are always so intuitive...and so logical and professional in your work that I–”

“True, logical and professional...but *you* happened to me. I’m human, not a myth...despite your fanciful claims. I’m going to Madera, my co-creator of this cranky little fetus...and somehow, at some high level of cleverness we’re both so good at, I’ll find a way to be alone with you.”

VI

*A pundit withdrew from the world and
closed his eyes to meditate its radiance.*

When he opened his eyes, the world was gone.

. . . Rafael Arnau i Roca

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As the plane landed the growing faction supporting him converged upon La Ceiba's ill-equipped, very dated airport, which many frankly called dilapidated. There had been several attempts to update the airfield, but foreign aid earmarked for that purpose always trickled away into the pockets of a few palmy officials. Peasants had streamed in from the mountains and distant valleys, having heard via the informed spokespersons of their nearest villages or towns that he would arrive at the end of the week. They had already endured over fifty hours of hot nights and mauling sun, bodies hammered down upon dry and dusty earth by the relentless daylight explosions of blinding solar fire. Among them, they shared their allotments of restricted water, now valued above all resources or provender.

With the probing media's simultaneous arrival, Rafael had adjudged that Madera's shrewd president was sufficiently confident of dealings with UNIFOLL to at least temporarily tolerate his unwanted appearance. Holding its forces in check just now would broadly illustrate Madera's democratic pose and, more important, not disrupt the flow of foreign aid. There were few leaders in Madera who were not self-serving members of the government or military, and no laymen of any practiced leadership abilities willing to give up their humble incomes by joining an opposition. A few young hotspurs -- reckless aspirants possessed of more heat than reason, and restlessly waiting for guidance in more subtle tactics -- were bold only because they had never felt a bullet drive into their innocent flesh.

He knew very well that he had become the answer to many more problems than would be solved. They dreamed of so much more than he could ever deliver, they who had seen no hand of Providence reaching out of the sky or down from the lofty mountains to lift them from their destitution. As nearly as they could discern he was their only hope. He had tried not to let that happen, but it always did. Heroes were sorely needed everywhere at present, and much more actively needed than fleshless icons summoned from history. But even in serving an immediate need, heroes were still fallible humans subject to time's swift undoing, and Rafael had no desire for that unsustainable role. Stories with himself as their propitious subject abounded. These accounts, enhanced by vague superstition, had already, alas, endowed him with invincible qualities. If Maderans did not yet understand, he understood fully the mechanism at work; it was not really himself, the man, they idolized, but what he represented: the positive result gained by concerted self-determination.

However restrained, the President's special guards still moved clandestinely through the crowds, but there were uniformed regulars phalanxed along the central avenue and in a few other congested places. Finally, there were the edgy roving bands

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of displaced unemployed who wanted to mine the valley at any cost to the earth or future generations.

This was the social and political climate into which the concurrently despised and apotheosized water-bearer had inserted himself, and with accustomed aplomb, for it was his *métier*; it was what he did and lived to do. Accompanying Rafael were Mari and Antoine, four burly young lieutenants whom Antoine had insisted upon as Rafael's guardsmen, and the ingenuous and unruly young apostate, Carlos Garcia. An unsettled though willing convert, Garcia had barely come to acknowledge the extent of the corruption, but, upon seeing his new mentor so avidly cheered, he heartily joined in.

Rafael wore an open-necked white shirt, blue jeans, and the slightly scuffed Spanish leather boots he had worn in Paris. He bore the full force of the sweltering heat with equanimity, for he still had reason to believe this long dry season was a finite burden less insurmountable than the steady threat of government opposition. The distant horizon beyond the descending ceiling of fire, presently of only figurative relief, beckoned with cooler heights of purest natural beauty. Very soon he would walk over an uninhabited slope of the nearest lavender peak in that floating chain; a peak rising above the bordering foothills of the once lush valley, *La Nava Feraz*. It was a legendary valley, still clinging to its prolific past, now arid and withering for lack of irrigation. He was here to save it.

In tamer seasons, remote unpublished Madera generously revealed itself as a privileged integument of the earth's crust. A fertile land bathed in scented airs, its well-kept secrets were fire-forged into magnificence long before any verifying human voice. This rugged purity had endured until increasing accessibility fostered careless abuse. The land was now in many places contaminated by freewheeling industry and areas of slum, hovel, stench, and disease, its diverted rivers used to service the subsistence-waged or more often fully automated factories of absent and foreign profiteers. Its current record-breaking heat wave was consistent with the uncommon warming everywhere attributable to the ominous greenhouse effect, a phenomenal index exploiters called *phantom*. Always in proportion to the ill-gotten wealth of Madera's corrupt officials and their fawning oleaginous retainers were to be found across the populace plummeting degrees of neglect; certain writhing pits of squalor so urgently in need that their infrequently visiting small relief forces had neither time nor means to address causes.

With some minor interruptions, they made their way to the UNIFOLL office. This enterprise, located in the newest building in La Ceiba, was one place where, at an earlier unannounced visit, Rafael had encountered costly modern appointments. Obviously UNIFOLL's arrangement with the government was firmly

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in place; they were here to stay. Although fatigued by travel, it was imperative that Rafael's group at once demonstrate awareness of the company's bold takeover, already being implemented. A crowd had gathered at the five-story granite building recently discovered to have been built by UNIFOLL. Near its doors stood a phalanx of soldiers. Others mingled without uniforms, but were easy to spot by similar modern dress. Amidst a tightening crowd, one soldier in drab mufti eerily lifted his unarmed hand and aimed directly at Rafael, pantomiming a pulled trigger. Two furious guardsmen, along with an explosive Garcia, started toward the would-be assassin. Rafael at once called them back and motioned toward a hastily assembled platform of boards laid across wooden horses on the other side of the street. He walked over and hoisted himself up.

His forthright statement, delivered in clear-timbred Castilian, held an unfamiliar inflection, but the riveted listeners received him en masse. Madera's harried citizens were at last to have some recourse for neglect and abuse.

"It is good that you are here, *amigos*. In these times, noninvolvement and inaction will not bring you what you most need and value. I am sorry that the water system for which we have worked so hard comes with obstacles: the certainty of destructive methods and a form of enslavement. If this company can bring you water let them do it in harmony with your lives and the earth. It is not too much to ask that you and your fertile land retain your value and dignity. If you sell your bodies and souls in haste and heat, how will your children remember you but by ruined, irretrievable land? We have undertaken to find another place where a mine can be operated without displacement of dwellings, removal of farmers, or the ruination of your threatened valley; at greater cost to the company, *sí*, but still profitable. Let us remain calm and talk this over. Let us stand together and hold to reason and cooperation. Give us some time to negotiate. You will have your water." Loud applause and cheering. "You will have your farms intact. You will have your dignity." More loud cheering, and he heard his name invoked in unison: *Viva Arnau i Roca!* "You will have a decent future for your children in your own homeland. *Viva La Nava Feraz, amigos! Viva La Nava Feraz!*" There was wild cheering as he jumped from the makeshift platform and was swallowed by the crowd, now a whirling, tightening knot of admirers, the detractors also caught up in the *mêlée*, and his four wary lieutenants employing sharp elbows to get him to the Jeep. Mari, Antoine, and Carlos would stay in town while he was headed for *La Nava Feraz* to eat and sleep in the home of an old *compadre*, a befriended peasant leader.

As the Jeep moved away, he looked back at the ignited crowd streaming past timeworn stone buildings cutting into hot blue sky. Down avenues bearing the names of forgotten heroes they came, straining toward a provisionally patterned condition of

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relief, the slowest trailed by starving dogs, and all suspended in a blurring pall of dust. Thirst and fatigue, disease and debt momentarily forgotten, throngs of charged bodies rushed onward to keep him in sight. He was the viable force that fed their new elation, and they were reluctant to end this euphoria of promise, of long awaited deliverance. At the edge of the waning commercial district, groups emerged from more run-down structures and shaded their eyes to verify the news that had traveled by its own electric impulse. Many of those joined the surging crowd. The accumulating mass hurried past an old formally laid out square, its stressed and shriveling verdure surrounding a central fountain of cavorting water sprites: young nymphs bore aloft dry vessels from which water had once sprayed over a scroll-edged pond filled with water lilies, now curled and desiccated brown remnants moldering at the bottom of their waterless home. Slowly crazing, the cement basin languished without purpose, watched over by a shy little patinated mermaid with downcast eyes. Here, where lovers had met beside musical splashes under a cool moon, was now only thirst of every kind. As suddenly as it had begun the crowd stopped, looking back at the expiring park, then off toward vanishing Arnau i Roca, midway between the ruined and the desired. Inured adults stood in silence, embittered, half-hopeful, moist-eyed, their arms folded. Their excited children ran on. Heritage rivers pirated from these same eager children now endlessly powered the automated factories and earth-scarring mills of unaccountable and rapacious foreigners. But even stolen water was finite.

Ramón Gómez welcomed Rafael into his home, a rough-hewn cottage on one of the lower foothills of the craggy peaks that half-enclosed the valley -- all, crowned by a quiescent volcano. His mother, two daughters, wife Julia, rejuvenated grandmothers, aunts, and other women had toiled for several days to prepare a welcoming feast. Rafael recognized the effort and sacrifices made for this meeting by expressing his gratitude with words of praise upon arrival; and did so a second time, making a toast of solidarity as the guests raised their glasses above a hand-carved long trestle table. They drank an aged wine issuing from Ramón's small private vineyard. It was produced from one of many harvests in more lush seasons within this lozenge-shaped valley that floated above sub-tropical lowlands -- a unique region amenable to the vine and, higher up, superior coffee berries. Glasses of the fruity dry wine glinted ruby as slanting rays of sun struck an odd assortment of raised tumblers -- motley old water glasses that laughing Julia told him were hastily collected from the village below and carried up the slope in clanking baskets balanced atop every age of female head. Rolling the wine gently over a subtly experienced tongue, Rafael smiled with real

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pleasure. Its sun-espoused grapes had yielded something quite respectable, fit to be grown in abundance and exported world-wide he told his waiting host.

Ramón's impassioned black eyes darted over the food-laden table. He appeared to savor the idea of a practical business venture, rising spirits softening an otherwise solemn and leathery visage; all noted by Rafael as Ramón rubbed his face to conceal his emotion, split-nailed stained cracked fingers rushing through his peppery-gray hair. The aggravation in Ramón's slumped body alone bore an indication of the land's accelerating loss of productivity. Most of the vegetables, meats, and grains served here had been grown on the family's land, such abundance not widely possible these days. Ramón's narrowed eyes returned to the long-necked pottery wine vessels placed in the middle and at each end of his table -- *wine for the world*, but only with an ample supply of water. Notables of the valley and its busy little village nodded their heads in serious agreement with Rafael's evaluation. Nearly all had at one time or another tasted the wine made here, often in more forward-looking, celebratory times when the valley was irrigated by an endless supply of purest river water. Their perennially satisfied tongues could all attest this superior wine's uncommon worth, its very real commercial value.

When the meal was finished, the children helped clear the table. Ramón's two pubescent young daughters grinned at Rafael as they worked, their dark eyes seeking his coveted attention. They were fetching little things, adorning any virtuous man's fleeting daydreams of the unobtainable feminine swiftly maturing. His generous smile and grateful nod were embellished with a wry wink, a special *thank you*. They lingered to tease and be teased, until their pitiless mother shook her head, scolded and called them back. This brought some reluctance, more shy glances as they sidled off to the kitchen, where their shrill giggles made him grin.

Perspiring women leaned attentively along the wall nearest the table they had deftly cleared. They mopped at their faces with soiled aprons. Sweltering bodies crowded the room, their hot brows knit in concentration as Rafael and the provincial leaders exchanged ideas and information.

"You are fortunate," Rafael said. "I have been to dry places in Africa where there is nothing like this. No sign of a river, no water table beneath the desert planar. You have the ghost of a large river to revive, precious water more needed and desirable than oil or any other natural resource. In some places where private companies have taken over the water supply, service is very poor. Even then, the people cannot afford to pay what is charged, and instead they drink from a disease-ridden lake or a pond or filthy puddle. The next thing they have is an epidemic of cholera.

"If the river is brought back, the water stolen from your valley returned for irrigation, while the mountain catchments become piped service, and waste is

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hygienically carried off and processed, you will have everything anyone could want...but that is the high end of achievement. You must not let a private company solely control your water. Around the world many of these private companies have very bad records of service. Remember they are in business to make a profit any way they can. They will not necessarily care whether or not your water is clean or well serviced, only expensive enough for steady profit.”

“But how will we even get the factory owners to agree to return our water?” Ramón asked.

“They are not nationals. You, the people, can demand they be thrown out if they do not cooperate. We have studied several of the factory operations. They knowingly pollute unnecessarily and also waste huge amounts of your precious resource. It is *your* water. If they want to remain in service they must behave, and you must make laws to see that they do. That is a longer range problem -- I think with the changing of your government, *¿*? Right now you can organize to work out future government-subsidized partnerships with local businesses and your villages. You can arrange to pay without selling your lives for water.”

A grizzled octogenarian coughed and shook his head. “I believe these companies pay our government very well.”

“Government officials, you mean,” Ramón said. “*Si*, the few idle rich of our land grow richer, but what changes for most of us is only more thirst and poverty.”

“There are things you are already doing, *bueno*, and other things that take time, but these, too, must be set in motion as soon as possible,” Rafael advised.

The old man, the oldest present, coughed, clearly desirous of spitting, and said, “It is hot in here.”

Julia, one of those leaning against the wall, uncrossed her arms and said, “You must all come outside. We have placed some chairs around, and there is the cool earth to rest upon. The sun is setting over the mountains.”

Outside, at that fleeting transitional moment of day, the guests were silent, the shadows long. In the final burn of vanishing sun, its watching chiaroscuro faces presented masks of roseate-orange light and the sable loss of it. The flames of three torches danced at the fenced edges of the cottage’s once hardy flower and vegetable garden; a plot left unwatered except for some meager squashes, beans, and tomatoes, whose vine and leaf shadows rose and fell beyond the writhing tongues of fire. These few green plants were carefully explained by Julia. “The girls and I have carried water from *la Montaña Espejismo* for this patch. A pool high beyond the next slope...we are lucky to have that spring.”

My God, so far to walk, Rafael thought, looking up at the nearest darkening mountain, now rosy-topped in dusk. He looked at the tender blushing faces of the

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girls, Juanita and Rosa, at their nail-bitten, sorely used golden-brown fingers, motionless in the vanishing sun. They had changed from their festive carefully-ironed full skirts and hand-embroidered white lace blouses, back into faded jeans and blue and yellow striped holey t-shirts. Their fast-growing young bodies blossomed beneath the worn snug-fitting old clothes. They lowered their eyes and smiled coyly, dimpling their flushed cheeks. Both were hovering just on the brink of womanhood, their innocent ploys of side-glancing coquetry part of secretive awakenings yet untainted by harsh reality.

Overseer Julia, in a flowered dark skirt and safety-pinned sky-blue blouse, appraised her two daughters with gleaming pride. She herself was the stuff of arousal and could still make her flinty husband look long at her, always bursting from her second-hand clothes -- *for the girls I sometimes find clothes like new*, she was heard to explain. She was an energetic woman with copper-brown hair and a dusky body as curvaceously inviting as a ripe damson plum temptingly ready for harvest. Her ruddy hands were rarely still in the repetitive tasks of a busy mother, a dominant figure character-etched by struggles with the burdens of a hard life. Incautious childbearing and strenuous work were rushing her toward a somewhat blowzy resignation, yet she seemed to possess an uncomplaining temperament, displaying an ironic playfulness in her delight over simple pleasures. When greeted, her faintly garlicky breath and damp skin had also issued the spice of chewed cloves and the earthy scent of heat-induced sweat. Her natural warmth and caring manner yielded a sensual aura, an abiding maternal ethos.

A vision of the woman carrying his unborn child flashed before him, an image hardly to be savored without leaping up and walking away, up onto the starry twilight-silhouetted slopes. The vivid reflection was so consuming he imagined he was visibly changed by it. Perhaps it was so. Semele was not at all like the striving women he had known, or the circumscribed women here. His exhilarating new mate was graceful and sophisticated with a coolly sharp mind, yet highly charged with an erotic warmth of generous love -- *for him*. Always aware of the *Other* in a purposeful, fraternal way, he again felt the amazing transition of considering another in so extraordinarily personalized a manner. There was much that he would not allow into their relationship, much that he could not tell her, but the rewards of their hectic pairing were still matchless. He might have lived whatever was left of his existence without another he could care for that much, scarcely a private life, mere physical relief, hardly any desire for personal exploration. There would never be enough time for such a rich pairing -- this mutually conceded. Exotic gardens needed constant input. He could hear her arousing voice, low, teasing a little, its colorful assertions conceived by a very fast mind.

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Turning away from the shadowy mountains holding his lofty thoughts, he stood up to face those who were waiting.

“Let me enumerate what must be dealt with, and then we will discuss these points one by one. There is the useless government, at present badly composed of self-aggrandizing officials and their right arm: the military. There are those who are sympathetic to you, those with foresight and some muscle: the rebels in the south; and those opposed: the expedient self-seekers without concern or provision for Madera’s future. There are World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the IMF, pushing for privatization. Which brings us to UNIFOLL: moving to build and control your water infrastructure and the proposed mine. There are a few other possibilities for the mine, and, as I have said, a few other possibilities of funding and billing your water service: an independent loan program where UNIFOLL builds the system and turns it over to an amenable government – perhaps not this government – for subsidies, partnerships with you. As to the water itself, you *will* have it. When you do, do not over-irrigate, or you will deplete your supply...and, as you know, increase salt deposits that destroy the soil. Nearly three quarters of the world’s water is used for irrigation, often with extreme waste. Refrain from crops that swallow huge amounts of water. Anything left out? Questions?”

There was a hesitant moment of total silence, and then a raspy voice virtually obliterated any specific comment.

“Do these few water companies we hear about...the ones lobbying for privatization everywhere...do they want to hold the world hostage...to have power and riches that way? Is that what they are planning?” It was the wizened old man, and when he finished speaking he spat into the dry garden.

Rafael arose in time to witness the dawn glazing the horizon with a gelatinous pink shimmer. His hammock, slung in the corner of the main room, had been piled with coarse merino wool blankets to ward off the night chill. After a visit to the privy beyond the garden, he returned to find Julia grinding coffee on the abbreviated veranda of her tidy bare wood cottage. She had left Ramón in peacefully snoring slumber, she explained, for her husband had drunk too much wine, far more than usual. “Let him have his dreams of the old river,” she said with a wistful voice as she handed Rafael a damp towel for a perfunctory cleansing.

Glad for the steaming warmth of hot coffee, he savored the fresh brew, sitting with Julia at a weathered cable-spool table made level in the sloping yard.

“Where do you get your drinking water, *Señora* Gómez?”

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“Please, *Señor Arnau i Roca*, you must call me Julia. Plenty water we had trucked from the river to the village for us. No more. Now we buy a little below in bottles.”

“Ah, then this coffee is as precious as it is good.”

When they finished, Julia loaned him a black felt poncho against the morning chill. He walked with her and the girls, up onto the steeper reaches of the mountain’s rising slope to the fresh spring. Both girls were wearing backpacks. They each swung dented old galvanized buckets, to be filled at the spring’s bubbling stream. It was a walk of six or seven kilometers, a precipitous climb in places, but the path, also used by goats and sheep, was generally well worn and negotiable if done carefully. Now and then the girls’ playful voices broke into soothing cradle songs, and Julia, brightening at childhood memories, occasionally joined in. More difficult climbing brought grunts, then ringing squeals of protest and finally laboring silence.

They leaned out to fill their buckets at the pooling spring, Rafael lifting the filled buckets from their hands to be set on a level spot. Goats had eaten away hardy grass tufts, leaving hoof-trodden nearly bare earth, upon which the buckets were left standing. The two girls teased each other, but he had noticed they were not careless with the water, spilling none. Tugging at her red sweater to get it buttoned, Julia explained where to bathe, in a place below around the other side of the spring, if he could stand the chill water. Exuberant chatter was amply forthcoming in the relief of high cool air. Julia’s veneration hung upon his responses, upon his sharp curiosity and interest. In such unusual company they were all shyly flirtatious at times, and at other moments like nervy star-struck fans vying for his attention. Most of all they wanted to please him.

“The girls and I bathe down there in a deeper eddy, among the boulders beyond the scrub trees and reseda. Help yourself to that water, *señor*. We will rest here. Is the odor of reseda not lovely? It does not grow above this place. Scarcer here, yet always before too cold for growth so high. Maybe someone has planted it long ago much further down...for the fragrance; it has escaped and now climbs over the lower hills. This climate is different...much warmer.

“I have carried thin pancakes, wild honey, and goat cheese for us to eat when you return...and here is a towel.” This she took from her daughter’s backpack and handed him.

He crossed over the stream at a narrow place of raised dry stones, and leapt down from rock to rock, landing on the rough-edged surfaces with his arms extended for balance. Where the stream whorled out upon a level rocky terrace he found a circular spot to bathe, water from this emerald pool trickling away over monoliths of jagged basalt. He removed his wristwatch, footwear, and clothes and dove into the

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green depths. The water was freezing cold, sharply, sharply bracing. Kicking toward a shelf where he could touch the bottom, he stood in water waist high, laughing in surprise at the brutal assault on his body. He threw back his head, running numbed fingers through dripping hair and sliding his hands over his face, then down across the black curls that silkily divided his abdomen and twined around cold-shocked genitalia. Swiftly leaving the water to grab at the small blue towel, he rubbed his hair and body with the flimsy saturated cloth then hastily put on his clothes. The entire surface of his damp skin tingled with sharp needles of cold.

Sitting on an enormous bolder, he inhaled the delicate fragrance drifting from patches of pale green, faintly red-tipped reseda blossoms. Gathering bees crawled over tiny star-shaped flowers that bloomed in clusters; a vigorous plant he knew better as the mignonette once used in French perfumeries. The sun's heat soaked into his black poncho, warming his chilled body to a comfortable lethargy. He gazed down a sloping shoulder of rock and clinging brush, glimpsing narrow unevenly framed aspects of the diaphanous yellow-green valley floating below; indiscernible life was now stirring, awakened by a higher sun. A distant horizon far beyond the lowlands radiated a muzzy mauve; undulating air heating up while still holding some warmth from the previous day. He could hear the occasional indistinct voices of the girls and Julia just below, the shrill cry of a hawk high above, the sound of burbling water, the buzz of a passing bee. All else was stillness. Whenever this peaceful silence was broken by the cheerful female voices of his unseen companions, he experienced their lively *joie de vivre* as a celebration of undefeatable human resilience.

Leaning out and looking up beyond the nearly vertical cliffs, he saw remnant patches of glistening snow. The age-old hanging glaciers were steadily dwindling, now shrinking uncommonly, as they were all over the world. The polar caps were melting; the massive glaciers disappearing; the salty seas rising, and at the same time potable water growing ever more scarce in new regions of draught. A racking torment of huge incapacity engulfed him, even as the sweeping beauty charged his vision with its magnificent indifference.

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VII

Chronicle of The Rose

Accidental wine,

Transcendental lust;

Water's swift decline

Love's epoch of dust.

The separate path that choice would trod.

Desire that drinks like a thirsty god.

. KMK

Semele had arrived in La Ceiba as clandestinely as Rafael had arrived in the opposite extreme, and quietly checked into *La Pausa*, the uninspiring but inoffensive and comfortable three-story hotel near UNIFOLL's offices. There she set to work as quickly as arrangements afforded.

The office was larger, newer, more assuming than she had anticipated, but she had sworn to yield neither to the silent intimidation of might nor to insinuating threats more immediate and personal. The manager, *Señor Reyes*, at once let it be known that he was on excellent terms with *El Presidente*, President Bellaco. He also, at first only half consciously or as a presumed rightful male course, exuded signs of personal interest. This did not escape Semele's notice, always in such circumstances tuned to the subtlest human inclinations. A priggish, slick-haired, mustachioed martinet, he was vain with both appearance and, relatively assessed, the rather handsome earnings of his achievement, of which few in La Ceiba could boast. He took for granted that Semele was present for the greater good of UNIFOLL.

Semele's discerning method was, as always, an initial polite interrogation concerning means, ends, and long-range effects. She then began examining the proposed financial outlay, her trained eyes flashing over proposals and fact sheets with surprising alacrity and absorption, surprising, that is, to Reyes. Having had no experience with anyone possessing Semele's acumen, he could hardly grasp how swiftly she was able to assimilate data, synthesizing an entire spectrum of figures in a very short period of time and posing areas where problems might occur. By the late afternoon of her second day, when some of these sticking points had been cursorily identified and partially recorded, Reyes leaned over her desk with an altered cast of smile beneath his twitching black mustache; the thin curve of lip resembled more a smirk of agitation at unanswerable female competence, the irritation settling into subtle menace.

"I did not understand your work here to include that of the efficiency expert."

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With her eyes still perusing a printout of statistics, pushing back her hair and barely taking the time to glance up, she said, “Ah, well, it goes with the process...nearly always.” Discreetly wrinkling her nose, she leaned slightly away from heavy fumes of stale tobacco mingled with the intolerable reek of cheap raw cologne pouring off Reyes.

Reyes folded his arms and drew himself up, but only managed to look trapped within his stiff navy suit. There followed the felicitous posing of a more convivial subject.

“There is to be a party tonight...at the presidential palace, and of course you are invited. You will find an invitation in your room, but I am glad to be the bearer of this news. *El Presidente* gives the most elaborate parties. He is having much pleasure over the UNIFOLL...*infusión*.”

Infusion indeed, baksheesh, Semele thought, the very payoff that allows these elaborate parties, while the deprived populace clings to the nearly vain hope of a sustainable existence.

Back in her room she glanced at the ostentatiously printed invitation -- gold script on parchment -- and went hastily and irritably through her apparel. In a moment of foolish whimsy she had thrown into her suitcase the ice-blue gown, and now decided it would have to further taint itself at the so-called *elaborate* celebration, at the ludicrously gingerbreadly Presidential palace -- Disneyfied artificiality representing squandered millions given over in forfeited loans. What an audacious extravagance, what sham, what utterly outrageous duplicity, she thought as she turned off the shower's impure trickle and towed her offended body.

When the hapless introduction took place, President Bellaco's voice oozed over Semele with a treacly dousing of presumed collusion. His black hair, mostly short, was severely razored up the back of his neck but flowing amply over a frontal bald spot and spilling down onto a sloping forehead. Beneath this absurdly boyish shock, his closely paired insectival jet eyes flashed back and forth across her face, then traveled overtly down her body and over her chic gown. A brazen assessment she felt as a crude theft of privacy, but Bellaco was apparently used to sizing up women in this anticipatory manner. His round liquor-reddened cheeks glowed above bronzed jowls of steadily augmented privilege and excess. An already sweat-drenched white shirt strained over his corpulent abdomen, half covered by the open tight-sleeved jacket of a white silk suit. A meat-eater eschewing no fat. His bright red tie sported a gold crown, rather flagrantly suggesting royal aspirations. A pudgy hand was extended, as if in dispensation. Glittering above the black hairs on his stubby right ring finger, a

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large diamond winked at her, while a square ruby shouted its competing vanity from the left ring finger. On his raised wrist a gold Rolex showily asserted the cupidity of the people's regret. Certainly he was the very caricature of his role, the colorful cock at the deviously wrested apex of the proverbial heap. It took only one glance to assure Semele of this well-subsidized dictator's threat to Rafael. A laughable caricature, yes, but never to be discounted; a dangerous foe, amply prepared to employ any and every means of retaining his lucrative tenure. Even as she smiled and offered her hand she was struggling with revulsion. After only a few necessary pleasantries, she was spared by the fawning interruption of an anxious flunky, thereby managing to escape long enough to fortify herself with a flute of champagne. She had suddenly realized *el Presidente* was wearing full facial make-up. Covering what? Malevolent scarring? Ominous. Likely clear-cutting wounds in making his way up the pillaged hill. Sipping her drink while standing just beyond the hushed voices of an oddly disparate couple, she attempted to dispel the unsettling image of Bellaco's fantastic mask, those rapinous black eyes -- the clownish façade of sinister artifice. She had found nothing to redeem this troublemaker but comic entertainment. He did have something of far more consequence than the burlesque of privilege at his disposal: a well-fed, well-armed military.

From the garish couple nearby she heard: "We will take care of those protesters. You will see." A dark neckless man in tan military costume with canted gold epaulettes was speaking to a rotund, silver-gowned woman tightly corseted and sealed in thick powdery make-up -- the hefty assemblage encrusted topside with a panoply of glittering diamonds. "*Sí, señora*, we have a few surprises for that rabble."

Semele clasped her regrettably empty glass to her chest to lean discreetly toward the conspiratorial Spanish voices.

"I hope you will get this over with quickly, our clever general. It looks very bad to the rest of the world. The news media have descended upon us. Like flies to...to the unwashed peasantry in the street...incited by that horrible meddling foreign *agitador*. Why can they not see that the masterful acts of our government provide them with a truly progressive country? What is wrong with those dirty fools?" Her heavily lined, barely discernable eye-slits closed over vacant splinters of disgust. Pouting girlishly, she grasped the stout general's whipcord sleeve, her short plump digits ending in lacquered nails gleaming blood-red.

"My dear woman, they are led like sheep to believe in some rosy dream. Very soon they will be too busy working to entertain any loco ideas...either that or they will be...ah, dealt with -- if they persist in lawlessness, what choice?"

The general's rolling-tongued complaints continued in further but indistinct remonstrance as they moved away toward a table laden with food. A gleaming

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mountain of garishly ornate inedibles cascaded from end to end. Nothing identifiable. Semele was reminded of the fascinating but, alas, nauseating excesses displayed in *Fellini's Satyricon*. She thought of the struggling peasants and of the water stolen from their crops, outright theft resulting in bare tables, and, yes, greater numbers of unwashed bodies.

“Ah, there you are, *Señorita* Taylor. I saw you talking to *El Presidente*. How fortunate that you managed to speak with him so soon, but you were interrupted, and he has asked me to inquire or suggest...” *Señor* Reyes halted, breathless with enthusiasm, appearing to contemplate what the correct wording might be. His white-patent-leathered feet minced his condescending body toward her, bearing also a bluster of importance at being so favorably deployed by his leader.

He wore a cream suit, a red tie, clearly in sycophantic emulation of his president, and his slicked-down hair shone like a solid cap of black enamel under the atomic blaze of the chandelier. Dashing his folded index finger backwards across his sweat-dampened mustache in an affected flourish, he eyed Semele with a missionary unctuousness compelling her to turn momentarily away. She stared off through the white columns at a row of mournfully writhing wind-torn palms, rolled her eyes, then cursed ever so softly and turned back.

“Good evening...and the...message?” Her manner offered no sign of encouragement as she lifted her glass to drink.

“*El Presidente* wanted to know if there is any way...you see...any way that he can assist in bringing your redundant examinations to a close. It is important...of course, you know how very important that the mine excavations begin.”

“The mine?” Semele exhorted with a barely controlled surge of fury. “It’s far more important that we rapidly determine the proper conditions for supplying water to all of those deprived people out there.”

Señor Reyes drew himself up in rigid hauteur, his face reddening considerably. “That is not your determination.”

“In a manner, it is.”

“Regrettable...on this night of celebration...” He shook his head, staring around him. “I warn you...ah, that is, I would not like to go above your head but if it must be done...you see what I mean? I have thought from nearly the beginning that your sympathies were not as they should be.”

“Not as they should be. And how is that? I’m to remain in an impartial position until a determination has been made...data verified. I’ve never worked in any other way. I will not be bullied...concede to any level at all.”

The shock of such obstinacy reddened his face, but it rearranged itself at once into a scornful sneer, very much as if confronting a reviled protester in the street.

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“You declare yourself impartial? I hardly think so. No, I think not. I must warn you, *Señorita* Taylor, I must warn you that you are in more danger than you--”

“Please don’t threaten me, *Señor* Reyes. I’m not your employee. I’m here to do a job, and I *will* do it...with all the fairness and knowledge at my disposal. Excuse me.”

Semele turned away, livid with anger, and strode between the misappropriated white columns out onto the terrace where she folded her arms and paced up and down. What luck to spot a taxi waiting far below the broadly rounding stairway. She hurried over to the edge of the steps, about to hail her hoped-for escape when a curiously nasal voice sounded from close behind her fleeing back. “Miss...a, Taylor, isn’t it?” The assertive voice was British, faint cockney, familiar. Glancing quickly over her shoulder, she turned to face another unwanted confrontation. She had recognized the reporter at once, having spotted him in Paris a number of times, hanging around UNIFOLL. It was Jeet Grey. Several weeks ago his attempt to interview her had failed and, to her dismay, she now observed the same stubbornly determined obtrusiveness ready to deploy.

Normally he wore a blue shirt and baggy khaki pants, flapped pockets down both legs bulging with the tools of his trade: CD recorder, cell phone, digital camera, binoculars, pens and pad. Today, his narrow gangly body was lost in a rented tux obviously tailored for a more receptive frame, a tux whose overlong trouser hems half obscured black tennis shoes. His thin brown hair was pulled back in the usual ponytail, the small gold earring permanently intact. His marbled gray eyes blinked at her, the left eye fixed in a confusing state of acute strabismus, both purblind eyes incredibly magnified by thick round undersized gold-rimmed glasses balanced on a short little ski-jump nose -- the breathing apparatus nearly secondary to persistent rooting.

Aren’t you a sight, she could not help thinking but would never say. She folded her arms with taut impatience.

“Well, hello again, Miss Taylor...lovely gown.”

“Hello again,” Semele repeated, expressionless. “I was about to catch that taxi down there and I’m afraid if I don’t get on with it he’ll get away.”

“Leaving so soon? The food in there is incredible.”

“As well as everything else.”

“I didn’t notice you eating anything.”

“I don’t enjoy munching on baroque decorations; it’s fiddled-with artificial food, you see...sweaty palms...if you’ll excuse me I’ve really got to try and catch--”

“I’ll do that,” he suggested. “We can share.”

“Oh, but I wouldn’t want to...”

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She sighed as Jeet Grey ran down the stairs, the hems of his black trousers flaring out behind his tennis shoes.

Her wasted gown fluttered against her ankles as she hastily followed, but with serious misgivings. It had occurred to her that, in this province of spare information, Jeet Grey had become far more interested in *her* than in the less obtainable, less productively conversant *El Presidente*.

There were protesters gathered outside the heavy black iron gates as the taxi passed through. They were marching back and forth just beyond a phalanx of armed guards, and they carried signs that she made out as “NO MINE” and “SAVE OUR VALLEY” and “WATER WITHOUT SLAVERY.” She saw their leaders loosely grouped nearby, and tall at the center stood Rafael in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled, blue jeans breaking above those familiar, well-traveled sorrel Spanish boots – occasionally, he had worn them in Paris. Startled, as if she were seeing him for the first time, she stared out of her window. He looked back, those disturbing covert eyes possessing every part of her, even after he turned away.

“I believe you know him,” Jeet Grey said, alarmingly cognizant of her focus on Rafael. She almost visibly recoiled with the shock of his words, but caught herself in time to shrug and turn her face back toward the avenue.

“I mean, I’m sure I saw you together in Paris, having coffee at a sidewalk café.”

This could be dangerous if it turned into widespread newsprint. “I’ve run into him a few times,” she said. “Unavoidable.” *Like you*, she wanted to add.

He leaned across the seat, close to her face, and she caught a whiff of cannabis. “I’ve been trying to set up an interview but he keeps begging off, insists he’s too busy. I was thinking, possibly you could--”

“I wouldn’t presume to...to...” she floundered in a quick attempt to cut him off. Damn it, he was in this taxi with her all the way back to her hotel.

“Well, I just thought...I mean, I’ve seen you with him also in that little bistro where you often drank, and I...”

God, this virtual spy was threatening her. She wanted to hit him, punch him soundly in his spare ribs and leap out at the next stop. Instead, she turned toward him with an ingratiating smile and said, “My company expects me to be polite to everyone.” *Even you*. “Of course you know how that works...so much better that way. Courtesy doesn’t mean you have to deviate from your agenda...or ever disclose one iota of anything. That’s the way I do it. But I suppose more aggression is required in your business. Are you an AP stringer, regularly employed or...?” She fell silent.

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He no longer looked quite so ineffectual. She could sense imprecations forming at the back of his throat. He was agitated, like a hound on a fading scent, ignoring her innuendo, her unusually condescending questions.

“You left there in a hurry.”

“The beginnings of a migraine,” she said, placing her hand on her forehead. “Hope I can nip it. Maybe I will if I close my eyes...and mouth.”

She put her head back with her eyes shut. She could feel his gaze raking over her face, possibly her body, while his mind worked at some new attempt. “Oh,” she groaned, turning aside without opening her eyes, “this is going to be a bad one.”

She had managed to get herself out of the taxi with barely more than an agonized good-bye and a hasty retreat. Performing the briefest ablutions, she went to bed, indeed with a slight headache. What would tomorrow bring? She would have to face Reyes at the office, and she could not decide how it would come out. Perhaps she could excuse them both as having drunk too much champagne, laugh it off and get on with her work. Still, she could not imagine laughing off anything with that prig Reyes. No, she had made it very clear that she would stand for no interference. Here, such a blatantly contrary attitude guaranteed interference.

Rolling back and forth on her bed, she saw Rafael’s consuming eyes, how he had looked at her and turned away. Why was she in this untenable position? How had things reached such an unnatural state? But without this extremity she would have no Rafael. Yet what could she really have of this fiercely committed embattled Catalan, this dedicated humanitarian she had once referred to as a demiurge? She was sorry to have asked herself, as if in asking she had tampered with his trust -- assurances he was never pressed to offer had been freely given. In order to get on with her work, she often forced herself to pretend that she was not carrying his child. Sudden nausea quickly reminded her. All too soon she could pretend nothing. A recent sonogram had revealed a male fetus. His *son*, Rafael Arnau i Roca’s son curled in her belly. Occasionally she would look up from her work, jolted by the startling realization. She hadn’t yet shared the gender of this subtending little fetus with its father, *her legal husband*. He had said he hoped it would be a copy of her. Was his ready acceptance of this unsought condition readable as merely a dutiful response? Such conduct was in his nature. What did he really want? At the moment he wanted her gone. The thing was that she loved him beyond any measurement, loved him with an ongoing ecstatic agony, simultaneously so abounding and incalculable as to remain above any poetic similitude remembered from any cherished poet. My God, it was all so different, such an irreversible departure from her largely uncomplicated, and unconsidered, previous

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existence. She clutched the extra pillow against her body and longed for his dark physical reassurance, the comfort of his soothing accent, a return of that early amazed laughter upon which she had thrived -- now she thrived upon the mere thought of him alive somewhere. Strange that until his absence she had never felt alone.

Her body was a river of heat. She dreamed that Rafael had his fingers in her hair, and awoke to find that he did, that he was lying beside her propped on one elbow, had for an evidently short and impatient forbearance of time been watching her dream within the shadows of the night light. For a moment it was as if she had gone to sleep with him there, and then she thought the dream must still be going on, and then she knew herself to be fully awake.

“Oh, God! Rafael, how--”

His greeting engulfed her questioning voice, stopped her breath. At last hearing him speak in a concise and muted voice, she sensed that he was different: connected with invisible forces capable of gaining access even here, marshaled for the unexpected, scrupulously prepared for the singular effort demanded in this pivotal time and place.

“*Querida mía*, are you well?”

“Yes...but how did you--”

“I have my ways...my *amigos*. If we talk we may argue, and I have not much time. When you float within reach as you did today, this is what happens -- I want you...*need* you. I knew how it would be with you here, *querida*, but now there is not much I can do about it...except this.”

“You don’t in truth want me.”

“Semele? ; *Cristo! mi esposa*, is this how you interpret my presence? It took some effort coming here.”

“I know. Forgive me...the difficulty of me. Hold me, Rafael. I’ve had a bad day and I’ve been wanting you so much...wanting and wanting you. From the taxi you looked so remote...as if you were lost to me...or never known.”

“Lost *without* you. You must remember what I said in Barcelona. Do you? Always the same. Do you remember?”

“Yes, darling, every word. I know I’m hopeless.”

He removed his clothes, throwing them on the floor, then tugged off her flimsy nightgown and pulled her body tight against his arousing warm flesh. Ah, to have his fingers in her hair. Once again there was only the musky immediacy of Rafael, the overpowering suspended moment.

“Isn’t this dangerous for you?” Unanswered; but again her own discounted voice: “Oh, I wish...oh, God...”

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She awoke to find him gone, half imagined as a dream. There had been no time to tell him about the boy child, or about Reyes or Jeet Grey. How she had wanted to confide in him, and then to have each other as they had done in Paris, throughout the long lazy morning. Her love-ravaged body ached for more and more. She stood in the trickling steamy shower, trembling, miserable at showering off his touch, the salty male scent of him on her body. Toweling dry, she threw herself down on the bed with her face against the pillow where his head must have been, must have. Yes, the sheets were still damp with their mingled sweat, his scent enough to prevent her rising, until she was nearly late.

She was left alone for two days. Once she had wished for it; now lack of attention promised a sinister result. No one, and especially Reyes, had come near her as she spent those two days tediously digging into the final aspect of her work. Now she was finished and she sat at her desk, tapping her fingers and staring rather distractedly into space. She felt like a deer on a black highway, frozen in blinding headlights. Potential road kill. UNIFOLL was heavily overextended here. This incontrovertible discovery kept going round and round in her head. They could not cover the initial cost of the mine and maintain their other operating costs around the world. She knew precisely what those figures were from the combined Paris and Madera research, information she carried in her laptop. They had seriously inflated the earnings of several other sites and egregiously undervalued startup costs here, most certainly anticipating a rapid return from the mine to pull them out of the hole. Their loan request was for far less than they actually required. And by their venturesome low bid they had assured its capture, finally winning the contract this very morning. She could only interpret this coup as a dangerous imperative for them to act immediately, with the necessity of either discounting her existence or swiftly acquiring her approval. By now they probably knew the latter would never happen. She was indeed superfluous, but far from invisible. World Bank was not exactly in her corner either. Could they possibly realize that UNIFOLL's subcontracted creditors would be left howling at the moon? When she compared the composite figures given her in Paris to her own acquisition of the earnings from each business, there was a remarkable discrepancy -- this task had been laborious because she had to work backwards to obtain the true figures, using both vertical and horizontal studies of actual expenditures.

It was all in her computer, but she couldn't risk sending it to Rafael. Anyway, she didn't have his e-mail address. He had been very circumspect about that,

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and she had never asked. If someone stole her laptop his address, however transient, might have fallen into the wrong hands. Having no jump drive, she made two CDs and slipped them into her small, otherwise empty, purse – whose sparse contents she had pocketed. She went to the restroom where she put one disk against her stomach, beneath her lacy stretch underwear, and the other in the empty pocket of her slacks. Pretending to leave a few minutes early for lunch, she walked out of the office with her laptop. It was well known that she regularly took a taxi to her hotel and lunched in the small café there. She had no clear idea of how to locate Rafael, but in order to think about it she did her normal routine and hailed a dusty taxi. Another taxi, parked at the corner behind her, pulled in front of the car she had hailed and opened the door. As she was getting in, a muscly young assailant wrenched her laptop out of her unprepared fingers and ran. The driver threw up both hands and swore, using Spanish invective she vaguely understood. Her angry protest held less surprise than anyone watching might have expected. There was nothing to be done. The stale-tobacco-saturated taxi was sweltering, even with the windows open. She asked to be driven across town, glancing through the back window. There was a car very close, and more than one. She saw the other taxi she had chosen in the lineup. Were any of them there for her or not? Paranoia was the order of the day. Then her cell phone rang.

“Yes?”

“It’s Jeff, Semele. I’m in a landing pattern right now. You’re off this job. I’m taking you back to Paris and then sending you home.”

Everything had spun around to a new configuration, but her thoughts were assuming more clarity with each click of logic. Jeff must know she was a target, but that couldn’t matter to her now. Rafael was a greater target and he was not about to leave. Somehow she had to get one of the disks to him. A rapid summation of what was on the disk required her verbal translation. She would never leave him anyway.

“I’m sorry...can’t leave for a few days, Jeff.”

“Where are you, Semele?” His firm voice was even but she could hear the rising alarm, the cautious restraint.

“Actually, I’m in a taxi, heading, I believe, out of town.” She heard muffled swearing in her receiver.

“Will it do any good to threaten the loss of your position?”

“Jeff...” She sighed. “No.”

“Do you possibly remember what a code black means?”

An insult even now, but he did understand that she was already prey. Certainly she remembered a code black. It meant she was to drop everything and use utmost care to get herself out of wherever she was. “I remember.”

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“Tell the driver to take you to the airport.”

“I can’t. By the way, some thuggish minion just stole my laptop.”

“Semele! Goddammit, Semele, tell the driver to take you to the airport!”

“Jeff, I’m sorry...please understand...I can’t.”

“Careful, Semele. *Please* be careful. I’ll find you. I *will* find you.”

Her voice was soft, as if confessing an indiscretion and fearful of wounding.

“That won’t be too difficult, you know where I’ll be.” Febrile distraction engulfed her as, already somewhere else, she added, “If I can get there.”

“My phone is open, Semele. Call me. *Call me.*”

She punched off her phone with tears in her eyes.

There was little time for sentiment. She looked around her. The dusty taxi she had first hailed was now behind them, and then she noticed that her driver was watching it and speeding up. Her eyes remained fixed on the thick-fingered, anchor-tattooed hand gripping the wheel as their car lurched to the left down a side-street. He seemed to have a very definite objective in mind. She asked him in Spanish where he was going and received no answer. Far too busy evading the other taxi to pay any attention to her imploring voice, he careened in and out of traffic, clipping a curb here, a fender there in a series of erratic maneuvers that got them through the narrow unaccommodating streets -- heroic effort, if she had been in fine enough fettle to offer praise, and didn’t have to consider the outcome. Angry horns were honking, irate people shouting, then a police siren. She was thrown back and forth across the torn seat until vomiting was imminent. By now it was obvious that she had foolishly stepped into the wrong conveyance.

They were soon flying through a penumbral part of town that she could readily summon without looking; the same fringe conditions of destitution blighting so many other encampments in the world, and still the sudden shock that such deprivation was allowed to exist. Allowed? *Caused*, and shunted aside as the unfortunate dross of humankind. Well, not human. They could hardly be human, could they? And exist like that? -- a hoary-haired, middle-aged female skeleton with an eye missing from its infected red socket; a hairless, toothless scavenging male body with a gangrenous, maggot-filled shoulder. *Don’t look!* -- this admonition also spoken by a more privileged strata making hurried glimpses during panicky lost bearings, and sloughed off in precisely the averted manner here mimicked. She *had* to look, had to consider the malodorous sewage in the garbage-filled street; bony children half-clothed in filthy, lice-infested rags, their vermin-ravaged bodies hosting every affliction; listless little trachoma eyes momentarily fastening upon the passing taxi, but only as something that might bring a fleeting relief; fathers long gone, murdered or starved to death, their bones lying alongside some dusty side road or in a shallow grave -- the last

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assumption would be of actual escape --; roaming disease-wasted mothers wearily scavenging for something to put in numerous mouths. A few lucky ones had jerry-built shelters constructed of salvaged rubble; makeshift household implements, most noticeably those made of dirty, luridly bright plastic. Their supermarket was the city dump -- here, useable discards not nearly as prevalent or promising as North America's prolific garbage. Derelict objects were swiftly extracted with an improvised but flimsy easement in mind: a moldering tire; a rusty tin or oil drum; child jewelers collecting pretty little shell casings from the last skirmish: the infrequent protests of myriad injustices having been fatally rewarded, and always led by implanted protesters, not these people. They were too weak and dazed to complain, and easily gave up their lives without the assistance of a rifle.

Completely freed from their tail at last, they climbed onto a plateau of rolling uplands, the dark-veined ever-circling mountains gradually rising. The driver had the radio on and pretended not to hear her barrage of questions, her brief harangue of accusation. She grew acquiescently silent. Continual hairpin curves left her too dizzy to speak. It was late afternoon when the car choked to a halt, parking below a raw-wood cabin set upon a long slope of dry grass, a rolling foothill of the big mountain that had been winding in and out of her vertiginous view for some time. Without looking around, completely unable, Semele pitched her racked body out of the car and fell to her knees over a shallow concavity of dry weeds. She was swiftly, miserably preoccupied with convulsing seizures of streaming vomit. *How unbelievably masterful of me not to have done this in the taxi*, she thought. Her entire body trembled. Raising her head only slightly, she saw first the scuffed but still shining sorrel boots. He knelt down and wiped her face with his hand as he lifted her up. Her exhausted thorax ached. She attempted to respond but felt herself spinning away.

"No...no...look at me, *querida*. You are safe."

She wanted very much to oblige, not to take this nausea any further, closing her spilling eyes until she could keep them open and look fully at him.

"Motion sickness...and your...protesting son."

He carried her inside, wiped her face with a damp cloth and settled her on a quilted bed. The simple shadowy room was cool and smelled of pine, kerosene, the smoky bite of charcoal and the wild-sloped herbal earthiness of Rafael. Collapsing in jittery fatigue, she nuzzled fragiley against his soft old flannel shirt while he stroked her hair.

"This hasn't been a very good day...until now."

She pulled the disk out of her pocket, then removed the other one, very sweaty, sequestered below her tucked shirt.

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“My laptop was stolen...right out of my hand...caught off guard getting into the taxi...thought your driver was taking me to the guillotine.”

“¡Jesús! lo siento. Querida, I did not want to do this, but I have received reports that you are in danger. I could not leave you there.”

“And I couldn’t stay. Jeff called...tried to get me on his plane...just landing. I wouldn’t go.”

“Dammit! I wish you had. Ay, your driver was told to bring you only to me. We will probably have trouble here soon...government soldiers...ordered to contain our rebel support coming from the south.”

“I had to get this to you anyway...well, somehow I was going to try and get to the valley and ask where you were. It’s all there...very detailed. They’ve lied...won’t be able to pay their subcontractors...their creditors. Oh, have you any drinkable water?”

“Sí, of course. You need liquid...and, even with the rejection from your poor little belly, you need food. Lie down, *mi amor*. I will bring water...some broth.”

He stood up and took a few steps, but then quickly returned to lift her easily into his arms, a rewarding mouth traveling over her hair and settling on her hungry response.

“*Vida mía*, you are wonderful. How I love you.”

“Where am I...actually?” she asked when she awoke and found him sitting across the room, working at his battery-powered laptop.

He jumped up, stuck his hands into his jeans pockets and came to her, pausing a moment merely to look, then eased his long body down beside her and stroked her face.

“How do you feel? Have you rested enough?”

“I’m okay.”

“You are in the foothills above *La Nava Feraz*.”

“Is this, then, the...the battleground?”

“Sí, this is where it all began...but, we hope, not where it will end with negative results. We have found a place in southern Madera that geologists say can be mined, if it must be done...mined without damaging everyone’s livelihood, the ecology. The logistics are more difficult, and we are probably going to have to fight the government for it -- that is, fight the devious, self-aggrandizing, plutocratic dictatorship that is presently the government.”

“Your driver went through a part of town that swallowed my heart. Is anything being done...is anyone--”

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“*Los barrios bajos, sí.* Antoine is getting some food shipments diverted that were intended for Algeria, along with a medical team. We are trying to address that, too.”

“I hope it does some good, but I suppose it’s only scratching the surface of another endemic misery.”

She sat up and said, “I have no clothes...everything’s back in my room. My SIG-Sauer was locked in my suitcase.”

“My pistol-packing mathematician...did you think you would go into battle? You are quite a woman. You are also my pregnant wife. This is not the place for you in that condition...any condition.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. But I love you too much to let you stay here and wait for bullets.”

“I don’t intend to leave you, Rafael.”

“Do you not care about our...our son -- is it really a son?”

“Yes, a feisty little Rafael.”

“And not Dionysus?” His eyes sparkled with sharp mischief. “We will call him *Miguel, sí?* After my father.”

“What about *my* father? George.”

“*Jorge?* All right.”

“No, I want you to name him. I’ll...I’ll name the next one.”

He leapt off the bed, jamming his hands into his back pockets and staring down at her.

“*¡Jesucristo!* wait until you see how you like doing this first. It is not the easiest thing to imagine...let alone accomplish.”

She arose to lean against him, laughing. “I think I know how it’s done...at least the first part. It could happen again...Rafael Arnau i Roca overpopulating.”

“Not without irresistible complicity...but I think you have rested long enough, my surprising *graciosa.*”

“I’m a clown?”

“Elegant, witty, graceful, humorous, *sí*...do you know all the meanings, beautiful clown? Right now I know only that I want you, clever one...the happiness I have missed.” He drew her back down upon the bed. “This I have missed.”

Semele wore a pair of Rafael’s jeans and one of his shirts, intending to eventually hand-wash her own clothes higher up at a cliff-side where there was runoff water. The day after her arrival, they hiked to an enchanting catchment fed by

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translucent curtains of water spilling over stepped rocks. A place where Rafael said a mother and two daughters who lived in the valley had taken him. Nearby, they filled two wooden buckets before washing in a smaller eddy. Later, they swam in the larger pool. Semele cheerfully called these privations splendid and character-building.

“You are an agreeable soul but you see, this is a hard way of life for the people here...not quaint recreation.”

“I’ve been around the world, Rafael, and seen many hard ways of life.”

“Sí, and that was character-building.”

They stood naked in the pool, arms around each other’s waist, and stared up at the cliffs and then far out through craggy openings at the hazy purple valley floating below.

“In some of the places I have been this pool would be considered heaven on earth. Now, with stolen water, it has become so here. The deep part over there is very cold. Is it too cold for you...this precious mountain water?”

“No, I like cold...especially after sweltering in La Ceiba. This is really such a pristine place...the wonderful silence, the sweet air. What’s that fragrance?”

“Reseda...mignonette to the French.”

“Ah yes, perfume.” She inhaled a deep and heady breath of the loaded air’s tempting offering – in this place and with this man, working its magic like a storied aphrodisiac.

“The valley colors are so evocative from this distance, like a rosy-gold tableau I sometimes dream...from somewhere in my early childhood...some place I thought perfect and was sorry to leave. There are a lot of places like that in my head...little fragments...such exquisite pieces of tapestry. I’m always wanting to return, but they’ve been mixed up, an *ideal* – and, of course, I’m not that wide-eyed child. They flow together, colors woven from innocent perception, sharp and wonderful to this day. A child’s eyes record things with unfiltered clarity.”

“I am surprised at how easily you do this...from a comfortable room with modern conveniences to a cabin with an outhouse...and a long difficult climb to a bathing pool.”

“You shouldn’t be too surprised. Travelers learn to adjust quickly...if they are happy travelers.”

“And you must have been a happy traveler.”

“Almost always...some things upset me...made me mad, when I really began to see.”

“Poverty.”

“Yes...and its effects: ignorance...killing...war.”

“When you *really began to see*, we were looking with the same eyes.”

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He sluiced water onto her body and ran his hand over the nearest chilled breast, white and with a taut wine-aureoled nipple, a silky curve of minutely cold-dimpled flesh. “¡Dios! you are beautiful, water nymph. I have thought of you here...but I could never make it as it is.”

“I wish we could stay in this peacefulness...only you and I, on and on. But it won’t ever be like that.”

“No, not for us...an ideal for anyone. But there is now. And we know how to enjoy that, do we not? To look around us, to look at each other and live in this moment. What we have is...really everything, *querida*: our reasoning minds and the truth of this moment...this place that holds us now...and always will...like our room in Paris...and in Barcelona...I pared an orange for you and you asked me if it was all right to be kissed.”

This recollection engendered its desired repetition, which went on for some time in wholly aroused silence.

Trembling, she managed, “It was perfect...*is* perfect.”

His gentle laughter was a little chiding, a little cautionary. “Eh, some things you have forgotten.”

“No, nothing...all of a piece. As you said: *in all the difficult places*. You for me always perfect.”

“Sí, *querida*. But *you* do that. For me your eyes are purest water, life...sometimes *azul celeste*...the color of heaven. ¡Dios!...we energize each other...our lives.”

Their arms hung limply at their sides, inert and forgotten, until all beyond was excluded by that melded gaze always seeking seclusion in the place of fulfillment; a gaze obtaining not as much to know as to relish to entirety what is in the moment; an ancient look out of myriad times exchanged spontaneously born anew, and by all time never diminished.

This kept, he momentarily broke the spell, laughing and stretching out his hand. “Come. We must get out now, *mi prenda*. I cannot satisfy you here...too cold.” He led her to the pool’s edge, and they splashed out, lying down on their rough sheep’s wool blanket. Reseda-laden breezes chilled their tingling wet bodies as they rolled together. His soft voice was a single French endearment: “*Mignonne*.”

Rafael thought it necessary to introduce Semele to Ramón and Julia Gómez without delay. They were surprised at the sudden appearance of this mysterious wife, and politely curious. She also met their two earnest-eyed daughters, who looked at her with poorly disguised envy and regret – their innocent secret yearnings had been

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dashed by an unassailable rival. At once aware of their artless sentiments, Semele cheerfully set about winning their favor. This she did by satisfying their curiosity concerning a wide range of simple subjects beyond their close-bound lives: Was Elvis Presley still alive? Did people in America really put ice cream in their coffee? Were there computers like Rafael's in every home? They were so bright and receptive that Semele wished she had her own computer so that she could show them things. They had initially viewed her as merely a comely wife, an adjunct to Rafael, implying she was quite pretty enough for this, but when they learned that she had a doctorate from a university they wanted to know what she did with such an abundance of knowledge. There, facing a detrimental explanation of her profession, the lively conversation came temporarily to a halt, and especially with their parents looking on. Everyone knew what UNIFOLL was: the company that dangled the coveted prize of water before them while attempting to desecrate their valley and deplete their meager earnings. Every inhabitant of *La Nava Feraz* wished only for the return of their glorious river, the sparkling dark blue ribbon of life which only a few short years ago gathered its momentum from the snowy peaks and wound through their valley, leaving behind a conditional paradise.

In order to protect her from any condemnation of her profession and its effects, Rafael explained that Semele was *encinta*. This revelation evoked considerable joy, tender expressions of sympathy: a hug for Semele from Julia; a robust handshake for Rafael from Ramón. Giggling Juanita and Rosa clasped each other and smiled until there were dimples of amazed delight prettily etched in their smooth caramel-sweet faces. They would assume that to be pregnant with their hero's child would require Semele's complete attention. Still, Ramón made so bold as to question why she was here in this condition in a none-too-stable environment.

"She wanted to come. She thinks as I do...Semele is a welcome comfort to me. If there is danger I will send her away," Rafael avowed. There was agreement that to be near her husband at this time was preferable to any other place, and that was the end of the matter.

People of the valley, hearing of the news, occasionally appeared with an assortment of homely but useful gifts -- a basket of pinecones for the cabin's fireplace; a newly woven merino wool blanket; a pillow filled with cornhusks -- and supplies of whatever edible staples they could share: a squash; a goat cheese; a few scabby pears from a thirsty tree; a half dozen shriveling tomatoes; a jug of fresh milk kept sweating-cool in a nearby damp hillside crevasse; even a modest clutch of diminutive speckled brown eggs. These offerings Semele and Rafael accepted with grateful thanks, knowing that to refuse such generosity on grounds of greater need elsewhere would have been very bad manners indeed.

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Carlos Garcia appeared and disappeared with regularity, self-conscious before Semele because of his earlier blunder, but quite unwilling to remove himself too far from Rafael's predominating influence.

Antoine and Mari were staying in the village below. Semele gradually came to know their carefully submerged personalities, their idiosyncrasies drawn from nomadic lives and the necessary inhibitions of clandestine experiences. The couple ate and drank sparingly at irregular times dictated only by sudden hunger, a food-on-the-run practice formed by constant global mobility -- chunks of white bread, bunches of red grapes, tins of sardines, and always the same smelly, grayish-brown-encrusted little rounds of pale yellow cheese, originating far off in a French monastery. They retired to their guest quarters when the inclination grew strong for either of them and an answering tryst could be conveniently arranged, the desire signaled by a more focused exchange. Between them, they communicated in mutually understood, very abbreviated snatches of idiomatic French. Both fully aware of Semele's profession -- viewed as threatening, the pairing of Semele and Rafael seen as a *mésalliance* -- they were at first circumspect and restrained. Eventually, they were won over by Semele's articulate opinions, very much their own, and her friendly inclusive nature. Weighty subjects of more depth were then suitably added to the conversation.

On this particular early morning -- its crimsoned-mountain coolness especially welcome to Semele -- Antoine had just called on his cellular to say he was driving up later for a discussion. He wanted to bring Mari who, he said, enjoyed talking with Semele.

"You see, everyone warms to you," Rafael soothed as he pocketed his phone and proceeded to lift two sunnyside up eggs from the black iron fireplace skillet. He slid them onto Semele's chipped terra cotta plate.

She leaned on her hand, staring at the eggs and feeling slightly queasy, her refusing body propped over the narrow pine tabletop.

Rafael had his flannel shirtsleeves rolled for the business of tending the fire and making certain that Semele ate. He tucked his green plaid shirttail into his jeans before he turned out two eggs for himself, and sat down on the bench across from her. She looked up at him, saw the hint of commiseration on his face, and struggled above her slight malaise. Messaged eyes lingered on her with concern, a black wisp of intransigent hair falling over his steadily sun-bronzed forehead. Her hand reached across the table, tapered white fingers lifting the jet lock, drawing it back and weaving it into his bountiful mane of undulating waves.

"Your hair is anfractuious."

"¿Qué?" He laughed and shook his head.

"Wavy...irresistibly wavy."

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“It is *your* hair, *increíble* this hair, kinks and curls of red wildness...enough to make me loco, *querida*.”

He caught her retreating fingers, opened the cool dry palm and pressed his mouth there, offering practical words of encouragement between each kiss. “Eat your eggs. Drink your milk. Miguel is hungry.”

Her peevish expression of resistance made him wink at her, but until she had cut up her eggs, raked them into a little mound, as she preferred to do, and slipped a forkful of this admixture into her unenthusiastic mouth, he made no move to eat.

Rafael had left Semele to her visit with Mari, and walked with Antoine up onto an ascending slope of hillside that rose and dipped as it rambled toward higher hills. They sat on boulders in the shadow of three small pines as the light of the noon sun heated the valley. They spoke in French, the easiest language for Antoine in relaying the latest news and his concerns.

Serious-faced Antoine had folded his blue-shirted arms in against his wiry body, occasionally raising a hand to stroke his thin black moustache. Intermittent breezes caused him to toss ruffled tails of straight black hair away from his dark glasses. His lean, sharp-nosed face held a frown, even more drawn with worry than usual.

“Where are your guards?”

“Below...I think with Carlos in the village.”

“No. Excuse me, but you see...you have become too unobservant in regard to your safety. Carlos is whoring in La Ceiba. And your guards should be outside your door.”

“I cannot live like that.”

“Because of...” Antoine held too much respect for Rafael to finish the assertion, at once looking as if he had blundered. He would certainly know that his chosen leader’s discerning mind understood the rest.

Rafael felt a mild frustration mingled with regret, this for his current inability to respond with the old unassailable assurance of the lone activist. He knew that Antoine was right – precisely why he had promised himself never to complicate his moment-to-moment existence with a woman. Once again, he reminded himself that he could not have anticipated the totality of Semele; the result being that he had entered her life cocksurely unprepared, briefly audacious and consumed with lust. The initial attraction was almost immediately enhanced with profound admiration, leaving him vulnerable. How disappointed Antoine must be in finding him with a pregnant

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wife. A serious and exemplary leader was expected to eschew human weaknesses. However, Antoine, in experiencing Semele, was not himself immune.

Antoine had no such problem with Mari; it was Mari who had drawn her mate into the plight of others. They operated as one. Mari was undeviating, initially ready to give up everything, needing only a leader -- as they all, at least of the inner circle, were ready for and in need of the one they had chosen. Yes, some time back, in the resounding wake of his increasingly prominent solitary efforts, Rafael began to attract very loyal followers.

In those early days, he relied on stealth to achieve his goals, surprise, and a most effective public humiliation of the opposition; this was supported by carefully gleaned incontrovertible fact. Now, with his inescapable notoriety, stealth and surprise had been almost entirely forfeited. Former tactics had to be replaced by studied, unimpeachable evidence and a certain amount of manipulative showmanship. His easy rapport with crowds, and those of prominence who could offer assistance, served him well and left him rarely at a loss for fact-based responses, refashioned for popular consumption. But as to the matter of Semele: for Rafael, she was above discussion, seen only as a singular asset, an indisputable phenomenon in his life to stay, even if she must be temporarily removed.

"I think they are looking for you...I *know* it. This place is too obvious. I want you to move."

"No, I am here for a reason, not to run away, and here I stay...as long as I am needed. In any case, *mi amigo*, soon it will not matter. This is not going to be a smooth operation. Soldiers coming from La Ceiba...rebels and supporters coming from the central south...we and the peasants of *La Nava Feraz* hurling ourselves prominently into the mix. We must try to save this valley without bloodshed. It is why we planned so carefully, took those critical proactive measures. But you know that when you come up against armed hostility it is not far to injury and dying.

"Do we really have to go that far?"

"Sometimes it happens, but it must never be from our own carelessness. Persuasion is best. We will not think of any dying, or encourage any, because that immorality always taints success with irredeemable degrees of failure."

Hard not to think of it, Antoine's grim face said. He turned to look out over the peacefully indifferent valley, whose untrammelled continuance could come at such a price, and then back at Rafael, hesitating a moment before he spoke. His voice held gravity and some reluctance.

"Bellaco might already have your head if you were not so high profile."

"Then some benefit has come from loss of anonymity."

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Rafael patted Antoine's shoulder and grinned, his former nonchalance restored as he offered a comment that left Antoine visibly shaken. "Amigo, I have never presumed a death of old age. Now let us talk of Bellaco's supposed deployments and our own, and where we expect to hold our standoff in the valley. I want it to be away from the village, near the mine site. At least we must be the ones to control the initial phase. There is our other action to consider, the far more decisive and dangerous action lying in wait for this government that steals from its people."

"It must be difficult for you," Mari said in her accented English. "You have much more to give up than ever I did. Since I was a girl, I have always been on the side of *l'opprimé*...the deprived...*oui*, the oppressed."

"I was raised to think as you, Mari. But I haven't really given up my position at J.D. Smith...although by now I may have been fired. I had hoped to return to work. Much of my previous work has been positive. This job's been made superfluous. My anger...disappointment...well, disgust, is justified. What I've been asked to do goes beyond loyalty."

"So your loyalty has removed to a worthier place."

They had carried the pine table's crude little benches outside and set them upon the trodden dry grasses; now they were nearly parching in the sun, their coffee mugs placed on a flat, but slightly uneven and tilting, slab of basalt.

Mari was small with sharp features, short straight dark hair gleaming in the sunlight, and a plump little mouth often protruding and puckering as she strained over her choice of English words. Semele would have preferred that Mari speak in French, but did not wish to dissuade her from her polite and carefully constructed attempts, which were altogether quite good. Her eyes darted over Semele's face, with a curiosity seen as striving to fathom the mind and manner of a female person who could so exclusively capture the elusive Rafael Arnau i Roca – this man, a phenomenon thought so prepossessing, brilliant in reasoning power, and wholly exemplary in selfless conduct that women and men alike, and especially ascetic Mari, had fallen swiftly under his very unintentional spell. Semele, here drawn into a proximity that allowed intuitiveness to flower, suspected that Mari was extremely curious as to how she had become Rafael's disparate soul mate, how she had invaded that very solitary life and been allowed to carry his child. All of this cued speculation was confirmed when normally reserved Mari put forth what was for her a generous observation.

"As I come to know you I realize there is much more to you than I at first thought -- you are so nice to look at, but that is not everything for Rafael. Excuse me if I say what I believe: you two are contrapuntal. I think that is right, *oui, en*

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contrepoint. There is a music between you, each an independent melody. These played together are very powerful to hear...to observe; they reinforce.”

“That’s really...very good of you, Mari.”

“I do not know if it is so good of me,” Mari mused, “but certainly I am fascinated.”

Seldom allowing the intrusion of sinister thoughts, because deemed an unhealthy and ineffectual diversion, Semele had recently become aware of an ominous heaviness that hung over her strange new life. This obscure darkness heightened every thought and vision with the absconding beauty of the ephemeral -- a stunning twilight texture of melancholy. At first she had thought it was a chemical change, the fetus making its demands. Now she identified it as much more: the force of her love doing battle with the unpredictable finite. This fiercely driven impulse made her anxious, made her question every new and unusual detail that her watchful eyes and finely tuned ears fell upon. In a sense, it was her investigative expertise called into play in an area previously out of bounds: her remarkably extended private world. In this current frame of mind, and in a rather short passage of time, the conversation unavoidably inclined to the reason they were all here.

“Antoine shares everything...the entire plan with you.” It was a statement also to be construed as a question.

Mari looked quickly away, far away up the grass-fringed slope climbing behind the cabin, as if sending out a message to her mate and in need of a rapid reply. She turned back, her covert brown eyes still holding indecision.

“*Oui*, of course I know and we share. I am here in Madera for that reason...to know...to do whatever I can.”

Semele -- her body, her white shirt and detergent-faded jeans all mantled a single tone by the broad flare of full noon heat -- had become an alabaster study of brightness, direct light blanching not only herself and her companion but penetrating her sun-burnished hair and scalp, blanching even the dark shadings of her thought.

She smelled the dried grasses scorched by a constant assault of steadily less filtered rays: a smoky, peat-mossy sweetness arousing flickering memories of juvenile summers on sparkling grass, those summers rarely passed in the same country. Angling her curved hand to make a visor of shade, she squinted at the washed-out form of Mari, whose upturned now featureless face offered no more than two jet slits of speculation masked in a blaze of white. In this seamless meld of subject and object, differences of intent faded; the blinding milieu formed a single cloth bleached of detail, everything flattened and neutralized by dimension-obscuring light -- a hot reduction not long to be tolerated, advancing an impromptu disclosure; an unburdening that might not have occurred in the cooling shadows of the humming pines above.

The Water Bearer

“Rafael withholds things...it has nothing to do with trust...but a stubborn...an excessive concern for my well-being. If, in me, you hear something like independent melody, then you know I have my own way of dealing with adversity. But now I’m disabled, Mari, just...left out by this sheltering aspect of...of his,” (she had been about to say of love) “unable to react or prepare because I’m not allowed to know important things. Do you see how that makes it worse...far harder on me? I need to know what’s going to happen. I need to *know*.”

Mari stood up and paced, with folded arms pressed firmly against the small round breasts nestled within her close-fitting blue t-shirt. She lifted her khaki pants leg and tapped her sandaled right toe against the basalt rock to release a granular irritant trapped between the thick insole and her bare foot. Semele remained silent, hoping that her uneasy revelation had induced enough sympathy for a gainful result. She soon saw that it was not to be. No, Mari was staunchly faithful, perhaps in a certain way herself in love with Rafael -- that uncanny strength of purpose emblazoned like a summons on the masculine beauty of his physiognomy. Back on her bench, Mari’s decisive hands settled over knees held taut. Her shiny black bangs were given a pert toss.

“I am sorry, Semele. You know I would never say what Rafael himself has chosen not to say.”

Gripping the edge of the bench, smiling and holding back a huge impatience, Semele said, “Do you know that I risked quite a lot to come here with information that helps this plan along? -- the one I’m not privy to...in the very mistaken notion that such ignorance is *good* for me.”

“Then why do you not insist upon being told?”

Semele’s dismissive laughter was tinged with a helpless self-justification. “Because, you see, I’d rather he didn’t know that I know...have to suffer with knowing that I know.”

“*Mon Dieu!* You two do make separate music in the name of love. I am sorry but now you must have a harmonious duet. I cannot forsake Rafael’s trust in that way. Forgive me. I am sorry, Semele, *je vous plains*...sorry.”

“How can I blame you?” By habit nearly always gracious and ameliorating, Semele had characteristically returned to the generosity of her old impartial nature. “No, I can’t blame you. It’s to be admired...and I’m sorry I’ve made you uncomfortable. Forget it, Mari.”

Semele was hiking briskly toward their bathing pool, the hoped-for haven of rescue, once a broad hanging glacier that had become the little tarn on lower *Montaña*

The Water Bearer

Espejismo. Perhaps the cold water would awaken her from the madness that now seemed to invade so much of her thought. She had waved a cheerful good-bye to Mari -- making certain the gesture was received as casual and friendly --, stood a moment watching her hike up the slope toward Antoine and Rafael, then begun her own demanding climb in a northerly direction. It was a long and rigorous ascent that afforded her ample time to work off some of the dogging frustration. Her good penny loafers were thoroughly dusted and beginning to show the wear and tear of rough terrain, increasingly so as she kicked at stones and crashed absent-mindedly into roots and low outcroppings along the narrow trail. Briefly, she wished for her running shoes -- to climb like a nimble cloven-footed mountain dweller -- but even having them she would be reluctant to abuse them on this destructive path.

Endorphins were making some headway. She was beginning to feel like her old self again, in control, almost heady. Up here in this high clear air, it seemed impossible that so much strife could be massing below; that conflicted human beings could possibly be intent upon making one another so brutally miserable. Thoughts flew through her mind with furious intensity.

What good has my disk of information been anyway? Probably things would have gone the same without it...or me. Rafael was right. I should not have come here. Well of course I should not have succumbed to...to him. I should certainly not be pregnant! I'm going to have to leave. I'm not wanted...a nuisance...a liability...simply a burden...an added worry for Rafael. I'll call Jeff and ask him to come and get me. I wonder if he would. I've no idea where I stand there. God, I've made such a mess of things. Clever woman! What a clever, clever woman you are, Semele. This is what love does. I've scarce idea yet what it really does, this consuming force eating away at mind and body. Eating away! All these fiercely transforming thoughts in this quivering, lovesick head, contrite and foolish and useless. Be more decisive. Oh, how can I just leave him?

The melodious tune of a single bird lifted her spirits, then a chirruping chorus of birdsong, sweet announcements delicately heralding the craggy organic surround. She had clambered over the flat stones, splashed through falling water, carrying her shoes, and now sat on a familiar large boulder, staring at the pool. The driving force of her anger and frustration drained away, gradually replaced by intoxication with her immediate environment. Occasionally, with tensed mouth, her eyes flashed lingering evidence of defeat trailing over flushed cheeks. Carefully controlled fingers unbuttoned her shirt, working in that methodical, thoughtful manner until her clothes lay piled on the rough boulder. Immersion turned her exercised hot flesh frigid, water temperature instantly banishing remnants of anguish. Standing in the viscous cold waist-high, she blinked at its shimmering green light, inhaling the heady reseda fragrance and listening to the euphonic rhythms of near and far bird cries, a hum of

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fickle breezes, the arcing splash of her own hands, all interspersed with silence. Two iridescent-blue dragonflies hung over the water in a transitory pairing, their encounter certain as a function of math, as if these instinctually mating, darting vitalities were the veritable center of all meaning, as if she, awed observer, were the mere effect of a fleeting insectival glimpse, oblique and blurred beyond the luminescent whirr of doubled wings.

Reflections joggled back and forth on the breeze-rippled green mirror, settling into solid shapes by dint of temporarily stilled air. The jagged rocks behind her then composed themselves across the surface of the water, ebony crevasses and sunlit striations beckoning toward a haunting reverse adventure. Beneath her breasts, her hair radiated back from the malachite membrane, sun-painted tentacles on opaque water. Just beyond this striking red drift, on one of the reflected high rocks, a tall human form materialized. Her heart quickened as her head lifted, her still-slender waist half rotating her upper body, one arm shading her eyes, the other reflexively covering her breasts.

Rafael came down to the water's edge and positioned himself on a boulder canted over the pool, silent, hands folded and resting on thighs of extended crossed legs. Fanciful consideration would have him forged of the rock itself, as adamantite and fixed in purpose as a volcanic extrusion. Yet the concentration of his gaze bespoke a visceral immediacy, the beating heart of vulnerable flesh.

In that moment of recognition neither spoke, for even the softest words would have punctured and dissipated this fragile bubble of perfection. The fused dragonflies danced on between two immutable visions of arrested time.

“; *Ven!*...come here, *belleza*,” Rafael finally called out to her, standing up to watch her swim to him.

He stretched out his arms. She rose out of the water and moved toward him, water cascading off spare curves and down lanky cream calves, trickling over her clambering feet. Receiving her lively body against his clothes and hot flesh, both a physical pleasure and a cooling relief after his sweaty walk, he slid a hand over her wet abdomen.

“Is your belly a little swollen now?”

“Is it? I think I only feel it...but can you tell?”

“I can tell...no one else.” He thumbed a sparkle of wet from beneath her eye, and then another sliding droplet.

“Why this?”

Now if she said, in the simplest resolution, *because I've been here with you and have to go away*, he would agree at once, leaving her no alternative. She shook her head, forestalling an answer, but adding yet another tear.

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“You should not come here alone.”

“I’m not a helpless child.”

“But you are carrying one.”

“Soon I think carried far from here.”

His fingers slid into her dripping hair, exploring quivering scalp, then pulling her head against his cheek in unvoiced tactile pleasure, the unique nutty-sweet flavor of russet wet coils she herself could smell. In a while he drew back to deal with her mood, although clearly reluctant to interpret yet another volatile state of intransigence.

“Why do you want to punish me today?”

“You’re the one who wants me to go.”

“No! I only want you safe.”

She felt a frustrating heat gathering inside her body, like massing thunder clouds pushed to electric display.

“You tell me nothing!”

“Is this what Mari meant?”

“Mari told you--”

“Only that you are disturbed. You should realize that if you know everything it puts you in much greater danger.”

“Not knowing is *more* dangerous. I don’t know what to do...I don’t know what to do!” Restraint impossible, a few more tears fell on the offending shoulder--the foolishness, the uselessness of exclusion, of ignoring her competence.

“*Querida*,” he consoled, holding her, stroking her, letting the tirade diminish in anticipation of sweet repair. When the outburst had abated somewhat, he continued to hold her in a tight encirclement of pleasure for both, then spoke against her ear with a softened soothing voice, “*Pobre de Semele*, your altered chemistry is mixing you up.”

“You! You are mixing me up. I want to know what’s going to happen.”

He let go of her and began to unbutton his shirt.

“I need to cool off.”

She stood up and dove off the rock, imprecise and clumsy with emotion, nearly belly-flopping, feeling the partial sting of the water like a cruel slap of refusal.

He came up at her back and took hold of her, pinning her body against him with a hard grasp of containment.

“*¡Jesús!* will you be careful with yourself.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll be careful! Because of you, I wasn’t careful with myself, I wasn’t careful, was I?” she cried, pushing herself away with her arms flailing at the water.

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“Stop it! Stop it, Semele. *¡Serénese!*”

He lifted her up and plunged her beneath the water, a swift baptism aiming for reason, pulling her out by her thick matted hair while she sputtered and gasped.

“It’s because of you...because of you that I’m here like this. You don’t trust me! You don’t trust me at all.”

“*¡Jesucristo!* I trust you with my life.”

Water sloshed over them as she twisted her body around in his arms and looked into his dark impenetrable eyes. An impasse, such an impasse of drowning darkness.

“Then tell me. Don’t ruin me like this. *Tell me.*”

She thought the water could never steal her breath as those taciturn chestnut eyes were doing.

“The way you are now is why I have never wanted to be this close to anyone.” He sighed. “But I am. If I reveal our plans, immediate or remote as they may be, I endanger you. If you are harmed, my love, I have forsaken you.”

“Rafael...oh, Rafael, anyone who finds that I’m with you will assume that I know everything. If that’s the case, I’m already endangered. I accept that. I don’t care!”

“One of us must. To be near me now is dangerous. Can you understand? I cannot bear to expose you to harm.”

She laid her head against his chest. “I’m so sorry that I’m pregnant, because it’s made you fear--”

“No! It was you I fell in love with...you I love now. You are so angry, *mi amor*...because you think I disregard your usefulness, but I fear for *you*, Semele.”

“And I fear for you...an unknowing fear...the worst.”

“The future is always unknown. *Querida*, why can you not understand? Coming above the pool, I thought, *there is my love*. What I saw was like a flawless painting. Your red hair, your perfect body above this green water, guarded by these peaceful mountains as if you were safe. You turned to me like a shy nymph in your surprise. *¡Jesús!* I wanted you at that moment...wanted what only you can give...you are so much...so full of life. But when you came to me you were crying. This is our reality...that I can make you cry.”

“But why should I have to cry? It’s terrible, this frustration. Love is sharing both good and bad...to me it is. Didn’t you say as much? I can’t be any other way.”

“I will think how to share more with you. In any case, soon I will send you away...perhaps it is that I love you too much, but please let it be. *Estamos enamorados*...you see? Our love is *now*, in this green pool of water. Alone in this

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moment in time we can do as we like...the joy of it...innocent pleasures...the heat of them. Here and now let us be together in nature, wild as this wild mountain.”

VIII

If you are bent upon a little private discipline, wait till you are choking with heat some day -- then take a mouthful of cold water, and spit it out again, and tell no man!

..... Apollonius

He had begun to prepare for what was to come. Always initially there was a brief moment of unspoken fear -- in these matters a healthy amount might well keep one alive -- very soon surmounted by the weighty proceedings at hand; apprehension necessarily sublimated to sharp reasoning and astute planning, to be followed by well calculated action.

As it sometimes does in the pervasive realm of infinite chance, life suddenly took an unexpected turn. For a time, he had worked at his computer, staring rather listlessly and ineffectually at a surfeit of e-mail. He had just called on his cell phone for the same taxi that had delivered Semele to come and take her away -- some measure of unpleasant disputation still lay ahead, as she had not yet fully agreed to leave. While pondering this, he heard a loud commotion outside, the sputtering of an engine coughing itself to death with a misfiring cylinder. Standing at the open cabin door, he was greeted with a strange sight.

Carlos Garcia, in stained t-shirt, torn blue jeans, and scuffed leather boots, was sitting on a battered motorcycle that resembled an aging contraption left over from World War II. Tied behind him was a large, dusty, incongruously expensive piece of caramel-colored luggage. His boyish face displayed a mysterious grin of satisfaction. Balancing the machine with boots planted wide apart, he revved the noisy, popping engine and lifted his arm in a jaunty wave.

“You lunatic!” Rafael called fondly. “Where the hell have you been, *amigo*? Carousing, *sí*?”

“*¡Oiga!* I want *la señora!*” Carlos shouted; for Semele’s benefit, half in thickly accented English.

“*¡De veras!* Is that so?” Rafael called. He walked up to Carlos who was now rapidly and with exaggerated gestures untying the suitcase.

“*Tengo aquí la maleta.*”

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“My suitcase! ¡Es mío!” Semele cried, rushing up behind Rafael. “How on earth did you get it?”

“Sí, *la maleta, es verdad*,” Carlos said, nearly in truth grinning from ear to ear. It was clear that he had somehow accomplished this marvelous recovery and was now presenting his prize in atonement for past bad behavior.

Soon the story came out. Carlos had befriended a little maid who worked at *La Pausa*, and discovered her to be in possession of Semele’s suitcase. This quick-thinking girl had taken the suitcase into her keeping before the *policía* arrived to search Semele’s room. She had grown very fond of Semele, who had given her some of her clothes and also tipped her very well. It was, in fact, Semele’s stylish clothes, altered to fit a petite body, that had especially attracted Carlos to this pretty girl parading down the street. When the young maid was told the room was to be examined, she had whisked the suitcase off to her own quarters and hidden it, in the hope of either appropriating it or returning it to its vanished owner.

Vigorously repeating her *gracias* a number of times to triumphantly beaming Carlos, Semele knelt down with eager concentration. She twirled the combination lock back and forth and pulled open her suitcase, searching through layers of clothing and shoes that spilled out onto the dry grass. Rafael looked on with more than a little surprise as her hands withdrew from near the bottom her gleaming SIG-Sauer.

“Loaded, just as I left it.” She jumped up, displaying a certain ulterior satisfaction increasingly unsettling for Rafael. She had become that other less familiar self.

He continued to stand with folded arms, pondering this charged aspect of Semele, while sending regretful glances at Carlos. The unwitting culprit shrugged back and squinted toward Semele with keen interest as she hurried into the cabin. She soon emerged with five empty tin cans clutched against her breast. The pistol was still in her right hand, balanced over the cans. She stepped away to set the tins in a row on a nearly level boulder at some distance. When this hasty arrangement was completed, she eyed her handiwork then started back toward Rafael and Carlos. Just before reaching them, she turned suddenly and rapidly aimed and fired five times while all five successively punctured cans flew into the sky and landed bouncing and tumbling over the earth.

“Holy shit! ¡Señora! ¡Olé!” Carlos shouted, coming off the straddled machine and waving his arms at the sky.

This irrepressible woman, whom Carlos had previously considered Rafael’s beautiful self-indulgence, had, with those five flawless, ear-splitting reports, proven herself genuinely useful, and thus far more deserving of his shrewd leader. In less than

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an hour this astonishing news would reach the village, and very soon resound across the valley.

“At least now I can protect you.” Quite serious, she presented Rafael with that connate curl of mouth that was pure serenity. Fiery waves of interfering hair were given a confident toss as she deftly decocked the pistol and slid it beneath her flannel shirt to ride under the belted waist of her baggy rolled jeans -- Rafael’s appropriated Levis. The hidden pistol’s horrific significance was unmistakable.

Alongside the immediate heat of frustration, he felt another devastating emotion coursing through his body, an unshaken adulation, if anything now deeper and broader; but then again the sinking feeling of defeat: he knew he would never get Semele away without far rougher tactics than he was willing to initiate. Resultant anger flamed at last.

“Do not walk around with that against your pregnant belly, Semele. Put it inside the cabin in a safe place.”

He watched her gather her strewn clothes back into the suitcase and lay the pistol on top before closing the lid.

“I will put it inside.” He took away the case. Were it not for Carlos, he would have taken *her* inside the cabin and helplessly dispelled this tension by what had caused it.

When the taxi arrived Semele, who had remained aloof after her grand demonstration, asked the driver to take her down to the village. Rafael knew the main purpose of her departure was to escape censure, but secondarily to seek out her growing class of devoted children, assembled early on in order to teach them both English and proper Spanish. Many children had at first attended in curiosity, but were soon won over by her patiently effective tutoring. Eager to learn, they especially wanted to please *la maestra hermosa*.

He sat on the cabin steps talking with Carlos. A good source of detailed information, Carlos had been encouraged to find out things -- every sympathetic pair of ears was always so employed. From time to time his mind flashed over what he had expected to be happening at this moment: Semele being transported to safety, crossing the nearest border to a small airstrip where a plane would fly her to a larger airport and thence to her home or Paris. Emotion soared with the reality of his ever more desired companion still within reach, then plummeted in disgust at his thwarted attempt to remove her to safety. He was not at all finished with this failed objective, and was suddenly seized with an inclination to berate Carlos for its interruption. In a flurry of pique, “That damned suitcase!” was all he managed to get out, for Carlos, thrilled with his accomplishment and its miraculous effect, impudently grinned, as if transformed to the swashbuckling hero of a legendary mischief.

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Then quite abruptly all accusation ceased, temporarily abandoned by the sound of Rafael's phone. The interruption was expected news conveyed by Antoine's excited voice.

"We need you right away. I'm on my way over in the Jeep. They've loaded the heavy equipment and left La Ceiba; it is being transported to the valley at this moment. A crowd is already heading for the proposed mine location."

"I am ready. Come and get me," Rafael answered.

He punched off his phone and said to Carlos, "This time you must do the right thing, *amigo*. If I am gone before she returns, you will be here to see that Semele does not come down to the demonstration."

Carlos shook his head with an expression of grave uncertainty. "This woman of yours...I do not think anyone can make her do what she does not want, *Señor Arnau i Roca*."

"But you *will* do it, Carlos. I charge you with that duty. Please do not fail me. You have my permission to lie...whatever it takes...except, of course, brute force." Envisioning such an attempt by Carlos produced a laugh. "Eh, you would find a surprise there, too."

"I must be at your side in the valley."

"No! This is a far greater help to me. You will have to be clever. By now you know that. Right now I need to concentrate on one objective. Do you understand?"

"*Sí, amo, comprendo.*"

As they wound down to the west end of the valley in the open Jeep, Antoine spoke of the letter Rafael had written to the government, a copy sent to a local paper, *La Jornada*, and copies also posted in towns and villages throughout the country. Point by point, his letter had made the plight of the people of *La Nava Feraz* clear for all to read, and point by point he had proposed reasonable and viable solutions. Foremost an immediate enactment: a removal of the proposed mine to the country's southern unpopulated region where similar resources had been discovered; and a complete breach of the monstrosly ill-conceived dam upriver, allowing the *Río Dulce* a full return to the valley. This tactical letter had gone unanswered, and *El Presidente* had sent soldiers to the newspaper to close it down when the pro forma letter was published. Soldiers had also been dispatched to rip down the posted circulars of the letter, but not before a few thousand had fallen into the hands of a populace in the main sympathetic to the people of *La Nava Feraz*, a populace long opposed to its corrupt and negligent government.

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“It was a good letter, explicit, instructive, fair.”

“Fairness is an unknown concept to this president,” Rafael responded. “Our letter has served its purpose.”

“So now we go ahead with our treacherous plan?”

“Sí, precisely why we worked it out so carefully, because we knew we would probably have to carry it out.”

“Some of the people will side with the government.”

“Those will be mainly the ones crossing borders looking for work. I think we have made a very good case for the concerned indigenous people...how they will reap scarce benefit from a mine in this valley. They have seen what the mill did to their mountains upriver, and where the money went from that rape of their land. With a hard push for reforestation -- there is some good employment -- fifty years from now those bleak eroding hills may once again have a protective covering...a viable ecosystem with diverse benefits, not the least being a pure *vertiente*...watershed.”

As they drove up to the area that had been flagged for excavation with red markers, a crowd comprised of small nearby villages and valley dwellers was already gathering.

“They are responsive,” Rafael said with a grin.

“We have a good communications system.”

Ramón Gómez walked up to the Jeep as they jumped out.

“*Buenos tardes, amo*, Antoine. The soldiers are on their way, truckloads from La Ceiba while *El Presidente* remains in his safe palace shouting orders on his phone.”

They stood a moment in silence, listening to the grinding gears of the straining heavily loaded trucks as they wound up the narrow road to the high valley. Some of the peasants had begun pulling out the red marker flags and tossing them away. Then the crowd linked arms and drew together over the packed dirt entrance road. Several dusty vans pulled up and were let through; from these a number of international reporters began descending with their gear-loaded camera crews.

“The news media. *Bueno*,” Rafael affirmed. “This is the way they redeem their dispersal of trivia.”

“*Alors*, I feel better. I wonder how they got here. I heard they were being turned back at the borders...and did not even want to mention it to you, *patron*,” Antoine said.

“I e-mailed them some daunting navigation. There is a little trail that runs along the border at the west end of the mountains -- hardly a road, very rough and rocky but traversable. Obviously, the government never thought of it. The news media can always be counted on for high performance when there is a good story developing. I like them around. Sometimes they are more useful than a flak jacket.”

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Antoine folded his arms and leaned toward Rafael with an amazed grin. “But how did you know it was going to happen today?”

“I did not know. They have been camped just above us waiting for my call...and I made it before you got to me.”

“*Mon Dieu*, you are a thorough man, *patron*.”

“Just expedience...you know how that works, *amigo*.”

Rafael frowned at the next consideration: the rebels and their renegade general, Mendoza, a well-intentioned man, a good leader. With an uneasy speculation, he gazed down the silent valley sweeping toward the sharp-peaked horizon.

“I have no idea how long it will take our south central rebel friends to get here. They are not far off now, but even when they arrive it is better if they stay in the background...unless things really heat up.”

“*Oui*, things are probably going to heat up, and rather sooner than later,” Antoine lamented. He had noticed Mari coming toward them with the two burly lieutenants, Maurice and Jordi, one French the other Catalan, who were assigned by Antoine to flank Rafael. They and a steadily growing crowd very quickly encircled their leader as he engaged those arriving in a few last minute instructions. Media shoulder-cams focused on this calm prevailing figure, now dubbed *el Arrojo* by Spanish papers for his nerve and cunning before relentless opposition. The filming began.

“Nothing provocative, *amigos*. Hold it down while I state our case yet one more time. We know what the outcome is probably going to be today, but ultimately we are not going to lose. Remember that. This is your valley. You will have it intact, and you *will* have your water.”

The people would need to receive much more than the words of their spokesman. And they did. It was primarily his unstrained, self-possessed manner that they observed and sought to emulate, their effort manifested by confident expressions of unshakeable faith. It would all be as he promised. Each one lifted both hands and boldly cheered, their captured faces full of emancipation, full of Arnau i Roca, of an image much deeper than skin, he who represented *el hombre de la calle*, the man in the street -- the peasant in the valley. At his own raised arms, the lively noisy crowd composed itself in concerted silence. This show of complete support would produce its positive cross-feeding symbiosis yet one more time, setting in motion a fundamental unified response that got the job done. The effect was like a powerful shot of adrenalin. His firm assurance and that broad grin of certainty, infused with an inspiring sense of rapport, continually fostered the required reciprocal action. It was understood that he had imparted the method, the reserve and persistence so important. A mysterious alchemy of unbending determination -- a process of which only Rafael was fully aware -- would carry them forward to the desired finish. Those around him

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rejoiced in their good fortune at witnessing experience conflated with phenomenal strength of purpose, a little history being made.

The first big UNIFOLL truck appeared around the last dusty curve, preceded by a truckload of soldiers now in full and ominous view. Every face turned in that direction as every person mentally dug in, entrenched in resistance.

The taxi had deposited Semele at a weedy intersecting path below the cabin, and she walked the rest of the way, swinging her half-full string bag. A dry wind swept up around her, raising dust. She stared off at the serenely waiting cabin perched on its grassy knoll, and felt its emptiness even from this distance. Something was afoot. Not even the most perennially lethargic soul had been lounging around the village. Her children had been scarce, so many doors shut. Bustling through the untimely closure of his cluttered little store, the proprietor had looked at her strangely. As she neared the deserted cabin, Carlos came around its side and stood in the yard with his hands in his back pockets. His solemn face had lost its mischief and gave the impression of bracing for a formidable onslaught. Could he find her so threatening? Only a short time ago he had sung her praises.

“*Señora Taylor de Arnau i Roca,*” he called in cautious respect, loping forward to take her weighted string bag.

“I wish you’d just say *Semele*, Carlos. Don’t I always call you by your given name?”

“*Lo siento, señora,* this I cannot do. You are the wife of *El señor Arnau i Roca.*” After a pause, and clearly hoping to make himself more agreeable, he suggested, “I am thinking, *con su permiso,* maybe to call you *Doña Semele.*”

“Unnecessary. But shall I call you *Don Carlos?*”

“I do not need of you this *título.* It is not your *costumbre.*”

“Well now that we’ve nearly settled that, where has *El señor Arnau i Roca* gone?”

His answer was very quick, so responsive it seemed to her rehearsed.

“Ah, he goes with his *amigos* to look at the roads.”

“The roads?”

“*Sí, sí,* the roads...to look at the roads...what is *la ruta muy bien por los hombres* coming from *el sur*...south country, eh, when coming into the valley. That is...those who come one day, in other days...when it is coming.”

For Semele’s ears, this fragmented reply was couched in strangeness, but just as she was about to question Carlos further he spoke again in an eagerly imploring voice.

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“Excuse me, *Señora...Doña Semele*, you are good to give food. *Tengo hambre...mucho...hungry...yet today no food.*”

Semele laughed. “Of course, come inside. I’m hungry, too. I’ll fix us something easy.”

Carlos made a fire, and Semele roasted piquant dark green peppers on the hearth grate, sliding off their skins and rolling them inside fire-toasted tortillas, with a dab of goat cheese Carlos fetched from the cooling rock crevice.

Sitting at the little pine table, Carlos said, “This is *muy bien*. I can eat many of these.”

“How many?” Semele asked, laughing and rising from her bench to prepare another batch.

When they were both again seated across from each other -- Carlos eating and Semele, no longer hungry, leaning on her elbows with her fingers locked beneath her chin --, she watched her famished guest, quietly scrutinizing his face and smiling at his rather exaggerated praise over the simple meal. She always encouraged him to practice his English. Now, trying to read his evasive dark eyes, she found him consistently unwilling to look at her. Perhaps he was still embarrassed over the incident in Paris. It hadn’t bothered her for more than a few minutes. She smiled in recollection -- Carlos staring at them in that hot oblivion. Those rare Parisian moments with Rafael were so cherished, so richly exclusive that the brief imposition of Carlos had simply been overridden, a trifling, laughable aside in the sharp singularity of that dream-like existence.

How much more intense this unusual relationship with Rafael had grown; anticipation enhanced by a deliciously pervasive eroticism, the insatiable addiction each to the other. Her thoughts fell once more to justification. If her astonishing life had strayed far from the rigorous path chosen, she was still able to convince herself that she had not precipitated such wild divergence, although her positive reactions had certainly directed the outcome.

Carlos, never so voluble as now, began to speak in halting English, sometimes anxious Spanish, of his seven siblings -- two being sisters --, of his ailing mother, who wove baskets and handbags *muy bellas*, and of his numerous part-time jobs.

“So eventually you began to eviscerate...to take apart old cars and repair their innards...their parts.”

“*Sí*, I have these parts everywhere on *la acera*, eh, the sidewalk. People is angry...*más de los carros* -- too many cars -- no more do they see the shit flowing in their dirty street, or smell it, even as it gives sick. I get a little money, *pero mi madre’s* baskets have not so many tourists. All of us is hungry *siempre...yet* we eat. Then my brother is coughing blood...so I go to kill *El señor Arnau i Roca.*”

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“Oh, Carlos.” She shook her head with brimming eyes.

“Sí. What do I with this killing money? *No sé*. I am as bad as hell. *El señor Arnau* i Roca knows this, but he gives to me wine this same day. He gives food, *la ropa*, clothes.” He rubbed his hands over moist black eyes.

With a polite glance at her watch, she realized several hours had gone by since her return from the village. The sun slanting through the small windows was far in the west. She gazed over the humble but tidy space with surprise, as though just awakening. She stood up and walked across the uneven wood floor to the open door, looking out at the empty path leading from the equally unyielding dirt road; weeds and stones and no footfall or sign of the Jeep to open her heart. She turned back to Carlos, whose wary eyes had slyly followed her. His oblique stare was filled with quick understanding, slight confusion, an oddly searching or beseeching expression Semele read as: *What shall we speak of now? Please let us speak of something agreeable*. She knew what had been troubling her, at once faulting herself for her own carelessness in letting down her guard. She had been so easily led astray, steadily, rather clumsily lulled into inaction. Overconfident by the triumph of her pistol, the moment for which she had been preparing had escaped her.

Sweeping through the open door, the cooling breeze at her back sent individual strands of sparkling hair floating forward over her rigid shoulders. In an altered state of dread, she moved to confront Carlos. She was furious with herself and with Rafael, and surely with this dissembling novice disciple. Standing before him, she silently gathered sharp words of accusation. He drew away, as if physically assaulted by the heat flaming off this unpredictable enigma. *Yes, I see*, she mused, *I am the esposa placed in your trust by the only man you have ever come close to loving*. However culpable, he would be loyal. She watched him snatch up his plate and rise to lay it on the plank counter beside a pan of water. Immobilized, he stood before the small window.

“Where is he?” Her flat voice stiffened his narrow back, and his entire ambivalent body locked down.

Seconds went by. He turned around, having achieved a broad smile, expertly emulating a certain one of Rafael’s. “I have said...he goes with his *amigos* to--”

“Stop it! Tell me the truth. You don’t know with whom you’re dealing, Carlos...oh no, or you’d never have--”

“Sí, I know, I know. You for him. It is truth. Except that...*Doña* Semele, you is to be the mother. You cannot go there and do those things.”

“What things? Oh, *damn it!* how dense I’ve been.”

In the next instant they both turned to listen, standing in shocked silence as the invasive sound of a knocking car motor rattled to a halt.

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Glancing out the window, Semele saw a dusty taxi with Jeet Grey stepping out of it, those weak, thick-glassed eyes probing the cabin. She ducked away, tugging at the curtain.

“My God! How on earth did he...quick, close the door. Go outside. Do something! He mustn't know I'm here.”

Carlos strode across the floor, closing the door hard behind him as he went out.

She leaned against the crude panels, listening. Jeet had walked straight across the dead grass to Carlos, who was standing just on the other side of her flimsy barrier.

“I'm surprised to find anyone at home. Everyone has been down at the mine protest. You're not interested in that?”

“I have work,” Carlos said in his thickly accented English. “No work, I am there.”

“I'm a newsman. I was told by a young chap in the village, hungry enough to take my money, that I might find Arnau i Roca's cabin up here somewhere...here, I believe.”

“No. *Aquí*, I live,” Carlos put forth with emphatic assurance. “*El agitador?* Is that one not *abajo?*”

“He was, yes, at the site...at the head of it all.”

Jeet Grey's appraising voice freely exhibited that recognizable enthrallment Rafael so effortlessly summoned.

“It was spellbinding to hear that indictment, and they bloody-well all listened, even the soldiers. Then the good rebels arrived. He and General Mendoza had their own people under control, but those restless government soldiers had become damned edgy. After all, they had rifles, were they not supposed to take some sort of action? A number of shots were fired...bit of a fracas, confusion. Madera's intrepid advocate, Arnau i Roca, has disappeared...he, and I believe a few others, gone...no one knows if he's even... Perhaps I could come inside...possibly wait here until we know--”

“In *mi casa?* No. *Lo siento*. I let no *extraño* to enter *mi casa*. You must go...*por favor*. I am busy.”

Her heart pounded nearly a thousand beats a minute as she hastened to peek around the window sash. Jeet Grey stood firm in the dry grass, dressed in his customary blue shirt, his preposterously stuffed and sagging work fatigues ponyed on his awkward body like saddlebags. Carried within those bulging pockets were all the implements of her defeat. A belligerent expression of disbelief forced down the corners of his gaping mouth. His sparse ponytail blew limply aside as he moved a short distance, recalcitrant to the last backward step, then truly appeared to be departing. He turned his head over his shoulder for a final incredulous look at the

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cabin, his small glasses flashing back a glint of low sun – gilded blinders, Semele hoped. He climbed irritably into the taxi, its degraded engine knocking so loudly Semele was certain it would fail before they saw the last of Jeet Grey. Meter by breathless meter the fourth estate was coughed and throttled away from the advantage of an inside story, the story inside.

Semele flung open the door. “Shots, *shots* fired! All of it going on while I’ve...we’ve... My God, I should have been there. You...*you!*” Her accusing hand settled over her temple as she ran down the path. “I’ve got to--”

“*Por favor, Doña Semele*, this is nothing good.” Carlos tried to soothe his fitful charge as he ran after her, for a moment laying his hand on her shoulder, attempting to halt her accusing, self-critical tirade. “*Tenga cuidado...have care. No do this. You who are inteligente...por favor. Su marido* does something *muy importante* now at this time.”

“What? Is he even alive? What is he doing?”

“Something. I am not knowing all this, *pero* I hear some things... You must *esperas...wait, sí*, you must wait *toda la noche.*”

“I’m just supposed to wait through the night while Rafael might have been... I’m just supposed to wait, knowing nothing?...as usual knowing *nothing!* Nothing.”

It was painfully clear that she was not one who would run to a corner and weep, but one who needed to act, needed to use her resourceful mind and body for positive results. In that regard, there was little Carlos could do.

Semele paced up and down over the path of trampled dead grass, from time to time her arms flung out in helplessness, all the while a fell mood of wildness releasing a string of muttered self-criticisms. The thing to do would be to start walking down to the village, the long walk was no deterrent but she was afraid of running into ubiquitously ferreting Jeet Grey. Encircling darkness slowly descended, limiting her confused and tormented to and fro roving. The passing minutes yielded nothing. No sign of Rafael, Antoine, Mari, Ramón. No sign of anyone. Soon the pain and frustration would temporarily restrict her, and she would settle down upon the flat moonlit boulder, dazed and speechless. But for a while longer Carlos walked beside her in constrained silence, vigilant, his arms in readiness, just as if she were a toddling, gibbering infant who might at any moment trip in the shadows and fall.

It was Carlos who had eventually fallen, but into a helpless sleep, lying on corn husk pillows tossed on the floor of the cabin. Taking up a naively defensive position, he had intended to barricade the door with his outstretched body but, tossing in his sleep, had ended several feet away. When Semele heard him snoring, she crept

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outside under a bright moon. She could no longer lie alone on the taunting bed shared in every loving manner with Rafael, lie there partaking of the horrors her creative mind continually supplied. Familiar with the crisp night air, she had snugly buttoned a thick-padded jacket of Rafael's over her white shirt. She sat on the still warm flat boulder now dimly reflecting the moon, and waited there, half expecting Rafael to come walking up the path. Within minutes, her startled ears beheld explosions echoing through the valley below, a long series of them. Jumping up, she stood wincing at the concussion of each blast. Surely the noise would awaken Carlos. But as she waited, expecting him to appear at the door, she soon realized that he was not coming, apparently more needful of remaining unconscious in some kinder state. What monstrous hell was going on down there? Were scouting soldiers aiming at something, practicing with their guns? What? Were the explosions for the mine? She was stuck here with no hope of finding out anything. Earlier, Rafael's transistor radio had yielded no more information than Jeet Grey had unwittingly provided. She could not call Rafael's very likely useless cell phone, for fear of endangering him.

She decided that if she could not go down she would go up, climb until exhaustion obliterated any more punishing thought. Her restless feet welcomed a response, the more arduous the better, an endeavor unachievable without moon glow bathing the rough precipitous path leading to their familiar tarn. Even in moonlight, negotiating the rugged ascent was a difficult process, but one that in dejection she tackled with a fiercely opposing energy. She heard the occasional warning rustle of a snake, completely undeterred.

Often she looked far down through the silhouetted gnarl of trees, at the innocent valley sleeping beneath the moon's silvery luminescence. With an outstretched finger she could trace the serpentine curves of the nearly dry river bed -- its pitiful trickle the very reason she was here. A whirr of sound, a soft aerobic swoop, made her look up to find night's stealthy black wings fluxing the stillness, darting bats crossing the moon. Off in the west end of the valley some terrible thing had transpired; unnamed because unknown, vaguely assembled by a highly inventive imagination. Never had she felt this alone, this left out. Could Rafael really care for her and leave her so remotely disengaged? Once again, she reminded herself that he had not expected to have her here with him, that he had merely carried on with what was set in motion long before they met. Attempting to be a part of all this had not worked at all. Ultimately, she was superfluous, had always been something of a liability in an otherwise nearly seamless operation. This charged Maderan atmosphere was least of all a climate for love's mercurial weather. But there she could never fault him for lack of devotion, or give up the need of it; neither blame anyone but herself nor dispense with her anger and grief. Now more confused than ever about where she

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belonged, she thought it must be back at her comparatively tame job with Jefferson Davis Smith & Associates. How far removed that seemed: her carefully toned body and mind, her business clothes, her nose to the grindstone; jet travel and account books and another sort of cunning, of a rather more set and definable intrigue. No private life. A private life, at least hers as it turned out, was an extraordinarily complicated affair. But she had longed to be a part of something worthwhile; that was how it had begun, even before Rafael, and how it remained, a conscious choice to use her life for some valid risk that canceled superfluity. *Oh God, is he alive, is he alive, or have those guns killed him?* her mind interposed. *I'm going to die of it. I myself am going to die of it!*

Moving clumsily along, she was only halfway to the pool. It was more difficult than she had thought. She stood still, thinking, exhausted from too much adrenalin, then threw herself down on a flat grassy promontory, a precipitous little wedge of earth barely accommodating her reclining body. Stretched out on her stomach on the cool, crackling grass, she finally allowed herself to weep. In the past she had permitted herself very few such fits of sobbing. It was a selfish indulgence to howl with abandon when others were far beyond any such release. Deep sobs oddly summoned another long forgotten disillusion, when as a tender child she had begged to clamber back and share her meal with a passing Tibetan youth encountered on a high rocky trail. Wavering before her now were those chilled crimson cheeks, dirty little hands protruding from soiled padded red coat sleeves, a pointed, multicolored knit cap, no trace of tears, but the narrow dark eyes devouring her crude slice of buttered bread. That hungry child – already then having learned privation – if still alive, had matured in an impounded country. Now before her lay this indistinct path above a threatened valley, but far more difficult to bear: her ineffectual, discounted existence beside a heavily engaged man whose increasingly complicated life was all at once severely in question.

The creamy blue valley now slept far below in silent and expiring indifference. Above, only the brightest stars competed with the moon; the whole, framed by an intricate jet scroll of dormant trees, a surreal mural of pearled sapphire, the obscuring night cloaking thirst and blight as a benighted society covers its failures with larger ones. Blinking and squinting, she imagined she could see the river as it once was, thick and black, winking back a fluid moon that rippled and dipped over full-channeled curves dividing a thriving valley. Wishful thinking. The only river was the tearful flood of here and now, blurring her vision. She rolled to her side and closed her eyes. For a moment the tears stung as they slid across her cheek and fell into the grass. The anger of self-castigation would not be assuaged, boring into her

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breast like a sharp awl, until, mercifully, her exhausted body slipped from consciousness.

“*¡Cristo!* at last! *¡Jesús!* I wish you had not done this. We must hurry.” He lifted her up against him.

Insensible, she awakened to the pungent odors of dust, sulfur, sweat, and blood, mingled with sweet particles of the mountain’s fresh night airs; the arousing musky, earthy scent of heavy action, belonging only to this man. His returned body had sprung to life, to her revived life, from a tangled trail of low-growing dark verdure and shadow, back from a harsh circumstance her excluded mind strained to elicit. There was a black stain on his torn left shirt sleeve that might be, must be, *blood*.

“*Rafael...* Oh, I thought... How did you know I was—”

“I am in your mind. Dammit, Semele, you could have hurt yourself or frozen here...no time for this. We need to move...fast, now! *¡Ven!* They will be after my head very soon...and yours *también*.”

“Is that blood? Are you hurt?”

“No time. *¡Vamos!*”

She shivered a little, the cold only a nuisance. Overjoyed to find his envisioned lifeless body yet in vivid motion, she could finally let go of alarming misconceptions, compartmentalize peace of mind, however threatened.

Drawing back in an attempt to verify the soundness of his whole body, she spoke in a carefully even voice. “You shouldn’t have looked for me. If they’re coming, you should have gone...left as swiftly as you could. What does it matter about me? I can take care of myself.”

In possession of what he had searched for, he drew her toward him with an impatient haste, as though she were the last necessary thing to be done, and started down the path, tight fingers gripping her arm, too tired or irritated or engrossed in something else to answer. But then, her eyes still affirming his presence, for one fleeting moment she saw him glance down at *La Nava Feraz*. He smiled. Her head turned aside to look. It was there, nothing imagined, the black velvet river flowing through the valley.

An unspoken state of siege lay over the predawn cabin. Carlos paced. Large-framed Jordi sprawled on the floor, trying to sleep. Semele dressed Rafael’s arm while, in an animated, adrenalin-charged state, his rapid Castilian advised Ramón on safe measures for the unworldly farmer and his family. Mari waited in remarkably patient

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restraint for Antoine to return. He had driven wounded Maurice to an old country doctor further south. Maurice had been standing beside Rafael when the firing began. Rafael's arm was grazed by one of the bullets meant for him, but which hit Maurice in the side. Rafael, Jordi, and Ramón had gone on to the dam, where Rafael set off the previously laid charges that sent the liberated water surging out of log ponds and catchments, rendering the barren riverbed of the *Rio Dulce* once again a lively rush of sweet sustenance for the valley. UNIFOLL was already preparing to convert the dammed river's power from the disastrous mill to the soon to be devastating mine. In UNIFOLL's parlance, hell would be paid.

"If Jeet Grey can tempt a hungry child to say where I am, it will not be long before Bellaco's soldiers come," Rafael surmised.

"No villager betrays you." Carlos was adamant.

"No, it will happen by mistake." Rafael's remark, along with his rueful smile, sent Semele out of the cabin to stand on its steps in the hidden dawn's night air.

"*Yo sé...*the truck comes." Carlos, easily the least experienced was ever the most confident.

They were all waiting, with some uncertainty, for a prearranged truck to arrive and transport them to the near border. There was nothing more Rafael could do now but leave and let General Mendoza and the rebel soldiers try to overcome the government loyalists. For the moment, his work was finished. Antoine and the others had insisted that he leave until things transitioned to a workable arena. At present he was very hot tender.

Semele heard the assurance made by Carlos, then moved down the steps. She had been standing by the half-open door and no one noticed her leaving. In her hand she carried her cell phone. A decisive act of recovery was now hers to initiate. She knew she must not hesitate any longer, had only been waiting for the right moment to slip away and put into operation a plan that might save them all. She moved briskly up the rising slope until she came near the three pines. The slow lifting of their pungent needles in a quiet sigh of wind gave off faint sparkles in the hard white moon's parting beams. Dipping boughs then sougled a doleful greeting as she knelt to punch numbers. To her considerable amazement Jeff answered at once, shouting above a horrid din of noise – almost a miracle...if only he could make it one.

"Where are you, Jeff?"

"On my way to you, but it took a while to get this big chopper on line and fueled. Been in and out of La Ceiba, staying on the friendly side of the government...ever since things heated up. I expected your call much sooner...but damned if I was waiting until you couldn't be removed."

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“You knew I’d call? I thought it was a miracle just to reach you. How do you know where I am...how to find me?”

“Have you forgotten what I do? I know exactly where you are...have known from day one...and I leave no associate of mine behind...not ever, regardless of status or personal opinion. Spence and I will be setting down there in about fifteen minutes to take you out.”

“Sorry, Jeff...I realize I’m arguing from absolutely no position of strength. I’m at your mercy...I can’t come with you unless everyone here who needs to leave comes too.”

“How many is that?”

“Eight...possibly more.”

“Not many more.”

“No.”

“They *are* looking for you. Stay inside the cabin.”

“Right now I’m out on a low slope of *Mount Espejismo*.”

“Get the hell back to that shack and stay there until you hear our rotors.”

Hiking quickly back to the cabin, already bathed in a shimmering pink dawn, Semele heard Antoine, who had just arrived, speaking in excited French. She attempted a clear translation, standing on the steps and listening with intense concentration.

“I had to leave the Jeep and hike around a blockade of soldiers. The road is closed, blocked. Our truck cannot get through. Maurice is going to be all right but not able to travel. I left him with those who will conceal him until he is well. I think we should leave the cabin...try to cross the mountains on foot.”

When Semele hurried inside, she saw that Julia had also arrived with the two girls. The room was crowded. Rafael was about to speak when she interrupted. They all turned to her with surprise. She had not been missed by anyone, perhaps forgotten in the *mêlée* of rapidly revising plans.

“No! Please, don’t anyone leave the cabin. My company’s chopper should be here in five or ten minutes.”

“Ah, for you,” Rafael said in a relieved voice.

“For everyone here who wants to come. Of course, you should all come...must come.”

There was a surprised silence. No one spoke, but they watched as Semele took the SIG-Sauer from beneath her shirt, by rote tucking in her shirttail as she smiled at Rafael and then stuck the pistol inside the waist of her jeans.

Rafael sent her an emotive look, inspiring gratitude indelibly conferred, the only reward she sought: inclusion. She could almost hear the desired words: *You are*

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one of us. He nodded and was about to say something when they all heard the loud chop of the rotor blades descending outside the cabin. Semele threw open the door and ran down the steps.

Jeff and Spence jumped out of the chopper in a rising cloud of dust, flying bits of dead grass whirling aloft. Both wore khaki and had holstered Glocks on their belts.

“Make it fast!” Jeff demanded. “There are soldiers on the road below, headed this way.

Spence was already hoisting Julia and the two girls aboard, followed by Jordi and Carlos, then Ramón. Chopper space looked crowded.

“Can we get everyone aboard?” Semele shouted.

Ducking beneath the noisy gyration of the long sweeping blades, Rafael called out, “If there is no room I will stay behind. I know these mountains well enough.”

“Then I’ll stay, too,” Semele cried, backing up.

“No!” Rafael shouted at the same instant that Jeff yelled, “The hell you will!”

“I’ll stay,” Semele insisted.

“Please take my wife!” Rafael’s importuning voice was insistent and near rage beneath the speeding rotor. “She is carrying our child.”

At the same moment there was a barrage of machine gun fire, by its long range mostly ineffectual. Jeff ran toward Semele’s fast-retreating back, grabbed a fistful of flying hair – “Careful!” Rafael shouted –, pulled her in against him and threw her at Spence who wrestled her to the chopper.

“Please, Rafael, *please!*” Semele’s shrill, horrified voice pleaded from the open door. “There’s room! Room!”

Rafael was the last to climb in, and with fresh blood soaking his shirt from a new wound below his left shoulder.

“Oh God, my God!” Semele cried, holding him in her arms as the weight-bound ship rocked, straining to rise.

“I am all right,” Rafael assured her, with no real certainty that it was the truth.

They all looked down at the cabin. It was on fire.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Antoine shouted, “They have done that with a flame thrower.”

“And we’ll be the next target, maybe a Stinger if we don’t get the hell out of here!” Jeff yelled. “Fortunately for us, this tin-pot government has a worthless air force.” Reaching behind Spence who was piloting the big detail carrier, he searched for a first-aid kit. Finding it, he ducked toward Semele with the kit held above Julia’s head and handed over by Rosa and Juanita who were both crying.

Semele, dry-mouthed and speechless, had torn apart Rafael’s shirt and was now cleansing the wound, making a gauze compress that she pressed tight with her

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palm. In an attempt to allay the terrible fear on her face, and so prevalent in her carefully averted eyes, Rafael kissed her strained forehead, contact she read as feverish.

“Does it hurt? – oh, what a stupid, stupid question!” She threw aside her head to let the tears fly away.

“*Sí*, it hurts. This pain...makes me *malo*...very mean. You know...the mean...do not soon die, *querida*.”

Jeff was on the radio, calling for medical assistance, an ambulance to meet them on the airstrip across the border.

Rafael’s right arm, its tendon firm-flexed to assuage pain, was now taut across Semele’s back. The left side of her face lay against his chest with her palm pressed hard and flat over the oozing, blood-soaked compress below his left shoulder. Her fingers dripped with his blood, her vaporous face swiftly drained of that same life force. Her senses were wholly tuned to the pulse of his laboriously beating heart, to each rasp of jagged breath drawn in mute suffering. Every captured heartbeat made her own heart leap, formed the only word in her throat: *Please-please-please*. A palpable force of consolation flowed in both directions. It would have required more strength than either now possessed to shout above the ship’s rotors. They held each other with no further movement or spoken word, taking shallow breaths respired slowly as one, both tensely conserving a single strength, never considering the hypnotic effect of rejected time.

IX

I MIGHT – unhappy word! – Oh me, I might,
And then would not, or could not, see my bliss,
Till now wrapt in a most infernal night,
I find how heavenly day, wretch! I did miss.
Heart, rent thyself, thou dost thyself but right:
No lovely Paris made thy Helen his,
No force, no fraud robb’d thee of thy delight,
Nor fortune of thy fortune author is,
But to myself myself did give the blow,
That I respects for both our sakes must show,
And yet could not by rising morn foresee
How fair a day was near. O punisht eyes,
That I had been more foolish, or more wise!

Astrophel and Stella - XXXIII

. . . Sir Philip Sidney

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So that was how the authentic ruling emotion looked, such reciprocity unexpected, and how foolish he had been, in their case, to assert its nonexistence. One had only to look at them to affirm, however previously disavowed, what he had always managed to miss or, more realistically, never found, except with the lost Dutch girl -- lost to him --, a briefly indulged discovery given no chance to blossom and fruit but firmly and forever implanted. He felt the heated sweat of envy and yet by some vicarious fixation wanted to drink them in, to steal as many glances of pain and love and pain *of* love as were afforded, but with a furtive, shoddy voyeurism as soon despised in himself. Knowing also he was looking at fidelity suddenly out of his reach, fidelity of such annealing power he could hardly comprehend its true dimension. Blood-smearred and in the most excruciating misery, she crouched on the jarring floor, consumed with another; so that, in the final indecency, a part of him struggled with the desire to have back a little of his forfeiture, to possess what he had never earned, what had been far too ingenuously offered to a squandering claimant insensate with wine *trop cher* -- yes, wine more expensive than he could ever have known --, an offering he had thrown away apparently to preserve the emptiness of a life. So full of effusive adulation was he at that moment, it spilled from her onto Arnau i Roca, and he knew that he must employ every means to save a rival with whom he could not compete.

Sitting in the uncomfortable waiting room of the limited and understaffed hospital, he had exchanged some words with Semele that he might not have said in another time or place. At moments like this with emotions on edge, uncommon, even fanciful, close-held thoughts emanated more freely. He considered also how she, and Rafael as well, had inadvertently made permanent inroads right through that always necessarily impenetrable exterior of himself. The slightest exposure to those two *together* was an indelible experience, from which one was unlikely to emerge unchanged. Newly cognizant of this, he preferred to view the result as positive. The part which surprised him least was that he bore similar traits, except that he had applied his life to the world in a different manner, a method which necessarily transgressed a good deal of what they embraced.

Resting now, after a nurse had transfused Semele's blood into Rafael -- the hospital's supply was minimal, but Semele didn't trust it anyway --, her serious face suddenly brightened. "How fortunate...how wonderful to have been able to use my blood...pumped out of this miserable heart."

"You should have told them you are pregnant."

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“No, I had no choice. I only want him to be well.”

He would not have spoken as he was about to if he didn't know, from his own observation and experience, that not quite enough blood had been spilled to render his chastising words thoroughly callous and cruelly inopportune.

“You've married the adversary of our client. My God, not just any adversary but... I'll have some explaining to do there. You've gone about as far as you can go from procedure. What do I do about you, Semele?”

Soaked in her lover's blood, her *husband's* blood, her clothes rumpled, her flaming hair a wild tangle and her mind focused entirely on another life in another room, she turned back to him; more desired at that moment than he had ever desired any person or thing in his life. Her eyes focused on him as if just then fully aware of his presence, her mouth forming, with some effort he thought, a sad smile a little whimsical, almost apologetic.

“You did warn me, didn't you? Guess I haven't failed as much as I've refined my conscience. Of course, for you I've failed miserably. I'll accept whatever decision you make. What else can I do?”

“You haven't failed miserably...you haven't failed. You believe I can't see your side of things. I do. You think I'm a heartless bastard...that it's how I got where I am. To some degree, yes...the hell with this -- no point explaining myself. You can go on paid leave until the child is born. Then decide what you want to do.”

The filtered blue eyes focused fully on him at last.

“No. You ought to...to fire me.”

“I can't.”

He might have gone on, might have said, “As you know full well, it's partly my fault.” But that wasn't the only reason he could not sever whatever was left of this unusual relationship, however impractical or imprudent or tenuous.

He stood up and walked across the room, looking out through unpolished glass at sere land as empty as he was, having left so much of himself over there at her feet, flayed and vulnerable at last. He did not feel at all foolish or even cautious, which meant that what he did feel was as close to the truth as he would ever get.

He went to visit them while Rafael was recovering in their spacious single room in Paris, a barren space whose main attraction in the matter of décor was Semele. She had gone out to purchase a bottle of wine, and left him alone with Rafael. He thought it might be awkward, but Rafael had an easeful way of making it seem if not entirely comfortable at least almost so. He sat in one of only two straight-backed chairs, facing Rafael, who was dressed in jeans and black shirt, and semi-reclining on

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the sofa with his left arm in a sling. The arm's wound had mended, but it caused less pain to that healing side of his body if held still. In an uncontrollable mood of concern, he took the liberty of saying something about their digs that might well have precipitated anger.

"Why don't you and Semele take my flat. I'll be gone for a month in...well, places like Pakistan, and then back to New York. You might as well."

"She is comfortable enough here for the time being, I believe...however unsuitable you may find it."

"Hell, it isn't that at all. It's just that...well, there's a kitchen...and my housekeeper, Jura, could take some of the work away from Semele now that she's..."

"Pregnant with our son. I will admit I do not care for your place...*pero*...I leave that up to Semele...because we are both thinking only of her comfort."

"And when you're mended?"

"As soon as I can I will return to Madera. I think the general will be fully in charge there very soon -- Bellaco's soldiers are deserting...joining Mendoza. He has asked me to oversee water implementation."

"So you will be dealing directly with UNIFOLL."

"Sí, so it appears. If they still want to deal."

"Some irony there."

"We have found a more distant but profitable enough place for them to mine, but that is uncertain. We may have to negotiate with another company."

"What about Semele?"

"You seem to believe you have more concern than I. No, you cannot think that." Rafael sat up as they both heard Semele coming through the door.

"I don't think that."

"You don't think what?" Semele asked.

They both offered her generous smiles as the room came alive with her presence.

Without waiting for an answer, which would not be forthcoming from either, she set the bottle of red wine on the floor then removed her jacket, lifting a weighted sack from its large pocket and hanging the wet coat over a chair back. Her hair was glistening with melting snowflakes, her voice excited as she went to fetch a corkscrew and glasses.

"Do you realize...have either of you noticed that it's begun to snow? The last gasp of winter, exhaling big fluffy wet flakes...floating...floating down."

He noticed that she wore her green silk blouse hanging loosely over her swelling belly. Suddenly, in a moment of wild speculation, he thought, *Why couldn't the child be mine?*

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Semele set aside the glasses and said, "Jeff, you'll have to open the bottle. Rafael likes to put it between his knees and yank the cork, which is presently not permitted.

"I've been opening bottles longer than either of you."

He sank the corkscrew into the cork as Rafael lifted the goblets from Semele, upside-down between his fingers.

"I bought a couple of nice big oranges. I was hungry for them." She reached into the sack and held up a large, thin-skinned orange, smiling at Rafael as if conveying some secretly coded message. "Valencias...so sweet."

His dark presence shone with predisposing light, at once subtly mindful. "*Querida*, let me peel it for you."

"No thank you, my darling. I'm going to peel it myself. But you may give instructions."

"Get my sharp knife...in the chest by the bed."

Rafael held the glasses for him while he poured. They looked at each other without words -- the flashing Catalan eyes dilated, warmly insolent, knowing everything -- then touched their glasses together, and he was bold enough to reintroduce his idea with a toast, "To the right decision."

"What's that about?" Semele asked, sliding the very sharp knife into the orange.

"No, *querida*, start at the top. Let me do it for you. I am not such an invalid." His scolding laughter caressed.

"But I have to learn some time. Suppose your parents were to find out how inept I am...Valencia-challenged."

Grinning, Rafael snatched the orange, held it in his slung left hand, then grasped the knife and swiftly peeled.

Semele's lips parted in a sigh of appreciation. "Mm, look how perfect...unbroken...fascinating to watch. Until I first saw it I had no idea...could never have imagined."

He would not be able stand much more of this, and thought he should swiftly finish his wine and leave. With his intrusive presence the room was far too crowded. It clearly belonged only to them. Although he alone was aware of it, he couldn't remember a greater humiliation, not since the time he had been smacked soundly on his burning seven-year-old bottom for an unforgivable deed done not by him but by his adored second cousin, Caroline. He had so grievously craved the attention, the affection of that diminutive blond coquette he stood with his pants down and took a beating for her -- punishment for the rare orchids she had obliviously snipped from their pots and then arranged dangling from a huge vase, carried with clumsily splashing

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water into his great uncle Harry's immaculate dining room. How easily he was reduced to that smitten boy as he stood in this room, miserably, degradingly dispossessed, and with the dismal realization that he could never make love by peeling an orange like that. *Christ, this is intolerable. I'm getting the hell out before there's nothing left of me.* He tossed back the last wine and snatched his coat off the chair back.

Sliding the orange onto a hairline-cracked jade plate held out by Semele, Rafael looked into her eyes and said, "Jefferson Davis Smith has offered you his flat."

She set the plate gingerly down on the old caramel leather sofa beside Rafael's long *serge de Nimes* thighs.

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"He would like us to stay there."

"Why do I feel as though I've already left the room?" he said, slipping into his suede jacket.

"Jeff, wait. Thank you, but I'm...we're all right here...really."

"That's a matter of opinion. As I told Rafael, I wouldn't be around. Why don't you two discuss it. I'll be in the city until the end of the week."

"Will you not have a little more wine? We should finish this bottle. Semele does not want you to leave yet."

"You certainly know the right words," he said, and found himself holding out his empty glass.

"Please sit down, Jeff. We're most assuredly alive because of you, and we both know that, know it very well."

"Sí, that is so...although I have thought it was for Semele." Rafael grinned a most disarming grin, and filled both of their glasses. "Assistance comes in strange ways."

"Maybe you just lead a charmed life."

"If you had followed me over the years you would not think so...until Semele." Rafael raised his glass to her, the distance between them an electric arc of blue flame from her eyes. They smiled at each other, not large vain smiles artlessly boasting: *Look what is mine*, but subtle flashes of intimate deference and devotion. To his unparalleled chance fortune, Semele, Rafael tilted his glass and drank.

For a moment he was caught in their uninsulated high voltage, then found himself responding. "And if you had followed me, you would not think my life so charmed either."

"We are among those who definitely chose extreme paths, are we not? You have done very well with your choice."

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What did Rafael really mean? “There were some rough places. I’ve done all right.” *But I don’t have her and you do, and I keep thinking that it’s my fault. It is my fault.* “I suppose you can feel better about what you do.” As soon as this was given out, he regretted the offering.

“It is not about me. It is about others who cannot quite do it for themselves...about all of the unnecessary inequities, abuses of the planet, degraded humans.”

“Oh, I think it’s about you to some degree.”

“Śī, to the extent that it is my choice to do what I do...not for glory if that is what you are thinking. There is satisfaction in the relief of others...never glory. If accomplished, one cannot even say that it was as ordained. There is no causal imperative...until we make it so.”

He sat on the chair’s edge, with his jacket still on, and quietly swirled the wine in his glass, then slowly, thoughtfully lifted the glass, tipped it and swallowed. He felt himself in the presence of something until this moment never encountered. He had not realized, with as yet little exposure, how self-effacing and simultaneously trenchant Rafael could be, a strange admixture of uncompromising certainty and humility – seductive and, as he had once insincerely maintained and now saw as truth, charismatic.

He glanced over at Semele who had listened to this colloquy in a concentrating silence. She was looking at Rafael with a rapt devotion, reminding him of a similar but less revealed feeling for her in himself. Just then he had to concede the glaring mechanism that made her bloom: with deep immersion in love, her exquisitely guarded self had opened fully to other stimuli as well. Even if rather clinically seen as animal efflorescence, the phenomenon was no less beautiful or irresistible. She was not at all that unassailable creature who had sat in his office chastely swathed in protective clothing – of course she was then striving to keep a valued position. Still...Rafael was responsible for this transformation, releasing within her a resplendent dimension that was her prime, conditional and at the same time binding her to the inevitable underlying suffering of a profound love. She was incisive enough to have recognized Rafael’s rare qualities almost at once, and placed those virtues above everything. Yet it was clear that this had been a mutual recognition, that Rafael, too, was richly altered and extended by it, by her exceptional traits, or their singular pairing could not be so powerfully manifest, so broadly influential.

Before he left he had come to feel as if he were sitting in a highly edifying classroom, where the ultimate possibilities for humans were being explored – perhaps also a semblance of those once-popular seamless theaters, where induced audience

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participation left one feeling foolish and exposed, but also galvanized for something extraordinary.

They never accepted the offer of his flat, but he felt certain the final decision, probably with some assurance of the outcome, had been left to Semele. He was to remain, out of his own necessity, apprised of them without seeing them for some time, mainly because he could think of no natural way of involving himself in their exclusive lives.

X

Amor Fidedigno

In late evening it was flesh and blood well-nigh.

In the morning it was writ across the sky.

Siesta dreamed their future's high emotion.

Next midnight saw them parted by an ocean.

. . . . KMK

He was going to leave her again, but he could never think of leaving her here, awaiting their child alone -- a swiftly approaching reality that aggravated and amazed.

Finding her dressed only in one of his shirts, standing barefoot at the bathroom counter making toast, he reached for the mass of silken kinks and waves and gently pulled her stressed, willfully straight back against him. Enclosing her in his arms, he buried his face in her hair, his red entanglement smelling of lavender and burnt toast.

"I cannot get close enough to you anymore...except this way. Now I have to compete with Miguel. For loving, he has an important part of you."

"A nice way of saying I'm big as a house."

"Only your belly, *querida*."

She brought her plate and he the coffee to the sofa, where they placed the crockery on a simple walnut coffee table they had purchased -- with Semele's deft bargaining during a less crowded Monday morning browsing the *Marché aux Puces*, the varied and sprawling Paris flea market.

Taking a sip of her coffee and a crunching bite of her buttered toast, she curled a little clumsily against him and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Interesting how I can tell by just your manner, just one glance...interesting how I know everything."

"What is it that you know?"

"You've been planning with Antoine and Mari. You're all going back to Madera, right? Myself, of course, excluded from that triumphal reentry."

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“Triumphal would be nice...but hardly so...a lot of work ahead is how I see it.”

He kissed her temple, then pushed up the sleeves of his black jersey and sat forward to have his steaming Arabica from a tall sapphire mug. Taking a long swallow of this rich black stimulant – better than he used to brew – he sat back and let his eyes travel over her body swollen with their son. His eyes came to rest on her beautifully chaste face: seraphic, dewily reflecting that suspenseful state of transition that he had unintentionally engendered. Faint freckles were temporarily more prominent on the straight bridge of her proportionately molded slender ivory nose.

He lifted a long crimson coil from the edge of her forehead and tucked it behind her ear. “Semele, I want you to go to Barcelona and stay with my parents. Then I will know you are safe and well cared for.”

“What?”

“Listen to me...just until our son comes. I cannot leave you alone here.”

“When did this come into it? I seem to remember your saying it wouldn’t be a very normal relationship, now you’re trying to make it one. You’re acting just like an overly attentive...well, a conventional father-to-be.”

“*¡Cristo!* I would never leave you by yourself in this condition.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“And how will you do that?”

“Actually, I was thinking I’d go back to Seattle. I have a very competent doctor...and, of course, there are a lot of good obstetricians there. I’ll be in my own home. I do own a home, you realize...with a very lonesome cat.”

“You find this amusing. Are you so resolved because you think I will not... I feel like hell leaving you.”

“Oh darling, that is such a gift, all wrapped up with your eyes and mouth. God, how I’m going to miss you.”

“You would be just as alone in your house in Seattle.”

“No, I’ll try and get *mi madre* to come stay with me. She might like playing that role at this point...for her, something quite different. She can hold my hand when I...” She shrugged and laughed.

“I will be there to hold your hand. I intend to be there,” he insisted.

“Well, just in case you’re not.”

In the ensuing days, as they planned for her departure and his own, he saw that she was especially cheerful and agreeable. Her unflagging effort was so splendidly brave and selfless that it pained him deeply. He knew the dread they felt, yet fell in with her courageous attempts to relieve the sadness of parting. And perhaps this sanguine pretense, in the time left to them, held him above his own concern and guilt.

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At the inception of their relationship, he had asserted something quite different -- a facile caveat of what still took precedence but now with far greater cost: his dedication to his work. This remained unchanged, even though her incredible spirit, her uplifting presence was now thoroughly laced into the previously neglected loose weave of his once barely discernible private life. Together, they had made an indelible past: an irreversible determination charging ahead of them into the veiled future.

When he had seen her off on her flight to Seattle -- necessarily standing behind her with his arms wrapped around her and his head bent to hers until it was time for her to walk aboard --, he returned to the flat and found the place unbearably impoverished, miserably silent, deprived of her quick laughter, her playfully incisive remarks, that dynamic luminescence. He walked to Antoine and Mari's to fill his emptiness with a discussion of the upcoming work in Madera.

Mari had asked after Semele but, finding in him a moody reluctance to venture very far into his personal affairs, soon went on to another subject.

"Unfortunately, Bellaco's influence has not left the country...those loyal soldiers in hiding. This does not make it as safe as it should be," Antoine warned.

"Bellaco has been rendered ineffectual. *Sí*, there remain a few diehard supporters with rifles, but most of the army is with the self-appointed rebel leader Mendoza."

"Do you really think it is safe enough for you to return so soon?" Antoine looked doubtful.

"Because of the grinding slowness in these matters, even under normal conditions, time is of the essence. At this moment, nothing is being done to facilitate a sound water infrastructure. Mendoza is too busy and has left it to us to direct. If we begin now, we will have a greater opportunity of influencing the right decisions in the new government...lasting measures that will help to stabilize the country. *Sí*, it is time to return."

And so he did return, even with such a favorable coup d'état, surprised at the noisy welcome he received, a hero's welcome. This was for the river. While he tried to assert that he was wounded in leaving not in fighting, and that it was only the beginning of a difficult road for all of them, he knew he must let the long-demoralized peasants have their joyful celebrations, regale their apotheosized spokesman. With passive but polite acknowledgement, he sacrificed their gratitude to cheerful restraint, good-natured silence beyond gentle admonitions of what was still required of them;

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often he returned their acclaim with his own high praise for their unfailing courage. “*Habr  paz,*” he would say. “There will be peace in your valley.” He did wish that Semele could have been there to participate in a little of the free-spirited merrymaking. “I believe you might have enjoyed the debauchery, mother of Dionysus,” he told her later on his cell phone. “Mother of your very rebellious son trying to kick his way out,” she teased. The tenor of their voices was all that really mattered. They fell silent, sharing a space of time held fast without very many words, then said their reassuring good-byes, his last words those of missing her: “*Te echo de menos, amor m a.*”

In the days ahead, when he was able to get through, he called to tell her which villagers and farmers had asked after her; or relayed, with his special Castilian -- and sometimes briefly explained and thought to be more apropos Catalan -- expressions of humor, ongoing anecdotes from or about those she had come to know.

Two evenings after the wild night of his arrival, Carlos had appeared at the dusty pink village cantina, *La Vid*, already somewhat inebriated and with his arm around a pretty dark-haired girl. Antoine, Mari, Ram n, and Julia had joined Rafael there over several bottles of red wine. A lively stream of valley dwellers frequently approached the table to greet Rafael and offer good wishes. Carlos, his black boots smartly shined and pounding over the polished old wooden floor, approached Rafael and bowed low, with an exuberant display of near-buffoonish self-confidence.

“*Oiga, amo! C mo est  su esposa?*”

For a reflective moment, and with down-turned lips of droll amusement, Rafael’s worldly assessment took in the blue-shirted, casually spruced-up Carlos -- here at this homely little *taberna* he would be thought of as a city boy, the boy from La Ceiba. He recalled his first meeting with this impetuously unpredictable young hombre, and then the embarrassed fellow’s atoning devotion to Semele. Warmed by Carlos’ show of concern for her, Rafael nodded a grinning welcome along with a vigorous handshake.

“*  Qu  tal, amigo? Mi esposa est  bien...muy bien...est  en los Estados Unidos...Seattle.*”

“*Ay, lo siento...y Usted?*”

“*Muy bien, bandido. Gracias. Are you going to drink with us?*”

Carlos held up his fingers to indicate that he would be happy to drink a little - *traguito* -- then explained he was already slightly drunk. “*Me siento un poco chispado.*”

Everyone laughed, then Mari asked Carlos to introduce his pretty dark-eyed friend.

His devilish drowsy brown eyes widened above a rather lopsided grin as he apologized and introduced his slender girl, Elena. Along with a shy smile she wore a

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bright pink sweater and jeans, her long, raven-black braid tied with a shiny pink ribbon. Chairs were added. Carlos leaned on the table, capturing everyone's indulgence with his humorously boastful stories of wine mixed with love, wine to entice love, wine to forget love, wine to embolden the fists of love-mad suitors. All this while a generous amount of the said versatile potion was poured for the newcomers.

Rafael sipped his *vino tinto* with a more sobering effect, and studied Carlos with compassionate concern. He was remembering how Semele had reinforced his own thinking on the subject of Carlos: that he was a bright and handsome specimen of young manhood going to waste; that he ought to be schooled, his sharp natural intelligence channeled into something far worthier and more useful than auto repair at a refuse-strewn curbside. There followed a moment of regret for his *own* near-impecunious circumstances; as an infrequent scholar-teacher, a writer of admonishing, revelatory books, a roving purveyor of water, he was unable to say, *Here, take this money and educate yourself to a good end*. Yet he was prone to smile at Carlos as he continued to enjoy the brash antics of his recklessly tipsy protégé. He reminded himself that he was not without useful contacts, far more valuable than money, friends around the world who might help the boy. Carlos dipped his head and spoke to the solemn Elena. She looked at him and smiled shyly at his words. Crooking his arm around her neck, he laughed and playfully tried to shake her free of a notably chronic soberness. He had apparently learned to be content with fleeting moments of happiness. In Carlos' particular circumstance this was a remarkable quality, an attitude that to some degree rescued a swiftly passing youth from the later desolation of bitter regret. Sadly, Rafael foresaw how this bright boy would impregnate his pretty girl, or another like her, and become an over-burdened parent entrapped in a hostile and indifferent world, his true worth thereafter unemployable, inaccessible.

Once again he thought of what he had done to Semele, but here the question of rightness or wrongness was past contemplation, made so by his choice of resolution. He only wished for her presence at this table, to be holding her hand beneath it, the light catching her hair afire as he reveled in those eyes, the *azul celeste* of a high place presently denied him. The wine, his pensive mood, the aroused anticipation so evident between Carlos and Elena momentarily made his body flush with hot desire.

Someone entered with a guitar. Carlos jumped up and, in his most jovial and persuasive manner, appropriated it. He returned gleeful to have the worn old instrument in his possession. Now he was seriously focused. Sitting with one foot balanced on Mari's chair rung, he strummed to acquaint himself with the tuning. A natural familiarity was obvious to everyone as he plucked out a melody. Then his voice was added, startling, mellifluous and soon riveting. The buzz in the room grew

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silent. Elena's eyes burned after Carlos. Mari pursed her lips, sending a sham moue grimace to Rafael.

The ballad told of a highwayman murdered on the way to his love, having hoped to win her with his spoils. When it was finished -- in a sonorous voice drawing out the last dramatically flourished note, as in the bittersweet agony of a *fado* singer --, everyone cheered and clapped.

"*Amigo*, why do you waste yourself when you can kill us with such a performance?" was Rafael's choice of compliment.

Carlos grinned, rubbing his agile fingers together to indicate the thwarting need of money. "For many years I had an old guitar," he explained in wistful Spanish, "and now a thief has it."

In La Ceiba, Mendoza had given Rafael comfortable quarters in *El Presidente's* hastily vacated palace -- the day after *el Dulce* flowed once again through *La Nava Feraz*, Bellaco had decamped with whatever he could steal of the people's property, borrowing one of the few old transports in his air force, a U.S.-discarded C-141 Starlifter. His readily accepted exile was hastily arranged by an official in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Lucky to have made off with his scalp -- although as usual in such cases some public coffers were emptied --, he would be compelled to improve his scant English in that West African English-speaking capital. Proximity to the rough diamonds that were half of that country's export earnings would certainly appeal to him.

Mendoza -- a big angular man, younger than he looked, with a noble head of iron-gray hair and drooping-lidded intense gray eyes -- had set up his own chaotic headquarters in the palace, mentioning to Rafael that he was not greatly enamored of its baroque splendor: "I go from a village pump in the thirsty south to a golden water spigot for bathing. Gold *grifos*! when the people beyond this town have never seen so much as a single PVC water pipe. The people's gold. I am not impressed." "And I hope you never will be," Rafael responded with confraternal laughter and ever increasing admiration. Even with many demands and relentless fatigue, Mendoza, his commanding voice resonating with guileless enthusiasm, was willing to exchange ideas with Rafael long into hot nights splintered with constant interruptions.

"However crack the troops," Mendoza expounded, "they must always mirror the people they serve. Bellaco's troops did not. They were his long-reaching arm...they looked and acted like fascist secret police. The populace rightly feared them. Such a thing must never happen again."

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In these talks Mendoza repeatedly revealed himself as a principled warrior, one reared in respectful poverty and manifestly in possession of an innate intelligence.

Rafael's new quarters were a welcome convenience. He needed to reside in the town, a place still echoing with the sporadic gunfire of dissident holdouts. With Mendoza's official sanction, he would now confront UNIFOLL.

A UNIFOLL official with the authority to make final decisions had flown into town to meet with the new water liaison, and much to his surprise found himself speaking with the reviled agitator, Rafael Arnau i Roca.

In the local UNIFOLL manager's office, John Higgins, a rough dark-blond man, who looked as though he should be out in the field shouting orders on some grueling job in its rudimentary stages, sat across from Rafael, sizing up his opponent. Rafael returned the scrutiny with his own sharp resolution. The sparse amenities of their initial greeting had just ended. This American had tried to converse in his inferior Argentinean Spanish, but Rafael kept answering in English, until the man gave up and returned to his native tongue. Settling into a brusque manner of authority, he leaned forward to issue a succinct ultimatum.

"We have a contract, and we *will* sue if it isn't honored as written." The wrong tactic.

Rafael ran a bronzed hand over his chin, speculative fingers extended and palpating the cord below his thrown back jaw. His eyes narrowed, then he straightened his head with an amending smile. "You *had* a contract. In case you have not noticed, there is a new government here, instituted by a coup d'état. Acting President Mendoza has chosen to ignore your contract, since it has little or nothing to do with him, or with this reorganized government."

"These people need a water system. How the hell do you propose to give it to them?"

"In the same manner as before, with a few alterations. You can build the water infrastructure but you cannot run it, or mine the valley."

Higgins laughed. "World Bank and the IMF will never stand for that. We went into this deal--"

"I already know why you contrived to have this pivotal operation. Because it would prove very lucrative over a long period of time...and at far too great a cost to the populace. There will be no private ownership by a foreign company or any other company, and no mine in the valley. The government will run the water system in partnership with the people...with communities and commercial enterprises."

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Higgins gave a derisive laugh, then jumped up and began to pace. “Even if it were to be sanctioned, why the hell should we undertake this job without a decent profit?”

“Actually, you could make a very nice profit if you want to partner the mine in the south with the government, when your work is completed here, of course...a profit without bleeding Maderans into abject poverty.”

“World Bank and the IMF aren’t going to do business with a government as shaky as this one.”

“In that case you are out of a job anyway. If you still want to deal, you will have to convince them that this new government is sound. I will back that with confidence.”

“Hell, they’re very savvy financiers. That assurance would take some time. This government has proved nothing so far...except that Mendoza can muscle his way into something. How the government runs itself remains to be seen.”

Rafael offered a grin that was almost forgiving. “I would bet on the soundness of Mendoza more swiftly than that of your own gross national product. You have all of your equipment here...this office building. To me, it looks as if you would like to stay. However, I know that you are not solvent; in fact, I have in my possession recent data confirming your actual financial situation -- eh, not very encouraging. Your company massaged a lot of figures, then underbid the contract, intending to use the mine as a more immediate assurance of profit, profit badly needed for the completion of other projects. If you--”

“You’re bluffing!” Higgins shouted, throwing himself back in his chair with his face contorted in anger.

“No. It is your company doing the bluffing.”

Rafael felt a surge of pleasure at what must be called Semele’s triumph. “I can fly to Paris tomorrow and visit World Bank. They might be interested to know how badly you need to offset overextension. And there is the question of the two *accidental* deaths...those over-enthusiastic probing lobbyists acting for a competing firm.”

Higgins’ face reddened and boiled with anger.

“Careful, you damned agitprop spic! You might not even leave this building. I came up the hard way and I know how to play rough.”

“As I have just noted.” Rafael grinned with a curt nod, quite comfortable with having exposed his opponent to the raw core. The man’s self-possession had been seriously eroded, placing him at a reckless disadvantage.

“Now you are in my territory, *Señor* Higgins. Catalans have a long and rowdy history...like yours but much longer. We know how to sustain action with

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logical thought. Do you think me naïve enough to come here without Mendoza's full knowledge...without effective preparations that go well beyond my own simple existence? And by the way, this new government can always relieve you of your building. La Ceiba needs buildings for other purposes than your own. I advise you to calm down and see the benefit of my proposal. You need money. If you decide to work honestly...if you convince the funders that this stabilized government is a good investment, you will surely succeed without having your previous dishonest methods exposed."

"This is blackmail...you can't--"

"Call it whatever you like. I prefer to see it as an opportunity of benefit to all concerned. A week should be enough time for you to reach a favorable decision...that is, to achieve confirmation. You can reach me at the palace. Although I am still somewhat embarrassed at that address, the apologetic new inhabitant is quite an improvement...very earnest and like-minded company."

XI

MEPHOSTOPHILIS Now Faustus, what wouldst thou have me do ?

FAUSTUS I charge thee wait upon me whilst I live,

To do whatever Faustus shall command,
Be it to make the moon drop from her sphere,
Or the ocean to overwhelm the world.

DOCTOR FAUSTUS . . . Christopher Marlowe

"Semele, I'm so sorry, darling, but I can't come now. Lord! I've sworn to finish this class of Lillian's...by now you know how much Lillian depends on me...except that this time... Ah well, my dear, she's really terribly ill, dying of cancer...and I've taken over her night classes. Such a sad business...with my own classes, it's quite a load...but somehow it must be done. My poor longsuffering Lillian."

Semele fixed her phone more comfortably over her ear as she recalled the sallow-skinned hypochondriacal colleague of her mother's, always prone to illnesses, forever warning of her imminent death, and now apparently about to succumb.

"I'm sorry, Mama. Please convey my sympathy.

"Mama...I really had an important reason I wanted you to fly up. I intended to tell you all about it when you got here...it wasn't only a need to visit. I understand, of course." Her conceding voice had clearly revealed an unsettling disappointment.

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“What is it dear? Something serious? You’ve always been so independent. I can hardly imagine you in need of--”

“Mama, I’m...please don’t laugh or...or judge me too harshly...I’m...pregnant.”

“Good heavens!” her mother exclaimed with laughter, “there’s something wrong with one of our phones. I’d have sworn you said you were pregnant.”

“I did. I am. I’ve married Rafael.”

Semele waited in silence as she imagined her mother, in her own startled silence, pulling herself together, or at least gathering her thoughts for the appropriate response, if there was one.

“You’re...but darling, do you see how this will change your whole life?...your profession?...have you...have you really thought carefully about how this will--”

“Yes, Mama, I have. In any case, there’s no longer an alternative...but I couldn’t have done otherwise.”

“Oh, my dear, were you so in love with this man?”

“I *am* so in love with this man, yes.”

“Then, what else can I say, except to offer my concern, my love...our best wishes. May I speak to Rafael?”

“He can’t be here now, Mama.”

With only a slight hesitation, Martha responded. “I’ve just thought...do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to send Marion to you. She’s home now and temporarily free. She’ll be a great comfort to you...and I can fly up as soon as I have a free weekend. We’ll get you through this, my darling. Please don’t worry. How on earth shall I break the news to your doting father? Of course, we’ll both adore the child...your own sweet child...my God!”

Marion Brown set down her coffee cup and picked up roving Catney, holding him on her lap and stroking his wonderfully thick mouse-gray fur. Catney’s loud purr held self-important contentment, having recently come under an ample windfall of adoring hands and a plentiful variety of guilt-inspired cat toys. Marion and Semele were sitting at her off-white distressed-wood kitchen table -- the tidy kitchen having been laid out wholly in the functional style of a cozily provincial farmhouse, although unlikely to have occurred in any real farm milieu. They munched on buttered multigrain toast with marmalade, as they reacquainted each other with such disparate lives as theirs had always been. This was the third discursive day after Marion’s appearance. They had talked all around the main subject -- the flagrant reason for Marion’s arrival -- without yet broaching its provocative circumstance: the completely unexpected and highly unusual situation of Semele’s irreversible conduct.

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Marion was a robust good-looking woman of middle age, with short auburn hair done in perfect waves framing a full oval face. Her very alert amber eyes shone with an intense perspicacity. Just the right rosy tinge of make-up glowed on her healthy cheeks, and her nails were perfectly trimmed and lacquered in a soft pearly pink. She was fastidiously dressed in pale-green linen slacks and a matching collarless linen jacket with large jade-green buttons, this worn over a cowl-necked sleeveless white jersey. Carved jade earrings, pale little chrysanthemums, hung on gold wires from rather small earlobes, and on the ring finger of her left hand she wore a cabochon jade ring given to her by her late husband. Her right wrist was encircled with a gold-linked ring-of-jade bracelet, her left wrist with a frequently consulted gold Swiss watch, simultaneously displaying the times of three major cities in the world -- these were regularly adjusted in accordance with her non-stop schedule.

"I'm withholding my opinion, Semele, because, as you know, I don't like to judge others. It's really outside my standard of conduct. And now your natural beauty is even more enhanced my dear...more lovely than ever, if possible."

"Really? I'm tired and grumpy and my back hurts."

Marion ignored this. "You know I quite admire your man Arnau i Roca...his remarkably daring accomplishments. Aside from our work with charities, I seldom get to work firsthand with the physically impoverished...but of course with other impoverishments: those who can't grasp the inequities, who take without giving...but I was speaking of that worldly rogue, Doctor Arnau i Roca...he does appear to have good taste in women." Marion winked at Semele and smiled. "I'm really very surprised. From what I've observed, he isn't the sort to do this...this traditional business."

"He didn't set out to do it, Marion. Obviously, it was an accident...and he's...he's a very honorable person."

"Oh come now, it wasn't much of a sacrifice. He loves you, my dear, *certainly*; how could he not? You are yourself quite an amazing girl. Don't I know this? Well, of course I do. But," Marion added, sighing and frowning, "I perceive that you will be the main caregiver in this extraordinary turn of events...and, I'm afraid, probably as much alone as you ever were. Of course you'll always have the child."

"Yes. I'm so fully aware of those considerations that for the time being I'd rather talk about something else." Semele was eager to part from the unsettling subject of disenfranchised love.

"You're very intelligent, Semele -- we all know that -- but still learning from experiences that your parents and I have already had. That's the way of life and always will be, cradle to grave. Unexpectedly, *this* happens and *that* happens, and we can only hope to learn from it. More often experience goes unheeded. Not with you, I think."

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Semele stood up to pour more coffee, and felt the heavy clumsiness in her formerly nimble and responsive body. She would be glad to part from this back-straining weight. Just last night she had dreamed that a massive penalizing boulder was attached to the front of her body, and she was trying to climb *Mount Espejismo* in search of Rafael – a heartrending variation of the myth of Sisyphus. She frowned, holding a supportive hand over her barely tied blue chenille robe just beneath where the fetus lay in wait. With her other hand she gingerly lifted the hot glass carafe and replenished their cooling coffee. For the moment, she kept her eyes away from Marion, who, in an obvious attempt to be helpful, was making a careful evaluation of Semele's demeanor.

“Tell me a little of what you've been doing, Marion.”

Marion leaned on her elbows with her graceful hands pressed together, the fingertips slightly bent beneath her chin. She brought her lips together with a soft smack that accompanied a brief interior analysis of her agenda.

“Just the usual, trying to educate the endangered world...enlighten, admonish, forewarn with alarming facts and mounting figures as set against a damned lot of greed, ignorance, cruelty...sloth...a closing window of time.”

Marion was smiling, but it was the serious, dauntless smile of a person thoroughly engaged in a rather hopeless effort, the hopelessness itself being the driving momentum in that forward slog of an unassailable, willful nature.

“So often as I travel around this country I hear how vile the world has become, and I try to amend such thinking. Oh, I'll never be Candide or more rightly Pangloss, or even approach poor Emerson, but I've always found a nice dash of humanity along with the world's iniquities. It's only that there are so many more of us, and in the trampling rush – like Ionesco's blindly conforming rhinoceroses – people are willing to sell their souls to many devils to have what they think will make them happy. I have my work cut out for me in trying to persuade them to stop believing the dangerous nonsense put forth...to see the vanishing beauty all around us, which cannot be bought. But, alas, what's there can be fraudulently sold...the miracle planet up for sale.”

“Alongside all of that, I must look like such a fool, standing here clumsily swollen...and even craving further risk of impregnation just to have the impregnator.” This had revealed a great deal, perhaps much more than necessary, but she was weary and in need of a candid exchange, and Marion was the perfect recipient.

Marion did then laugh with full abandon, her smooth face crinkling in complete enjoyment of Semele, whom she thought of as a fondly adored relative, had always thought thus, a superlatively turned out niece of whom one could boast with

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pride. Semele did know herself loved in part as George's sole issue, his youthfully vulnerable wunderkind.

Almost as if she had read Marion's mind, thoughts of Semele's father -- which could always be presumed to be going on in Marion's head --, and a small retaliation for Marion's boisterous laugh, which she must own she had precipitated, provoked her to ask, "Will you tell me about you and Papa? I've never had the fortitude to ask, but now, with my private life laid out before us, I feel like delving into yours." She watched as Marion's placid forehead was reconfigured in a wary and revealing frown.

"Delving into mine...to what end? I haven't forgotten you are your mother's daughter. I am not, at this state in our happy coexistence, about to wound Martha for your self-indulgent curiosity, my girl."

"So it's as bad as that."

"I've admitted nothing, but anyone who knows the least thing about our so-called *ménage à trois* knows that I have always loved your father...I also love Martha. We are a family...of which you are a prominent part."

"But, Marion, why and how do you love my father...as much as you do?"

Semele knew that above all else she wanted Marion's devotion to be for a nobler cause than self-gratification. If such slavish devotion really existed, she wanted it to be because of who her father profoundly was, and what he had always fearlessly professed and advocated in his teachings.

Marion stood up, her two hands dropping Catney to the floor tiles on his four rebellious, furiously swinging legs. She folded her arms and leaned in toward Semele, who was balanced awkwardly on the edge of her chair -- she had sought some position of comfort, unfound, and let her complaining feet slide out of robe-matching blue mules.

"My God, you are nervy today. What is this...a sudden spurt of malevolent hormones?"

"Dear Auntie Marion, my second mother, you--"

"Oh, stop this placating nonsense. You are enough of a woman of the world to know what's what...and also that you are painning me in belaboring a bittersweet choice. I had to take what I was permitted. Does that satisfy you?"

"No. I want to hear more. Of course, I'll never speak of it to Mama. Do you know, Marion...I have a sudden sharp intuition that you'd feel relief at sharing your thoughts with me...that you really need to reopen that trussed-up old packet of love letters inside of you...to read again for meaning. Possibly it will make you a better lecturer."

"Well, you've really come into your own; finally I discover you in possession of wisdom, which, chronologically speaking, means that I am aging."

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“As his student, you fell in love with Papa,” Semele prompted.

“You are relentless. Yes, how I did fall in love, but your father was taken...well taken. You see I wanted to have that influential mind all to myself. I wanted to bow down before it, and fly off periodically to fulfill its precepts...of course, to receive its affirmation.”

“But you’ve done just that.”

“So I have.”

“Are you satisfied?”

“I must be – I did once have a comely entrepreneurial husband, who for a time gave me a certain amount of physical satisfaction...when he happened to be at home. Ah, so much living...so much looking with shock and empathy, makes us lower our pitifully romantic expectations in regard to our selfish selves, if we are *really* looking. It could be said that persistently active involvement allows one to glorify each breath taken...and with joyful anticipation of the next, whether or not we are likely to get it.”

“That’s so well said,” Semele commiserated.

She lifted Marion’s hand in her own, detecting at last a tremor of uncertainty that allowed her to absorb and cherish Marion’s struggle. “I don’t really need to know if you’ve slept with him. It’s none of my business...except to hope that it gave you both immense pleasure. I only wanted to know if you love him for the right reasons.”

“And...?”

“And you do.”

Marion smiled broadly, with a clear offering of deeper respect. “Your impartial understanding floods my heart. What pleasure, what relief to be in the presence of such discernment...especially when it’s in the family.”

Her recently uncomfortable condition did not readily promote sleep, and the question of selling one’s self to the wrong cause again haunted Semele that night in her lonely bed. She rolled awkwardly back and forth in thoughtful unrest. Her job with Jefferson Davis Smith & Associates did provide a very good wage, occasional thrills and certain ego-stroking rewards. Had she entered those portals with the customary get-ahead attitude of yuppydom? No, not entirely. What *was* she thinking at the time? Jeff had sensed at once that she had rather quickly morphed into something dangerously divided, something insalubrious for the company. Some of it had always been in her -- with solidly egalitarian parents and her early life exposed to such disparate humanity -- and some of it was Rafael. *Rafael!* She longed to sleep again with his assuaging and comfort-seeking fingers in her hair. A small thing and yet so largely

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required, so impossible. She hadn't heard from him in several days, and he was probably not going to see his son come into the world. In all of this uncertainty a firm sense of rightness still prevailed. Was it merely the unconscious ploy of human nature to expediently rationalize mistakes, or had her choice truly been wise? Ultimately, the question was again muted by that mysterious and overwhelming sovereign force: love.

In the middle of the fourth night of Marion's visit, Semele awoke and called out with gentle urgency, "Marion? Marion, I think I need to get to the hospital...now."

Marion was up at once, swiftly dressed and possessed of such a reassuring, take-charge manner that Semele, anxiously pacing in her flapping open robe, could only be impressed.

Once situated, after arriving in a hastily summoned taxi, Semele became a routinely attended object in that most unfamiliar medical hierarchy she had always managed to avoid. A great deal of pain ensued, so much pain that she could not believe she was living through it. Completely released from shame or regret, she had actually screamed for Rafael. Finally, her doctor said, "Your son is here." and put her out of her misery.

"What a darling little Catalan I've just doted over," recently arrived Martha cheerfully related, chatting with Marion while Semele lay with her eyes closed. "Eyes and hair black as coal...he doesn't resemble any of us."

Neither woman had mentioned the absence of Rafael, this a presumptive manner of exclusion that irritated Semele. Some small shred of expectation had lingered, that she might open her eyes and find him there. The baby had not been expected for another week. When she at last allowed herself to reason clearly, she concluded that their son's presumed arrival time would probably not have made a difference.

Quite amazed, she had held Miguel and ached with love for her baby and for its father. Lifting its tiny perfect fingers with swelling heart, she smiled at Martha and Marion and said, "Mm, the maternal instinct definitely at play." Now with the baby taken away to sleep, she felt exhausted and was going through strange changes of mood, very needful of her own sleep's escapement. Ah, only to sleep, with her retreating belly, her entire body on the mend. Intangible mending would be a far more lengthy process. As she lay drifting into sleep, she heard Marion explaining to Martha that her daughter had not quite enough milk for Miguel's healthy appetite, and

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thus his food intake would alternate between breast and bottle. A discussion on the importance of breast-feeding ensued. She smiled at lively exchanges between the two on a subject she had never expected to hear.

Semele had been at home more than a week, alone with her rather demanding son and slightly less demanding cat, having just guiltily shooed her mother and Marion back to their assiduous lives. Dora Benson came regularly for a helpful visit, and also to admire Miguel and stroke Catney. Quite noticeably, she made no inquiry of the father's whereabouts, offering not a single word of interest. She had never married and did not appear to care much for, or place much stock in, the opposite gender. Having once mentioned that her boss was a tyrant whom she had served with practiced skill and near total self-denial for nearly forty years, no embellishment was offered. Still, Semele inferred that some dependent satisfaction had been derived from so long an allegiance. Humans made strange alliances, and from this conjecture she could hardly exclude herself.

One day she fell ill with a severe headache, and had to call Dora Benson and ask her to sit in her house and watch over Miguel while she tried to recover.

With head throbbing, she answered her door wearing only white satin pajamas and in bare feet, eager to return to her bed. "It must be my overwrought hormones acting up," she tersely explained with a weak smile of apology.

"Don't worry about a thing, my girl. I know where the bottles are and I know where Miguel is. If he wakes I'll rock him and feed him, and whatever else is necessary, a change of diaper I'm sure. I tended my sister's children on many vacations years ago and I still remember how."

"My God, I'm so lucky to have you," Semele called out, holding an aching head, unkempt hair flying as she retreated to huddle beneath her feather comforter. Not much given to self-medication, she had reluctantly taken three aspirin.

Some time in the late evening Semele awoke to the sound of muted voices and thought Dora must have switched on the normally silent television. Her headache seemed to have abated a little. The darkened room glowed softly from her night light. She turned to her other side, facing the pale green wall, a color always found very comforting -- just now soothingly filigreed with nascent spring leaf shadows from a street lantern --, and soon closed her eyes. Drawing her legs up nearer her chest, she sighed and tried to fall back into sleep. At the same startling moment that she felt a hand grasping her hair, she suddenly realized what it was she had been hearing in her recovering torpor: that one low accented voice. Now the unmistakable caressing fingers. No sound would rise from her throat as she opened her eyes in shocked

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silence, her heart exploding with rapid beats. He lifted her up into arms redolent of travel, that communally used recycled air fumed into life incarcerated in flight.

“I have seen our beautiful *Miguelito, mi amor*,” he whispered against her ear.

“Then...then you know that he’s all right...will always be so well-loved. I just adore him.” She tried to push herself away from him as she spoke, clearly an attempt to regain her own ground, as she supposed necessary.

“No, please. *Por favor, querida mía*,” he protested, refusing to release her. “Let me explain.”

“I don’t think so. You would always be explaining. I know that...explaining and explaining. I don’t want you to resort to that. I understand everything...have accepted the consequences.”

“Do you love me?”

“Oh yes...I do love you.”

“Then be still and listen.

“Everything happened at once. I had to fly to Paris and argue with World Bank. In the middle of that my mother reached me to tell me my father was seriously ill.”

“Oh, no. Oh, Rafael--”

“Sh, sh. ; *Chito!* Just listen. I arrived in time to sit by his bed, and we really did think he would not live. My mother was not handling it very well. I did not want to call you with this news...to upset you with his death...and I was upset myself. I know how much you came to care for him...and with the baby coming -- I thought it would not be for another week...as you told me. I wanted to be here.”

“But, Rafael, your father’s--”

“No, he is recovered some. They did surgery on his damaged heart...are installing a pacemaker. But I am sorry, *mi amor*. Have you been alone...except for Miss Benson?”

“No, with my nominal Auntie Marion...Mama got here.”

“You did not suffer too much?”

“I don’t really know. Anything that hurts that much can hardly be remembered. Well, I...yes, I was screaming for you...didn’t care. My doctor finally let me sleep.”

She looked at his face, evaluative eyes, saw elation sliding beneath the wound of her petulant answer; too vivid an explanation. She attempted to soften it, and failed, again overridden by recurring uncertainty.

“My reward is a carbon copy of you...except that I thought...I was thinking...oh, I imagined that you didn’t--”

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“*¡Por el amor de Dios!* why? How could you possibly think that, Semele?...after all I have said...*damn*, I should have called from Barcelona. I thought your mother would stay with you. I was wrong. I will get used to thinking in another way.”

She turned her streaming face away. “Oh, God. My chemistry is really skewed...I’m so darned emotional.”

“Soon you will be my same love...please forgive me. I will make you well. Is your head better?”

“Everything is better. Aren’t you tired from all of that traveling?”

“Eh, a little. I am used to it.”

“Have you eaten anything?”

“*Sí, la basura* they feed you on the plane. Never mind. I am hungry only for you. I will let your friend go home, and then we will lie together, sleep together, *mi esposa*, mother of Miguel. *¡Cristo!* I have wanted to be with you.”

In the morning Miguel was crying with insatiate hunger, and for absolute attention and a fresh diaper. When he was breast-fed Semele brought him to her bed, where she had left Rafael still recovering from jet lag. Tucking the fussily writhing oiled little bundle beside Rafael, she lay down beside them, offering a string of cooing words.

Rafael leaned on his right elbow, letting the tiny waving fingers curl around the little finger of his left hand while he laughed with delight and wonder.

“*Buenos días*, Miguel. You must speak my language, too. “*Mira...*those eyes. Ah, this baby is an Arnau i Roca.”

“Yes, I see no hint of me there. You’ve dominated my womb as well as my life.”

“I had no intention of dominating either. Wait and see. You will find some of yourself in this flesh of our flesh.”

“I don’t mind that he’s you...I’m glad.”

He reached over Miguel and ran the back of his hand across her cheek, then dropped onto the pillows with his hands beneath his head, staring at the ceiling in thought.

“And so life goes on, and in this way perhaps we have let ourselves into a very uncertain future, this imperative of our chromosomes...this perfect little human.”

“Right now, why don’t we simply think of him as our son,” she suggested with teasing voice.

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He kissed Miguel's tissue-thin oily-sweet forehead and said, "Put him back in his bed. He wants to sleep, and I want to hold you without fear of hurting him."

When she returned, Rafael, still pondering, reached for her and said, "Here is the amazing effect of spilled wine. Red-headed mathematician, what a joy you are to me. I never thought to have so much."

Later, Catney jumped onto the bed and awakened them with a loud meow. Rafael stretched and began to tease the cat, rolling it over a little roughly. Catney batted at him, with enlarged black eyes but without extended claws, finally settling down to purr. Lying on his back with his eyes closed, Rafael said, "I have to go to Paris. Will you come with me?"

"I...it's so strange with us...as I suppose I should've realized. I never seem to know what'll happen next...how we'll deal with this strangeness. Mama and Marion appear to think I've imagined you."

"Are they very religious?" he exclaimed, sitting up and laughing heartily. "Did you also imagine Miguel?"

"You're such an amusing man."

"*Bueno*...but you have not answered me."

"Will I come with you," she repeated in an intentional monotone and with no hint of an answer.

"I am lying against these pillows looking calm, but inside I am wild impatience...about to demand something from you, Semele. I want to take you both back with me."

"Didn't you say--"

"To hell with what I said...thought. What now? Do I beg? I am unused to living without you. You are also responsible for this...you have ruined me for a solitary life...I want to have you, both of you. And I think you need me...*mira*, no more headache. Is this love enough to--"

"I'll come. I was always prepared to come with you. I mean, go anywhere with you...if you wanted me."

"If I wanted you? If I wanted you." He slid his hands beneath her head, his fingers against her scalp. "Why would I want you...want my heart's thief?...*animosa*...so brave."

As the Sound's morning fog dissipated, Rafael dressed in unpacked charcoal slacks and a new shirt of dark green corduroy, slightly creased from travel. He leaned on the window ledge of Semele's bedroom, his thumb beneath his chin, staring out at the arresting panorama.

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“So you like to live near water.”

“Yes, I do...as Thoreau wrote, ‘It is well to have some water in your neighborhood, to give buoyancy to and float the earth.’ But it gives so much more.”

“Ah, my friend, Henry David Thoreau...who influenced Gandhi with his lucid *Civil Disobedience*...useful words.

“This salty Puget Sound will rise as the ice melts.”

Semele looked over at Rafael from the bed, where she lay on her side in her robe, making Miguel smile with her teasing expressions. “At least my house is on a hill.”

“Here, it is earthquakes, *querida*. I like your house. Why did I think you would live in something modern?”

“Why did you?”

“Perhaps because your thinking is enlightened, avant-garde even...*sí*, modern solutions for modern problems.”

“But my taste is of an earlier time, high traditional, classical, somewhat European and well-lived-in, burnished with many lives...I suppose impressions of early travels.”

He spoke with his eyes fastened on the misty gray-blue water, a gliding white ferry distant. “Do you have a car? Drive? *¡Dios mio!* the things I do not know about you.”

“Do you want to go for a drive in my car? I’ll ask Dora to watch Miguel. She’s fallen so quickly in love with him...really she finds him absolutely irresistible.”

“Of course, he is my son.” Rafael laughed with amused assurance. “*Sí*, let us go for a drive. You will drive me to a place you like, *no?* I want to see where that will be.”

Semele watched him cross the room and lower himself gently down beside Miguel. His consuming presence here in her house continued to amaze her. After the shock of his abrupt arrival, everything had become extraordinary. Gazing at him as he studied his son with a softened solemnity of mood, a powerful emotion swept over her. This incredible man was her husband, the man with whom she had made the little being now gurgling, grunting, so easily winning his father’s smile. Lying back, she turned her face away.

He reached around Miguel and grasped her hair to turn her face toward him. “Where have you gone? What is it, Semele? Are you crying?”

“You’ll probably find me a little changed...possibly it’s hormones...or maybe just seeing you again.”

In the moment of silence she felt his disappointment.

“You did not believe that I would come.”

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“I knew you would *like* to come. I..I guess I didn’t really think you would.”

“You were prepared to live without me...because of the way you came to know me...because you really do think me untrustworthy. What a stoic woman you are – perhaps some negative thing happened in your childhood, something you could only control by dismissing. Where you are concerned, I am not stoic at all. I realized it when you left me to come here. I married you not only because of this little *nene* here, but because I think of you as mine. Always I am yours...*siempre*. Are you...the same for me?”

“Yes...yes.”

“Then do not try to live without me.”

“Oh, God...how can you know me so well? Ah, *tears*.”

“Cry all you want...but only if it makes you better.

“Give Miguel a little of your milk, *mi amor*, so that he is content to drink from the bottle while we are gone. Already I have seen that my son wants what I want.”

Rafael swept his fingers absently through waved strands of disheveled hair falling over his forehead – hair mussed when their bodies gravitated each toward the other in a single elated emotion, as so often happened in sharing a positive experience. His discerning eyes momentarily left Semele and traveled along the horizon of blue-crazed snowy peaks beyond their parked car’s windshield.

“You resonate with good feeling in this place. I sense it in your body...different.”

“Yes...always so intoxicating coming here. Something about the air...this high air.”

In her neglected, five-year-old Saab, they had boarded a ferry north of Seattle at Edmonds. “Why do you not drive a non-polluting car?” Rafael had wanted to know. “I don’t drive very often,” was her feeble answer. “Do you realize that for every mile you travel in this car you add a pound of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere?” She apologized and promised to very soon amend her transportation.

From the ferry they drove onto the peninsula, climbing in leisurely silence through sprawling old upland farms and then precipitous dark green forests, to the rugged summit of Hurricane Ridge. They had stopped on the scenic unguarded verge of a steep incline, facing the snowy panorama of the craggy Olympic Range. Spring was always late up here, but the lodge parking area had been cleared of snow. Mounds of muddy white scrapings flanked the uniformly flat space, sparkling in bright sun. From time to time, fast-driven clouds dulled the sheen of snow on the low hill across

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the road behind them and the slope falling away before them. A steady wind hummed over the surfaces of the car, the car gently rocked now and then by stronger gusts. It was a weekday and they were alone, except for a few brief visits by other cars. In this welcome isolation, they awakened to the pleasures of peaceful discovery, glad for their comfort in the tempering stillness of a cozy enclosure, within the cold beauty of harsh elements; thus, nature indifferently served to reveal uncharted interiors, an ongoing exploration of each other.

Semele reached behind her and snatched a navy and red plaid blanket from the back seat. Tucking it around Rafael, she explained, "You aren't used to cold. I love cold, but you're a hot-blooded Catalan."

He let the blanket slide from his leather jacket to his knees as he placed a hand on the nape of her neck, leaning into yet another inspired kiss.

"Ah...with that I need no blanket. There is nothing cold about you...and if I am hot-blooded it is you.

"We share a great span of mountains linking the earth, *sí*? Do you miss *Espejismo*? Maybe a little you do."

"*Espejismo*...bathing there with you...living above that remarkable valley. I've thought of it so many times...like a sparkling dream...now paradise...proving the benefits of nature's rough and tumble...and you driving me crazy getting important things done while I lay around gestating...in such awe of natural life...of *you*...perfect...until you were..." Her eyes widened, following a drifting cloud shadow.

"What's happening there, Rafael?"

"Do you really want to talk about that...*now* you want to talk about that? You know what happens, and here in this moment you will not have any more poetry in your head."

"I have *you* in my head...most of you here with me, I think...I hope...and, yes, I know how you are...want you as you are. *You* are poetry."

Rafael laughed and shook his head, then twined his fingers through hers and kissed the back of her hand.

"Eh, I am afraid to ask why you think so. Madera, *sí*, Madera. They will have water. I am fighting with World Bank. They want profit and profiteers. I have managed to convince UNIFOLL, so far that is, that they can still make some money without privatizing the water -- this condition Mendoza will not allow, and it is I who have convinced him of that immovable stance. It is a very difficult situation, because everyone wants money, a lot of money, and no one gives a damn about the people and their need of an adequate water system. No one ever does. At least we have the government on our side. In most places where there are impoverished governments they side with the profiteers."

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“Is there still fighting in Madera?”

“Sporadic fighting, a few holdouts long used to warm barracks, decent pay and good food...too short-sighted to read Mendoza’s writing on the wall. Bellaco paid his elite cadre of soldiers well, a necessary expenditure to keep him on his throne. They will soon come around...or be captured by a new army. Mendoza’s army is strong now...the country essentially stable...my argument for covetous World Bank.”

“You at World Bank seems to me a huge incongruity.”

“Ah, but they move money around, facilely, and I can and will conjure that possibility. If UNIFOLL even appears to be profitable the IMF would like to see a part of the spoils, ostensibly in the interest of stabilization, of course. I may have to lie a little, or count on the wounded earth to lie for me.”

“The earth lie?”

“Sí, inviting indications of what in long-range is not forthcoming, or sparsely so...but enough. You see, the earth is not always so indifferent to human fate...it can tease, cajole...sacrifice itself a little for the finite.”

Rafael was laughing as he threw open the door and stood breathing cold air, each inhalation exhaled in a quickly vanishing opacity of warm breath.

“Walk with me in your wonderful cold.”

Holding hands inside his warm pocket, they crossed the parking lot, and made their way to an alpine-tree-sheltered spot of tangled ground in the lee of the wind and mostly barren of snow. Semele knelt down and cupped her hands around a single fragile flower pushing up from the brown winter mat. Its delicate face had six pointed white petals and a golden-orange center.

“Look, an avalanche lily, maybe the first here. For several years the frail little bulb makes only a single leaf. Finally, it stores enough energy to make two leaves and a brave flower. Such persistence...so enduring.”

She looked up at Rafael standing above her studying the elegant corolla, then more so her delighted eyes. He knelt beside her and touched the flower’s petals, the fingers of his other hand tightening around her right arm wrapped in the sleeve of a silver-gray jacket.

“It is surprising that you know this, you, doctor of mathematics, worldly traveler, incidental mother...that you know and care about this small mountain flower.”

“I’ve often come to find them in the spring...ranks and ranks of such exquisite beauty, nodding in the silence of sheltered high places. They flourish a little later, hosts of them, so aloof and pure I’m always spellbound...reminded of the intricate magic of a place that--”

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“*¡Cristo!* I love you, Semele. *¡Jesús!* how I love what you are!” He buried his face in her hair, and she felt the heavy cold as flaming heat swirling around them, borne on crisp icy-fresh airs, deeply, viscerally stirring, somehow collaborating in the sudden ignition of her body.

They continued to crouch over the thawing ground, holding onto each other, hardly aware of exactly where they were, until she came to think that it must be partly this high place rendering her so wildly emotional -- these high mountains, *Espejismo*, *mutatis mutandis*, sharpening, shaping, perpetuating love’s desire, yet threatening its epilogue.

Later, they drove to a dark-interioled log cabin, a restaurant long established as a quaint destination in the milder climate of the denser forest below -- a square old rough-hewn place called Rose Lodge. They sat at a candlelit table covered with a soft crimson cloth, near a large window facing a shady, nearly bare woods floor anchoring tall firs. Across the room a fire, freshly fed with snapping alder, sent heat-borne sparks up the broad stone chimney. Beyond the dioramic window, and scattered among the uneven grayish-brown tree trunks, a few huckleberry bushes and wild roses displayed their new leaves in lacy splashes of palest green. Raucous crows sailed in and out of this ramous view.

“There’s a sort of unwarranted ownership you have of a place you love. The more you come to know it, understand a little of it, the more you feel you’ve earned proprietary possession...as much as anyone ever owns anything.”

As Rafael was digesting her words, her mood suddenly changed, her eyes traveling over the sweeping limbs of the tall and dominant Douglas firs. Searching among their thick trunks, with a playful smile hinting of a child’s artless speculation, she revealed her whimsy, “I always expect to see a bear rambling among those trees whenever I come here...but I never have.”

“*Hay muchos osos aquí.*” Rafael had at once fallen in with her ingenuous spirit, his eyes, his entire face alive with sparkling humor. “A lot of lonely bears. They come at night. They, too, wonder where you are.”

Semele held her lips together in a chiding smirk that broke into laughter. “Yes, we always miss each other.”

“*Tomamos una copíta?*...maybe just one?” he suggested with a coaxing interlingual ease. When she assented, he summoned the waitress and ordered glasses of red wine.

Often now he inserted some Spanish into his casual conversation; she knew he had discovered that when he did this her eyes focused keenly on his face, on his revealing eyes and carefully intoning mouth as he appeared to test her comprehension

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in an unconcerned, impromptu manner; for these spontaneous offerings he had her fully fixed attention, her lips sometimes silently forming his Castilian words.

They had decided to order a bottle of cabernet that was a finer vintage than the house wine listed on the menu. When the wine arrived and was poured, he touched his glass to hers with a Catalan word unknown to her and which, in swiftly passing, went unexplained. He drank with quiet ease, occasionally looking out at the forest of hidden bears, once raising an eyebrow to nod his head with a teasing smile she thought generously careless, quixotic.

Continually, she wanted to know what he was thinking but as often refrained from asking, supposing it to be an irritating habit: interrupting another's peace of mind with persistent curiosity. He had given her so much attention that she wanted to compensate with impressions of his work.

"The second most important person in Madera now, with Mendoza in control, would be the minister of finance."

He set down his wine glass and looked at her. The obscure dark blind of withheld experience visibly changed to comprehension, a little surprise, thoughtful and incisive.

"*Querida*, you are deferring to what you believe my *idée fixe*, because you... ; *Cristo!* I understand, and in a way it pleases me, but we do not have to discuss this now."

"I'm really very interested. I acquired quite a bit of data on the GDP when I was going over figures there. It's just something I like to do...and I can easily replicate stats from memory, so I think I have a realistic idea of--"

" ; *Jesús!* are you really going to talk about this?" Looking around, he lifted his hands, incorporating in his protest the primitive, rather theatrical romance of the Old West therein evoked -- this dusky-gold old dinner room of smoke-tarnished log walls hung with large racks of deer antlers, some attached to deer heads; an interior she had vaguely thought suitable as a stage setting for Puccini's unusual opera, *La Fanciulla Del West*: ersatz Western saddle tramps and rough miners artfully singing in Italian -- *The Girl of the Golden West*. Would that she were as effective as Minnie with her pistol, that Rafael were the redeemed Ramerrez and they could disappear forever into an idyllic wonderland. She was jolted back to reality by his voice.

"*Here, now*, you want to talk about Madera?"

Her response had begun low-voiced, at first only for herself, but rising for him. "What then should I be talking about? Oh, something mundane and innocuous. How handsome you are in your forest-green shirt." His near mortal wound had made her into someone else, a wary, uncertain person very confusing to herself. It suddenly occurred to her that this halcyon period of attentive digression was his gift to her, not

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to be thrown away. Yet she went on in a pondering dark voice progressively more desperate, venturing into an unfamiliar place where profound angst had led her, beyond caring what else was being revealed, never conceding that he too may have considered such a dismal eventuality. “Perhaps I should say the real thing, yes?...how I’m hardly able to believe any of this. Because sometimes I think...I think it couldn’t possibly last. Anything...anything as unbelievable as this couldn’t go on, could it? Could it?”

“*Querida...querida m'ia*, drink your wine, *por favor*. You are wounding my heart.”

“But I want to believe...I want to, and I want it to go on. Oh. Oh, God...sorry.” She lifted her wine glass and drank the entire amount, at once holding forth her empty goblet and watching him tilt the bottle, the replenished red palliative gurgling out, as from the ruptured artery of an engorged heart -- she had witnessed such a thing, without experiencing the misery felt here. “Now maybe you’ll have to drive. Do you drive? I’ve never seen you drive.”

He got up and came around the table to sit beside her in the red-cushioned, pine-joined booth, sliding his arm around her and gripping her listing shoulder.

“Sí, I drive. *Querida*, will you eat something?”

“Yes, we’ll eat something. As I recall, they serve turkey or venison here...from hunters. Or maybe a freshly lassoed steer. Feels like that sort of place, doesn’t it?”

“*¡Dios!* May I laugh?”

“Absolutely. You’re supposed to laugh, and often. I love it when you do...that surprising Catalan abandon.”

He laughed a little more, but without sustained humor. His face settled into express concentration. It was a face she now saw as chiseled by constant exertion and adjustment, written with a certain imperturbable character only possible with long-practiced self-denial, a determined face, always coolly in possession of an objective. Called to mind was an early painting by Picasso; a discerning face remembered from the younger artist’s work found in Barcelona -- really the only paintings of his she cared for --; a face of living many ways but captive of no artifice; dauntless, assertive. The face here was strikingly etched by continual engagement with an endless commitment never to be laid aside -- this last perhaps the key to Rafael’s seductive personality.

As he studied her volatile condition, his mouth held an unevenly made smile both consoling and gently reproving.

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The swiftly infused cabernet had liberated her from the morose fit of uncertainty. She floated up on a wave of optimism, shrugged and returned an arch smile.

“A strange personality I’ve never met just...somehow appeared...but the wine was certainly a good idea...I mean a lot of it all at once. That...*alien presence* is drowning in *vino tinto*. You always encourage such useful ideas...or have them. I think maybe -- if I had to, but I don’t want to -- I could live the rest of my life on what we’ve had.”

“Semele...at this moment my feelings will not allow me to sit here philosophically. It is a mystery -- *you!* -- the passion of you. You are a mystery...the intuitive ways you affect me, affect everyone. Later we *will* talk about Madera, *mi amor*. I know you have wise things to tell me.”

They returned home after dark. Rafael had perforce taken the wheel, complaisant in doing so, and had found his way back in a reverse manner unusual for an unfamiliar nonnative, navigating alone while Semele dozed.

She apologized to Dora for arriving so late.

“I was thrilled to have Miguel in my care.” Dora was cheerful, sincere in her pleasure. “He’s a darling, and he slept most of the time. But he knows how to announce his needs, that little boy. If you’ve a mind to go out again tomorrow just let me know. I’ve nothing pressing to do.”

After Miguel had been fed, cuddled, and returned to his handsome maplewood crib -- a welcome gift from Semele’s parents --, Rafael expressed his own desire for attention, the lateness nothing to either of them. Semele was glad she had tipsily dozed off in the car. She awoke in the early morning exhausted, assailed by recollections not merely of erotic dreams but of a deferentially attended body. At Miguel’s first cry, she leapt clumsily out of bed.

“Let me do it,” Rafael surprised her by saying. “Come back here, I will do it.”

“*You?* What do you know about hungry little mouths and soiled diapers?”

“You might be surprised.” The pale green duvet flew aside as he stood up, naked and stretching his arms behind his head. “I have cared for motherless children in some places around the world.”

“I *am* surprised...not sure I believe you.” Her voice was a yawn of indecision as she stood half asleep.

“You are worn out. Go back to bed.”

“Yes.” She offered a languorous smile. “But probably you are, too.”

“So...it is my turn. Lie down.”

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She lay in bed for perhaps twenty minutes, unable to return to sleep and considering the fate of her son, then crept into a spare bedroom that was now Miguel's. She found Rafael in shorts and t-shirt in the rocking chair, placidly feeding a most content Miguel. She stared at their son, held snugly in the crook of his father's arm, Rafael's tan fingers wrapped around a warm bottle while Miguel made small happy sounds and eagerly sucked at the nipple.

"Clean and almost sated, this *nene*," he said, grinning but with rather sleepy eyes. "*Miguelito* was hungry."

Using a tissue pulled from her robe pocket, she wiped a dribble of milk from Miguel's rhythmic and relentless little mouth, then combed Rafael's sleep-tousled hair into place with lightly threading fingers that needed to touch.

"You must have really been paying attention earlier: the bottles, the formula, the diapers...in the same way you obviously observed how to get home yesterday. As I was passing out in the car, I thought surely you'd be waking me to ask directions. You're a different sort of person...I'm unused to such a one as you."

"I have trained myself to be observant...a good way to survive; no second chance if you fail to notice something.

"*Mira*...asleep with the nipple still in his mouth."

Now the scene before her was painted in coruscating washes, made so by an emotion soaring beyond query or voice, a rich genre painting indelibly laid down within a limitless repository, the intangible yet voluminous mental gallery. Recently this occurred without consideration or command, each chromatic stroke stored by her painterly mind's eye; exquisitely experienced scenes likely repeated everywhere, perhaps unremarkable to anyone else, but miraculous to her.

When they were back in bed and wrapped together, she whispered with her mouth against his ear, "I suppose you always think in Spanish. Do you ever think in English?"

"Sí, when I am with you, thinking of you...thinking of what I will say to you."

"And in Paris you'll be thinking in French."

"Not now, Semele Taylor de Arnau i Roca. I want to think only of this...of your hair flowing like a river, smelling of roses, the softness of your body, this delicate ear that accepts my English...echoes my Castilian. ¡*Jesús!* your entire body shivers when I touch only this small funnel of sound. I am amazed at us...*siempre*...always amazed."

"As I am...continually amazed."

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“So we are both this way. Inseparable economics and mathematics, Catalan soldier of something and red-haired athlete with swift mind and body...an original pair. I no longer question any of it...how we came to have this, *mi amor*...all of this. You give to me what I give to you and we sleep the way our son sleeps...like a vine making energy from sunlight...new green leaves. Why are you laughing?”

“It’s that very Catalan practicality alongside such incredible poetry. You make me happy.”

“*Sí*, now I will do that...every part of you and every part of myself.”

When they awoke, she lay on her back with her eyes wide open, staring at bright spangles of light rippling over the cream ceiling.

“I have a horse.”

“¿*Un caballo?* ¡*Dios!* why? You are never here. The poor horse. Where is this animal to be found?”

“He lives with a distant cousin, Brad Taylor. You would like him.”

“The horse or your cousin?”

“Well, both...you would like Brad, I believe. He once taught philosophy, but he gave up everything...renounced the world and retreated to the country. We should go see him today...if Dora is amenable...and I believe she will be.”

Before they drove away to see her horse and Brad Taylor, Semele’s mother called and insisted on speaking to Rafael. Used to the persistent intervention of inclusive relatives in his own extended family, Rafael was thoroughly at ease and, because Semele was their daughter, delighted. He spoke to both parents simultaneously from their busy home, which Martha said presently resembled Union Square.

Semele had decided not to participate in this initial communication, handing over the phone and listening to only one side of the exchange.

“*Sí*, I am glad to speak with you. *Gracias*. That is so. *Sí*, he does, very much an Arnau i Roca, but of course your daughter is also in this little one. Ah, *Señor* Taylor, you will like this grandson. *Sí*...*George, gracias*, George. *Sí*, he will be bilingual, and some Catalan...probably many other languages. We are going to Paris soon. *Sí, sí*, we will. Semele will call you from Paris. Ah, *gracias, gracias*. *Sí*, one day soon we will come to visit you. No, no, *siempre*, always...always she is careful. Nice to talk with you. *Adiós*, here is Semele.

“Hello, you two.”

“Rafael sounds wonderful, Semele. Are you happy?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“That’s the most important thing,” her father asserted. She thought of Marion. “We hope to meet him in person.”

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“You will, Papa. I don’t know when. You know we’re leaving in a couple of days.”

“Yes, please take care, my girl...and let us see our little grandson before too long.”

“Of course. You’ll love him, Papa.”

“I know I will...we *do* love him.”

“Call us now. Good-bye, darling,” Martha said.

“Good-bye...and give my love to Marion.”

“Yes, dear. Marion is in Budapest.”

“Lord, off again. Oh, I’ll be seeing Brad today.”

“Our hermit?” her father said. “Advise that old boy to reenter the world. We need him badly the way things are going. He’s too young to give up – tell him we haven’t.”

“I’ll tell him, Papa. He won’t listen, though.”

“Tell Rafael to work on him with some of that marvelous charisma. We aren’t averse to such tactics if Brad can be encouraged to better employ his tremendous worth. It’s such a waste, dear.”

“I know Mama, but you yourself have said that people make their own choices and live with them.”

“All right, darling. We love you all. Good-bye.”

As Semele drove them out to Brad Taylor’s remote Bear Creek farm she explained, “My mother has designated you as the person best qualified to rejuvenate my cousin, that is, bring him back into the world of the engagé.”

“I hope this is just an amusing anecdote. I would never interfere in your cousin’s choice of life.”

“But you do it all the time. It’s how you move and shake the world.”

“Move and shake the...ah, but that is different. The people I work with have never been given a chance to make *any* choice, let alone one that is likely to be beneficial.”

Semele glanced both ways and roared across a busy intersection. Looking aside, she happened to notice Rafael silently raise an eyebrow critical of her snappy driving.

“What if you found my cousin existing in bad faith?”

“Is he?”

“Possibly. I believe so. Yes.”

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“Please do not involve me in something undesired, *vida mía*. I am trying to befriend members of your family, not alienate them.”

They drove on through the outskirts of the city and away from mostly unremarkable residential areas, into a dark green silence of platted forest, and with the jagged snowy Cascade Mountains always in the near distance. Eventually they were among fenced pastures. Escaped Herefords were standing on the road shoulder as they came over a rise.

“Could you find your way back now?” Semele inquired in a tone of voice genuinely curious but nevertheless amused.

“Sí, and please look out for that steer crossing the road. You are a very carefree driver.”

“You think I’m a bad driver?”

“I said a carefree driver. I would not be a passenger if you were a bad driver.”

“What would you do?”

“Insist upon driving myself.”

“You are a *good* driver.”

“I try to be...now. I once had a motorcycle and nearly killed myself and others with regular and spectacular acts of insanity.”

“I just thought of Carlos.”

“The motorcycle Carlos rides is too gutless to be of much concern...unlike his wild disposition: *¡salvaje!*”

Semele concurred with a laugh as she slowed for a gleaming sorrel horse and its robust young female rider. Its tail swishing from side to side, the horse was being held close to the pavement and moving steadily along on the gravel road shoulder. Swerving gently with a friendly wave, she glanced at Rafael and delivered an intentionally provocative assessment.

“I suppose you roared across Europe on a big Harley, with a pretty dark-haired girl hugging your middle and the wind whipping up all that Marlon Brando madness.”

“*¡Jesús!* you are entertaining. *Por favor*, tell me more about myself.” Rafael added nothing further, only staring out the window at a driveway fast approaching. The entrance had two high gateposts and an overarching varnished board carved with the words: *Laissez Faire*. When Semele slowed and turned the wheel, driving beneath the sign and past the unmarked mailbox, he said, “I hope that is irony...that corporate slogan. Is your cousin *el loco de la familia?*”

Semele gave a titter of laughter. “You can decide for yourself, but I’ll supply you with some clues: magna cum laude Wittgensteinian scholar, naturalist, and very cynical environmentalist.”

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“*Bueno*, irony. We may get along. He knows about me?”

“*Sí, mi marido*. I phoned him this morning. He doesn’t require much notice. I’m one of the privileged few always allowed through the gate.”

“There was no gate.”

“No. But entering here unannounced is done only once.”

“Eh, one of those,” Rafael said with a grin.

“Brad studied at Cambridge.”

“Ah, and now he is an anchorite.”

“Well, not in a religious sense...yes, reclusive, a hermit...at least he was living alone when last I saw him.”

In the following silence, she observed that he remained too circumspect and unassuming to ask what was known about himself by her reclusive cousin, but as they approached the house Semele volunteered a little more information.

“Brad knows who you are. He does read various papers, journals, if only to validate his reason for withdrawing from a society he considers to be heading over a cliff.”

“One of my uncles is such a recluse. How does Brad’s relationship come to you?”

“He’s my father’s uncle’s grandson.”

Rafael considered this in silence as they approached the yard entrance, the driveway rounding past a large old brick house with white trim. The style might be described as well lived in, or tolerably run-down, Georgian Colonial.

A lanky dark blond man in his mid-thirties, wearing worn jeans, blue plaid shirt, tan leather vest, and scuffed Wellingtons, stepped out of the fan-crowned front door and stood at the top of the circular steps, his hands in his back pockets.

Semele observed those piercing China-blue eyes sweeping over Rafael with a very critical scrutiny, before coming to rest more softly and with obvious pleasure on her.

When the amenities had been exchanged and the weather and a few flourishing plants discussed, they went inside to sit before a semi-screened snapping pine-log fire in the oak-wainscoted keeping room. They were greeted by strong and pervasive aromas of pine, candle wax, and ashes. Brad had momentarily left them to pull off his boots and find his slippers. A nervous lean red setter trotted into the room and threw its angular body down before the fire. Built low across one side of the room, a buffet-style oak cupboard held a few pieces of pewter and two pewter candlesticks covered with wax from unevenly burned, unlit white candles. Above the buffet, beveled latticed windows faced out on a rambling spring garden. Rafael stood there for a moment, gazing out on the varied tangle of leafy verdure. Semele quietly

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studied his contemplative light-edged posture, a black turtle-neck sweater accenting the blackness of his wavy hair, his hands thrust into blue denim pockets in a rather critical stance of displacement. Once again she found herself wondering what he was thinking. So far afield here, otherwise long and fiercely engaged in such monumental efforts, now unexpectedly attached to this American woman's rather unusual life, however temporarily at her side. A wrench of pity and remorse took purchase on her heart, along with a swelling pain that, incredibly, must be defined as that punishing, consuming, mercurial condition: love.

Briefly, she pondered her own pondering, then her sober downcast eyes began wandering over what was visible of the rug's central pattern, partially hidden by the long trestle table -- the familiar geometric medallion of the eleven by fifteen foot handsome, but rather lived upon, serapi that covered the oak floor: floral shapes stylized in rich colors of red-orange, cream, and navy. Brad had bought it in the town famous for such carpets, Heriz in far off northwestern Iran. Inspired by her parents, he had begun traveling during his leisurely summers away from academia. Now, in a complete reversal, he never left the farm. *Laissez Faire* -- the noninterference advertised by that ironic term did make her smile.

A red-cheeked young woman, the one they had seen riding her horse on the road, suddenly appeared in one of Brad's plaid shirts, carrying an unwieldy and rattling black enamel tray; it was loaded with a plate of frosted raisin buns, blue-flowered paper napkins, a large blue and white teapot, matching cream and sugar pots, slightly tarnished silver teaspoons, and tall delft mugs. Setting the heavily laden tray down on the waxed plank dining table, she hastily gathered some scattered newspapers from its surface and dropped them on a corner of the raised fireplace hearth.

"This is Sarah," Brad said as he entered the room, giving no further explanation. Tipping her head rather submissively to the side, the dimple-faced girl, perhaps twenty or more years of age, offered a shy smile at their concerted greetings. She took their cups from the tray and poured out the steaming black tea, then, without a single word, disappeared, closing the oak door softly behind her.

"A new addition." Semele's voice held surprise.

"Of course has never heard of Wittgenstein," Brad said in the curt and candid manner familiar to Semele, "but damn good at warming the backside. Met her at a tavern six miles further on...sort of a lost soul...likes horses."

"I trust she's suitably liberated around here for your feminist sympathies," Semele could not help commenting, with a chastising tone that hinted at hypocrisy. "I mean, you might have invited her to sit with us."

"She's not interested...shy...likes me though," Brad said, as if the apparently unusual sentiment were sufficient reason for letting Sarah disappear. "I was getting

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lonely. But you see, up to this exact moment, Semele's the only woman I'd ever have considered marrying." He stared down Rafael with a sardonic look of unmistakable baiting that produced only an amused smile from his unknown guest.

"I have thought the same," Rafael offered with an undaunted grin.

Brad rose from his Windsor chair, grabbed the iron poker, leaned over his entrenched dog and the high fire screen and, with a hard jab, settled the charring logs into a sparkling shower of bright new flames.

"Semele's done a lot for me. I wouldn't be riding around the grounds with my head in the clouds, generally with nothing more to do than shovel fireplace ashes in the middle of the afternoon and drink scotch in the evening if it weren't for this incredible woman."

"Oh, come on. You do a whopping amount of work around here. And you take care of Chancy. Poor neglected Chancy. Is my tack handy? I'm planning on doing a little riding."

"Your tack is fit and ready. And so is your horse, thanks to Sarah. He nearly bucked her off he was so in need of exercise. I can't keep up with every damned horse, fowl, sheep, and goat on the place...although I've been trying."

His sudden volte-face in regard to the amount of work he actually did around the farm made Semele chortle softly.

"Rafael's still pondering what I meant, aren't you? If you had to guess what would you say Semele did for me?"

Rafael took a swallow of his tea and said, "Something financial...probably she has shown you how to turn your savings into a retirement hobby by some good investments."

"Probably she has," Brad said, sitting down and leaning toward Rafael with his eyes arcing electric blue. "The curious thing is that this mathematical paraclete never invests anything much for herself...oh, for a charity or two, but otherwise disdains the whole business. Surely you're aware of this odd behavior. I hear you have a doctorate in economics...maybe you can better understand the curious nature of a mathematician...but this one is--"

"Hello! Is my presence here still recognized? I'd like to change the subject now." It was deemed a good time to stop the talk about herself by fulfilling her recent promise to her parents.

"Your San Francisco relatives think you should go back to teaching nonlinguistic minds how to properly use the language, Brad...so that we can all communicate well enough to understand what is and what is not important."

"Christ, does this importuning never end? It's all useless. Ask your husband. He knows if he keeps this up his days are numbered."

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A silence fell over the room. For a full half minute there was only the snapping fire. Beyond the row of windows a sudden northern gust rocked the budded branches, and below among tender new green blades a Maine Coon Cat, its long fur blowing absurdly forward, stalked something hidden beneath a spreading forsythia. Out of the closely watched yellow bush darted a rosy-headed house finch, swooping near the crouched cat and soaring up to alight high on a swaying dogwood twig; there it sang a taunting full-throated note to its foiled predator.

Rafael turned from the thriving prospect of the windows to look at Semele, his overt response contained now but his eyes flashing grievance, a silent apology not his to make. The sickness rising in her stomach made her want to slap Brad, something, through all of his previous bitter tongue lashings, she had never thought of doing. When her look, bitter and resonating with anguish, finally assailed him, regret washed over his grumbling countenance.

“God, that was rotten of me...and stupid. I’ve lived alone too long and my tongue has gotten very sharp. Sarah will be good for me. She’s teaching me some manners. My choice of schooling inculcated a damned self-centered arrogance. Sometimes it makes me a real shit. Please do forgive me. Look, I’m just fed up with the greedy, corrupt, murderous, slimy world. I suppose I’m turning into a crank. Can’t do anything about it but spew anger...misanthropy.”

Rafael’s answering voice indicated genuine concern, which Semele thought generous. “No point in suffering when there *are* other choices more gratifying...at your age.”

“Doing something about my unhappiness would be doing something about the condition of the world, and that’s impossible.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“If everyone thought as you, you would not have the privilege of living here and complaining.”

“Oh, that old chestnut,” Brad shot back at Rafael, crossing his legs and swinging his leather-slipped foot with churlish dismissal.

Semele looked with interest and some surprise at Brad’s harshly used hands, spreading from angular bony wrists and sliding irritably up and down over his shirtsleeves, as if to warm his cooling nature. Those callused nicked hands, with red-scabbed scratches and stained rough-edged nails, were nothing like the smooth appendages once pampered by sedentary academia; scholarly life promoted softer skin.

“He’s right, Brad. You know he is.”

“It could be that I no longer care.”

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“How cynical you are. I’ve always respected your right to do what you want, but now I see that you’re in a lot of needless pain in the doing.”

“Well, of course. I know too much. Pain is the obvious result.”

“But wasn’t this retreat supposed to make you happy?”

“Not at all. Happiness is a high branch of golden apples...deliciously enticing, but when reached for they vanish – sometimes one jumps and gets a taste. Happiness I do not expect. I’ve only striven to remove myself from the insidious horror...since I can have no effect. You have to constantly lie to yourself to do what you do, Rafael.”

“No, very much the opposite. I have to face one absolute truth and then embrace it in order to change the lie. That is the reality I see before me, the only one that matters to me. You, above so many, know how language works, so you know how accurately I am using it.”

“My God you’re a brave man.”

“Not so brave...stubbornly persistent. It is both an engaged way to live and a way to get things done.”

“To what end?”

“In one way or another we are all linked together. You already know it is impossible to be content for very long when you have a mind capable of processing the suffering of others...the misery you feel is that linkage. There is no cure for that but a striving for change.”

“Of course you’re right.”

“You are an environmentalist?”

“I was.”

Rafael reached for the teapot but Semele took it up and poured everyone more. His eyes scolded her for doing what was traditionally accepted as her task. Brad’s sharp eye did not fail to interpret this look. He smiled, tucking a muttered word into a growing lexicon of Rafael: *iconoclast*.

“What made you once care for your environment?”

“Oh, that’s a rather strange little anecdote, but you should understand that I still care, Rafael. I simply don’t do anything about it.

“Well, let’s see...I was a teenager hiking around northern California...sort of coming upon the redwoods through a back door. One day on a trail nearly abutting that incredible forest, I came across encroaching shed-like structures, jerry-built, with a yard full of garbage, an eclectic hodgepodge of filth and squalor set among stumps that had once been noble trees. I walked near a fence with a sign: *Beware of Dog*. Beyond the barbed wire, a man was hacking at something on a big bloody stump, a buck, shot out of season. He looked up at me with bullet eyes -- I thought I looked pretty harmless...so young and wearing a backpack. He wiped his dripping hunting knife on

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his filthy jeans and started toward me. I smiled, waved, and went on my way, rapidly. I had the feeling that if he'd had his deer rifle handy he would have taken an unseasonable shot at *me*. Here, the perpetrating human virus was completely oblivious to its self-destruction. Chemicals and metals were leaching into the soil. Nearby, a once pretty little stream meandered through a refuse heap and had adorned itself with scum. It smelled very bad and along its barren shores were scaly yellow and white patches of something ugly and choking and ominous. I looked ahead toward the horizon of trees where I could see the heroic redwoods reaching as if unbound from earth, then back to this blight that stank of death -- the beauty and the beast. I looked up at the dome of sustaining sky, held to an unsuspecting blue, and began to wonder what was collecting up there as well. All at once it was as if I heard the forest sobbing, a terrible cry of anguish...the pleadings of a sickened orphan, still so innocent, dying with hunger for its lost mother. Then it struck me like a hammer between the eyes: the earth was mortally infected with a terrible virus: us. It appeared that hardly anyone knew, hardly anyone cared. I couldn't enter the celebrated redwood enclave, visit the pitifully diminished hostages of antiquity that remained...tokens left to garner sorrow for what was lost and vanishing still. I was too stricken, too ashamed, too heartsick. What apology could I, an awe-struck young naïf, make to millennia of aspiring giants?"

Sarah had brought Chancy into the paddock north of the house, a sleek black Arabian fitted out with English tack and eager to prance Semele across a long green meadow.

"Hello, Chancy," Semele soothed, running her cheek over her horse's nervous muzzle. "You remember *me*, don't you, don't you? You old risk-taker, you old Chancy thing.

"Thanks so much, Sarah. Will you ride, too?"

"Done enough of that today...going in to fix dinner."

Semele was nimbly aboard Chancy, stirruped with her snugged knees deftly drawn up, her mount already dancing backwards and champing to be off. His restless hooves pressed into the powdery earth, kicking up light puffs of fine dust from beneath a drying crust made by recent rain. "Couldn't I help with dinner?" she called, whirling once around and then reining in her agitated mount.

"No thanks." Sarah waved her hand, terribly shy before this formidable, worldly red-headed intellectual she could not envision as a friend. Readily discerning this timid reluctance, Semele, with a concerned frown, tried to settle side-stepping Chancy while still focusing on Sarah's back.

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“Leave her be,” Brad said, staring after Sarah’s rapid retreat through an as yet unattended spring yard; ferocious greenery crept near the brick walls. They both watched her, pushing aside overgrowth and leaning hard into eagerly sought escape, a place of anticipated deliverance: the safe kitchen. “She’s fixing something nice for us...likes my big old butcher block...not a bad cook...lucky for me.

“Are you riding, Rafael?”

“I will watch Semele...unless you have a Spanish saddle.”

“Very nearly...something like it. Come on, we’ll fit you up with Flux, the horse I sometimes ride...with Sarah.”

“You will not ride?”

“Now? Hell, no. My legs are bowed enough. I’ll do a few chores while you two straddle recreation. You know that leafy trail at the foot of the meadow well enough, Semele. Goes nicely into the woods. Easy in there, not much scrub.”

Semele had given Chancy his head. He was off, thudding hooves smashing over thousands of tiny white and pink meadow blooms tangled among resurging horse-cropped field grasses. Watching Chancy’s sparkling black mane blowing back against her double-clenched reins, she briefly considered her own hair enjoyably streaming out behind her, a whipping banner of complementary flame, horizontally signifying the wild impatience of both: flying red and black gonfalons of facile sport’s temporary freedom. A child’s storybook picture of Middle Age jousting flitted through her mind, the sexless notion that she of athletic prowess could have done that, and done it with victory laurels.

“I’ll work some of that rebellion out of you, you big devil,” she cried in a loud boisterous manner, pregnancy dispensed with, her high laughter ringing over the field.

By her third revolution of the long meadow, Rafael had caught up with her on Brad’s broad-shouldered Quarter Horse, a bay. This South American looking thick-chested breed complemented his equestrian gaucho style. She knew that he had ridden all over Madera, often far into the hills in conjunction with his investigative and communal work, and probably in a lot of other places in the world, nearly always on Spanish saddles. He rode with relaxed ease, reining in the advantage-seeking chicanery of his horse, very likely similarly handling all the others he had ridden.

They moved quietly into the forest on the spongy path Brad had suggested, a trail already familiar to Semele, who took the lead. Always for her the dense susurrating forest brought hushed reverence. She relished the murmuring rhythm of occasional wind-song piped through needled branches, the scrape of dead limbs, the chiseled echo of a solitary thrush piercing the rich silence of nature’s domain. She leaned back, her pliant body twisting at a waist already settling into thinness, her hand laid flat on Chancy’s croup.

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Rafael was enjoying his position, his head cocked at an evaluative angle. A spangle of evanescent light melted into his eyes as he drew up beside her. His appraising voice issued a variant theme: "Myth on Pegasus." This relevant offering in a light-hearted low register stirred a carefree response: laughter he easily teased from her modest nature.

She regained her equilibrium with a more serious and factual assessment. "Chancy does a very graceful rack that sometimes makes him look like he's flying."

"You are too literal for my myth-making."

A disoriented bumblebee buzzed near Chancy's ear; he shook his head, whirling away from Rafael's horse. Getting him under control and trotting back, Semele said, "I'm sorry about Brad. He can be difficult. You were remarkably restrained."

"Why should *you* apologize? I am sorry for the pain he caused you...but he was only being himself. I like him. He is a tortured soul, but coming around...in his own way."

"How's that?"

"It is so obvious. He is making his final argument. And resolving it."

"But how?"

"With anticipated action...not yet fully conscious but at work...often it is a sharp external jolt that resolves a difficult argument with the self. He knows he still has time...the answer to his dilemma. Your parents might help reinsert him...along with his own good credentials." Rafael posed this quite matter-of-factly, as if it were already a received process, even qualifying his belief. "He will be much better at his profession next time around...as adamant as ever in teaching the truths of language, but tempered with the wisdom of having lived the down side of knowledge."

Startled, and with a rising sense of synchrony because she had thought something similar and wondered how it would play itself out, she asked, "How do you know that?"

Rafael turned his reins over the pommel and folded his arms, looking at her in a penetrating silence, as if to say, *Do you really not know? I think you see it.* Instead, he chose to amplify her presumed understanding with a metaphor.

"He has fallen on his sword, unconsciously already admitted his mistake...*sí?*...that is the anger you see. But he is really slaying a sense of helplessness and keeping alive concern. From that necessary defeat comes positive rebirth, an even greater determination. The man understands choice; he has reason and uncommon intelligence...now he has acquired hard experience...perhaps even a soul mate." He added the last with a broad white grin and a mischievous wink. "That is some deliverance...*mira mi.*"

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She did look, closely, lingering on the elation found in his dark eyes as he bent his agile body beneath her face and grasped her neck, pulling her toward him in the shadowed light of their bracing wooded tryst. A small palest-yellow butterfly flitted over their heads, content to hang in a slanting shaft of sunlight. Both powerful horses appeared to understand the necessity of standing still.

Brad bent his head between Semele and Rafael, speaking softly as they stood before the fire in the keeping room and sipped amber sherry from small thick-bottomed glasses.

“Sarah has made paella in honor of your visit, Rafael, but now she’s afraid her recipe for this Spanish cuisine won’t meet your sophisticated standard. I hope--”

“Even the word makes me hungry,” Rafael interposed. “I will eat everything set before me.”

“Not the plates and silver,” Semele teased.

Later, Rafael stared at the huge steaming paella pan resting on raised tiles, and mounded above its brim with succulent morsels of blended mouth-watering aromas. The saffron rice, stirred into a *sofrito* mix of sautéed onion, garlic, tomato, and pork chunks, was studded with sapphire-black mussels, fluted clams, huge pink shrimp, fresh green peas, roasted red pepper strips, slices of spicy chorizo sausage, and crusty pieces of fried chicken. These colorful ingredients had been cooked each to its point of savory tenderness, and especially the translucent pearl rice grains. Sarah’s astonishing dish engendered satisfied smiles on the candlelit faces of the eaters, all but one.

Sarah, seated to the right of Brad and across from Rafael and Semele, had kept her head bent over her plate of untouched food until Rafael lifted his wine goblet with a toast: “To Sarah, whose wonderful presentation would bring *alegría*...joy, joy to all the paella eaters of *España*.”

Even in the dim light of the room, Sarah’s pale face, exposed by pulled-back hair the brown of a November woods, was seen to blush. She lifted her glass and stretched her hand across the table to touch Rafael’s waiting glass. His reward was to be the hesitant offering of her gray eyes.

“Now you will eat before this masterpiece grows cold,” Rafael encouraged with a wink and a smile.

Everyone paused while the uncertain young horsewoman cum chef lifted a forkful of food, chewed, and swallowed. Deep dimples appeared just beneath the center of revealing apple-blush cheeks, as she observed with an artless surprise delightful to witness, “It *is* good isn’t it?”

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Striving not to laugh, the others did manage cheerful restraint, nodding in agreement but with broad smiles.

“Oh, much more than good. If there’s any left, I hope you’ll let me take some home,” Semele requested.

The meal’s final embellishment was a voluptuous *crème brûlée* with essence of orange, accompanied by a platter of icy-sweet white grapes and cups of rich black Arabica.

“Turning to Sarah with a broad grin of recognition, Rafael said, “Ah, *Crema Catalana, muchos gracias, chef.*”

With a tap of her spoon, Semele cracked through the sugary brown skin crusting her dessert dish. She slipped the silky yellow richness into her mouth: Madrid, with its mahogany-walled old restaurants, canaries singing from wrought-iron balconies high above narrow alleys into her mouth; cypress-lined formal gardens and the Prado into her mouth – her parents speaking in hushed voices before Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*; an exposé steeped in the wild tales of villainous, venal, victimized mankind, portrayed with all the wily innuendo, cliché, and myth of the demonic late Middle Ages. All into her mouth.

She swallowed, her spoon balanced mid-air, her face in a contortion of pleasure, a stream of sharpest memories parading by on the zest of burnt sugar. The similar dessert she had first eaten in Spain was turned onto a plate, sepia-brown sugar flowing over its flat round custard top.

“The first flan I tasted was in Madrid. My family was staying in an ornate old hotel not far from the Prado. One evening we ate flan, and the next day my parents took me to look at the paintings in the Prado. Drifting quietly over those polished floors of shuffling feet, I was introduced to the strange and haunting Mannerist, El Greco, Theotokópoulos – his elongated pale figures richly colored and floating in an unquestioned spiritual eternity; then the daring court painter Velázquez, his collection of human oddities, and the great one he had influenced: Goya...the unforgettable brutality of *The Third of May*, the sensuality of the *The Nude Maja*. But Bosch! I couldn’t stop looking...the way he transported this little upright ape of foolishness called man far back in time, to a never-never land of innocence that was only a dream...and carried him forward into science fiction...but his authentic madness of humanity! Never did a painting blatantly hold so much brutal metaphor, or such wickedly delightful retaliation. Bosch I had to study.

Glancing to her left she discerned Rafael’s glimmer of enthusiasm, his moist dark eyes intent upon her in the candlelight, eyes filled with the same familiar visions that had colored her earliest luxuriant encounters.

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“Bosch is ageless...incandescent, and his metaphor *socarrón*, eh, sly, defining every immorality in that strange mixture of myth and reality. But Goya...*sí, querida*, one of my favorites. He was a troubled man of the people.”

Rafael’s caressing hand slid over her thigh and settled on her knee, her body drawn into that potent touch as her ears lingered on the musical trill of his rolled Castilian Rs. Then her dreamy wine-blurred gaze fell upon Brad’s gaunt face. He stared back at her through the fulgent candlelight, with a disarmed look of agreement - - possibly remembering his own Prado experiences? -- her often captious relative revisiting, perhaps enjoying the revelations of this soaring collaborative moment. *Or is this the wine?* Only some of it, she decided.

Sarah would not allow Semele to help with the dishes, not even gather them up, saying only, “You’re a guest and I don’t mind...really, I like doing things in the kitchen.”

“I’d rather you thought of me as family. I am, you know,” Semele gently scolded.

“Maybe next time you can help,” Sarah allowed. “I’d love to see your baby.”

“Of course,” Semele agreed, uncertain when this would happen. “Our sweet Miguel.” She was at once startled in visualizing their amazing creation, their conjoined flesh even now rapidly developing a distinct personality, even as she stood with breasts swelling from his absence.

Clatter emanated from the kitchen as Brad placed more logs on the fire, then dusted his hands and settled back in his pillowed chair in thought, apparently to formulate a considerate interrogation of Rafael. His intended subject had settled on the creaking red leather sofa, with his hand remaining on Semele’s neck and bringing her along.

“You never say anything about yourself...have not said how you came to do what you do, Rafael.”

“No one has ever asked me. At least I cannot recall being asked that particular question.”

Rafael turned his head to a sleepy-eyed Semele who had leaned forward with indications of remiss -- it was she who should have asked; she had meant to. He lifted her hand and placed it above his knee, to be held beneath fingers that reveled in touch. Kept there, her hand absorbed the warmth of his thigh, a tingling heat spreading through her body like a soothing narcotic. Thus tranquilized, assisted by the hour and the rich food and drink, she settled back against his shoulder, could have fallen asleep there as suddenly and insensibly as a kit fox sated in its warmly insulated den; satisfied as her little son, often sleeping with her nipple in his mouth.

“Well, are you going to tell us?”

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“I will tell you something. It seems a long time ago. I was not twenty, not even eighteen, walking across a desert in Africa...sí, it was a certain place in Ethiopia...I with a young woman who was very sick, the Catalan grand-niece of an old family friend. This happened unexpectedly, and I was worried. We carried a little water and food, and were not ourselves in any great danger, except for my friend’s sudden illness. I assumed it was a bacteria. My companion, Pilar, was frequently a careless eater, trusting and ready to eat whatever was offered. She was dehydrated, and I knew I would soon have to give her most of my water. Then we came to a destitute village, hovels of death, malnourished people dying of thirst, searching for water...or no longer able to, children dying for lack of it. Whenever we drank from our plastic canteens they looked at us in a way I can see now, have since often seen: unbearable thirst and its dying eyes. What do you do when you have a little water and you know you cannot give it to anyone and make any difference? We walked away. My friend lay down in the shade of a rock. I gave her the rest of my water, but she could keep nothing inside her body. I left her there and walked until I found the transport caravan we had intended to join. We went back for my friend. Both of us had become dehydrated. They took her away and treated her, but I went back to the village with a truck carrying some water. Most of the people were too far gone to save -- there are many in our justifying world who consider those at the far edge of *legitimate existence* expendable, a short life their only destiny, punishment for being too many in the wrong place. Among years of study and afterward, ever since that haunting day in the desert, one way or another, I have been getting water to people in various stages of need. Minimal attempts carried on while at the same time arguing for stabilized population in crowded uninhabitable places...and while railing against unnatural climate change that makes them uninhabitable.”

They sat in silence. Semele, having come wide awake with the telling of this tale, could stand no more without release, and so got up and left the room, letting herself outside to stand on the steps and blink at the stars. It would have been better if she had heard this story before this inopportune moment. Perhaps she had never asked the question because she already knew what she would hear. The aperitifs, the ample wine with dinner, the after-dinner brandy had brought her to a fragile maudlin state, her empathy pushed beyond restraint by those particular sorrows long finished...but, as she knew, still going on, millions of stories like this still going on. The thought returned to her even more forcefully now of why, under the scrutiny of his supporters, a necessarily exemplary Rafael would not have intended to produce a child. She rubbed her eyes and with a long sigh went back inside.

Rafael and Brad were talking about other things, intriguing, quite sobering tales of clouded, ill-used or inflammatory language that precipitated irreparable

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missteps, or more often, war. They were soon in agreement that, in a position of power, to stand before the nervously attuned world and negligently label any country an *axis of evil* was to become an unconscionable instigator of nuclear proliferation, as that so-named country, wary and fearful of attack, rushed to defend itself.

This immorality, her cousin had discussed before, and the dangerous lack of constructive diplomacy. “Yes, Brad’s always maintained that most of our grief and suffering, most of our madness, flows from insensitive language, misused either from brazen carelessness or outright ignorance.”

“Sí, that is so...along with greed and indifference.”

“I’m sorry, you two, but I can’t abuse my friend Dora’s kindness any longer. We need to return and reclaim Miguel.”

“You should’ve brought him along. I’d like to see the amazing product of this rare mix.”

“You’re looking at a grown version,” Semele revealed, pointing at Rafael.

Rafael laughed and again stressed that Semele’s genes would most certainly make themselves known in that small likeness of himself.

“Oh, I’ve no doubt. The child unquestionably has limitless possibilities,” Brad observed.

Before Semele went into the cluttered book-lined study to call Dora on her cell phone and check on Miguel, she watched Rafael get up and move nearer Sarah, who, like a wary wild bird, had paused on the edge of a leather hassock to listen to their conversation. With casual but carefully chosen words he adroitly dissolved Sarah’s reserve, soon learning that her father was a commercial fisherman; a man infuriated by the introduction of contaminating farm-raised fish. Rough cold seas, an ever-shortening season, the astronomical cost of an operating license -- once obtained held in the family like an heirloom --, and the dwindling fate of formerly abundant Northwest salmon were all listed in her grievous complaints of painstaking family effort. Methodically, he set about linking damaged watershed, over-logging, pesticides, and extensive dam construction to the causes of her lament. All this she seemed to comprehend readily enough, assisted by rote echoes of her father’s voice. Rafael was commiseratively polishing a new convert’s rough principles when Semele left the room.

When she returned from checking with Dora, Rafael and taciturn Sarah were still talking. She entered the kitchen where Brad was reheating his coffee in the microwave.

“You are smiling...seductive.”

“Rafael is busy refining a receptive mind.”

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Semele glanced around the kitchen and saw how very neat Sarah had left it. Even the big central butcher block had been oiled and rubbed to a gleaming gold readiness. There was not a crumb or smudge on the russet tile floor. Nothing left for her to do. She smelled a lingering almond scent and thought it must be from the bottle of hand lotion standing on the ivory-streaked tan marble counter.

Brad leaned against the oak paneled cabinets and drank from his delft mug, eyeing her over the top.

“You’re very different from the last time I saw you. That man in there.” He tossed his head toward the keeping room. “Way out of the ordinary. He’s got me thinking.”

“He does that...rather well.” She yawned, producing tears. “Sorry, excuse me...the wine, of course.”

“How the hell did you wander into his path? My God, I never thought you’d marry...not for some time...or have a *child!* You and a counter-culture environmental activist? Yes, a Ph.D. in economics I can understand...even earth sciences. But a Catalan intellectual rebel who rouses armies...marshals nearly an entire country? Incredible!”

“Yes. He recognizes you, too, Brad. Some day I’ll tell you all about it...when I’m a little more sober.” Her smile felt larger than her face, expanding still more and consuming everything else – a shred of reason separated, adjudging this alcoholic levity as ludicrous. Overruled, her head remained dreamy, her body desirous of lying down, but not alone. A careful silence seemed in order.

“I’ve never seen that smile before...not until him. You’ve been soundly done to. And you’ve allowed it. You!”

Riding back to Seattle – Rafael had looked at her and simply announced that he would drive – Semele was silent, groggy but also disturbed by something indistinct that in her muddled state she found difficult to elucidate.

Quietly withdrawn, Rafael must have supposed she was asleep. She opened her eyes and stared at his profile, his eyes on the road, his expressive mouth solemnly fixed by that steady inner calm that so often transshaped into a curl of pleasure made by and for her. But what was he thinking? She could not help imagining it was about time being wasted. These days, especially when looking into Miguel’s beautiful dark eyes, she regularly confronted the overwhelming phenomenon of Rafael. If he had decided to assume a certain indeterminate role as husband, she felt it advisable to accept his remarkable presence as a spontaneous occurrence of short duration. Suddenly this *husband*, still mysterious, even after their Paris and Madera sojourns, had

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altered the bachelorette milieu of her house merely by alighting there. Her consciousness was now inhabited by a Shakespearean benedict of sorts, an inveterate loner surely opposed to their currently endured ritual. What now? Impermanence seemed foreordained. If he was never to be freed from her subliminal desire yet *must* be free, let it in fact happen by momentous effort, sacrificing to the world an exemplary man.

“Tonight I realized something...or finally admitted it.” Her voice so soft it seemed meant only for herself.

He glanced at her. “What did you say, *mi amor*?”

“I realized how carelessly selfish I’ve been to let you...let *Rafael Arnau i Roca* mix himself up with me.”

“Close your eyes. You have drunk a little too much.”

“It wouldn’t be in your code of ethics to contribute to the population. Oh, I know you love Miguel as I do but, my God, at least in part...in part, I’ve been so irresponsible in the *diversion* of me...what I’ve done to you.”

“*Por favor, querida...you are maudlin...borrachó.*”

“No, I’ve thought it before, without a single drink. It’s only because I *have* drunk that I can say it. I feel so remiss...my flimsy excuse being that I couldn’t let go.”

“Please stop this.”

Rafael fell silent, driving ahead to a turnout in the narrow road, where he pulled over and shut off the engine. He opened the door and got out, looking up at the high phosphorous moon and breathing in the night air -- one of its more prominent scents sweetly putrid dairy-farm manure. He stretched his arms behind his neck. In the distance a calf bawled for its answering mother. Crickets sounded in a metal chorus of erotic urgency. A breeze stirred, carrying an especially welcome fragrance of cottonwood sap.

When Semele got out to stand beside him, he opened the car’s back door and said, “Get in.” She flashed him a confused questioning look but slid onto the back seat. Climbing in beside her, he placed his hands firmly beneath her armpits, drawing her near to fully orient her attention, this with slightly more vehemence than gentleness.

“Are you awake and sober enough to understand what I am saying? We are animals inclined to propagate, and if you are willing and able to care for an offspring it is all right to replace yourself. That is my *code of ethics*, as you put it. We did this together. It was not you alone, *mi caballera de la cabellera*. It began the moment I laid eyes on you. The more I know the more I love. Perhaps I wanted the child in you. *Sí*, perhaps I thought it would extend our relationship and keep us together.” He rubbed his shadowed jaw against her damp cheek, a gesture that softened his voice.

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“As Edith Piaf has sung, *Je ne regrette rien*...I regret nothing. You knew after the spilled wine nothing was an accident...really not Miguel. *I* knew...I knew *you* knew.”

“Yes,” was her only immediate response, still smiling with the pleasure of having heard *long-haired horsewoman* in Castilian. Swallowing, she raised her hands and clasped them beneath the taut arms still holding her, wanting him to expel the harshness that had served its purpose, for in this moment, looking closely at his changing mouth in the silver-blue light of the high moon, she was nothing more or less than fluidly soft and warm with anticipation.

He blinked once, like the swiftly stopped lens of a camera, dark eyes opening upon the image of desire.

“Can you wait until we return or shall I have you here?...I want you, too. *I want you*. I always want you.”

“You see so well in moonlight...I could almost cry.”

“And *you*...you with your honesty and willingness to sacrifice yourself, must be overtaken...sometimes with a lot of frustration at the ways you run away...and always with such impatience for you to *stand still*.”

A deluge of need left her intention of postponing it in question. “It’s late. I suppose we should go. Even though there’s no one around, it probably isn’t a very comfortable place to...oh, I wish we were already home.”

When they were settled back in the front seats, their belts mechanically affixed, Rafael started the engine and sped away from the pungent rural night, shoulder gravel flying from beneath the tires.

“Are you really a good driver?”

“I am in something of a hurry.” His voice was playful, buoyant, having effectively left Semele’s self-examining ambivalence by the roadside.

“Close your eyes. It will not be much longer.”

The drive did take a while, but the vibrations of the car rocked Semele soundly to sleep, and she only awoke back in her driveway when his hand tugged lightly at her hair. They did not have to wake Miguel, who had just been fed, and Dora went out the front door carefully whispering her unconcern at Semele’s profuse soft-voiced apologies.

Neither the paella feast, along with various alcoholic beverages, nor the long drive back had mitigated Rafael’s focused intent when at last she lay entangled with his body. *You are insatiable*, she thought, intended to say, but then realized the word described *both* of their bodies, swiftly gravitating one to the other, acting without deliberation, without any interference from the mundane or lofty or more contentious thoughts so amply shared at other times.

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Much later she awoke with his arm across her chest, and lifted it, whispering, "Sorry...my breasts are so tender because they're...Miguel's supper was from a bottle."

Coming slowly awake, he lifted his head and lowered his mouth over a swollen pale mound. Finishing, with the tautly inflamed nipple quite distended, he moved to the other while she threaded her fingers through his hair and softly moaned her pleasure and relief. Fully awake at last, his tongue in her mouth tasted of her own milk.

Later in the morning, examining her leaner breasts, she sighed and uttered a chortle of laughter. "My love, you've stolen poor Miguel's breakfast."

"*Querida mía*, I did not want you to suffer any loss of sleep...at least that way. Once in a while the father is entitled to take from the son, no?" He yawned, laughed at her raised brow and settled into a prolonged kiss.

XII

Almost Sapiens

Who counseled children not to fear poisoned skies?

Symbol and Word,
Burial and Elegy,
Hand-sown Corn,
Wheel and Keystone,
Hybrid Rose,
Newton and Leibnitz,
Ferrous heat, and
Virus under glass,

Churned by a race fond of letting blood.

A few rose high enough to breathe without air.

Then down they came, down, down, boasting to the
mutants, as they fell.

They went and came and never went again.

We are the children who lived without wildflowers,
tried to imagine strange animals -- elephants
and panthers.

We never heard any cosmic harmonies.

Present at the time of burning flesh, we lived to
curse our ancestors.

We, the last of the creators, created nothing.

No others will celebrate our bleached bones.

No eyes will read what was written on the blackboard:

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calculus of the final radiance.

. KMK

The long postponed interview had finally been granted, but Rafael had insisted that Jeet Grey speak to him while sitting on a bench in the *Bois de Vincennes*, and not in the apartment shared with his wife and son. Surprisingly, Grey still did not know that Semele was Rafael's wife, although it was clear to Semele that early on he had suspected a liaison. Rafael had reasoned that the previously evaded interview could now be done in an opportune manner lending credibility to his position, very possibly working to his advantage in meetings with World Bank. He would subtly, or not so subtly, undertake to bend this journalist to his purpose, always pragmatic in his dealings with the media.

Thick greenery climbed above the *Daumesnil*, a large artificial lake, lacquering the water surface with winking ripples of viridian trees and gray sky. Silently skimming boaters lifted their dripping paddles and reinserted them in the sparkling veneer. A chattering flock of ducks, floating by, set up loudly repetitious bursts of quacking, as if they were sharing hilariously funny jokes. Occasionally a breeze carried the smells of food vendors, hot buttered popcorn wafting from the more visited spaces of the wooded area.

Rafael had caught the Metro to this sprawling multi-purpose park that lay on the eastern environs of the bustling Parisian metropolis, choosing the setting partly because he had never been there with Semele. Distracting emotions -- those resulting from near Dionysian visions of her simply walking or jogging or picnicking, all of which they had done together in the *Bois de Boulogne* -- would have less chance of interfering with or softening the hard, task-oriented side of his nature. In years past, sharp focus was easily maintained in media encounters, news interest being generally fixed solely on public endeavors. He had only to insist that his work was his life. Now, just as media attention was rising, his private life required parameters.

As he strolled along the walk toward the designated bench, he conceded his wish to compartmentalize Semele. She would not now, nor did she ever, easily support his attempt to keep her above and apart from the rigors of his work. "You cannot think it is because you are a woman," he had argued. "No, it's because I'm *your* woman," she swiftly and smartly responded. She wanted them to be more like Mari and Antoine, and perhaps it was his ingrained Catalan nature that prevented this, a deep romantic chamber never visited or even assented to until her. Having familiarized herself with Catalan women's history -- a very sparse proscribed history -- she had asked him, solely for effect, if it was in his blood to marginalize her presence. "You will make me angry if I take you seriously. You know I support your gender's

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complete freedom to do what you want.” “But you won’t let *me* do what *I* want.” “And you will not let me love you as I want.” One could not be perpetually occupationally harnessed to one’s refuge if he wished to go there for sweet release. Selfish? A sardonic amusement with himself made him grin and toss a rapidly acquiescing shrug of culpability at the creaking green-flecked branches overhead. Until Semele and Miguel, he had no inclination to forego even the most dangerous aspects of the trammeling occupation he had chosen. There would always be the matter of their safety. Already he had shared certain parts of his work with Semele; nor could he deny that she was brilliantly resourceful in any unsummoned response to an urgent need of what some now called *El Fenómeno d’el señor Arnau i Roca*.

With his only distraction temporarily set aside, he again considered the most likely and significant portions of the upcoming interview. His varied public, and now private, history provided a nearly unpredictable jam of invasive possibilities. Today he intended only sharply informative responses, as alert and controlling as a nimble traffic officer at a chaotic Barcelona intersection.

“*Buenas tardes*,” Jeet Grey called, smiling a little diffidently as he approached. He was dressed in customary bulging-pocketed chinos, but with a safari shirt-jacket instead of his normal blue shirt. His hand stretched forth, and Rafael grasped the cool clammy bony little fingers in a brief but firmly polite greeting.

“*Sí, buenas tardes*, but unless you are heavily into Spanish please speak your native tongue. You will do better in it.” This was about to be construed as condescension, but Rafael followed it up with an ingratiating and very disarming show of gleaming white teeth.

Jeet Grey responded by switching to his faint weasel smile, this particular display one of restrained compliance. Rafael was already well aware, by instinct and by Grey’s choice of occupation, that, however confoundedly he seemed to peer through his thick lenses, Grey was not categorically a simpleton with weak-eyed vision.

They settled on the appointed bench, leaving sufficient space between them for equanimity and anticipated dissent, and opened their conversation with a few standard amenities. These followed by Jeet Grey’s concise reportorial voice: “Do you consider yourself the instigator of Madera’s war?”

Rafael responded with an explosive laugh. “If that were true I would not apologize, but even with your facile attempt at provocation you exaggerate my influence by a ridiculous amount. The war was inevitable...already in the making, as you know. Perhaps I contributed to the process.”

Grey cocked his head and looked at Rafael with intense scrutiny. “I do wonder... Mendoza has given you a bloody lot of leeway in his country.”

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“Only in regard to the water, with which I was involved unofficially before he occupied the position he now holds. Fortunately for Madera, Mendoza is a good leader, practical, forthright, wise, and honest...and very expedient – he recognized my involvement as advantageous for his country.”

“It hasn’t escaped certain international onlookers that *el Dulce* has been made to flow through *La Nava Feraz* again, and by rather sudden and drastic measures.”

“Sí, that was a fortunate occurrence,” Rafael responded with a slow smile.

“Coming as advantageously as it did, it was like a shot of adrenalin for the rebels...certainly spurring on their cause. May I set you firmly down as the perpetrator?”

“You have only tried another path to the same place,” Rafael said with a dismissive grin. “The river is where it should be.”

“Moreover, most of those paying attention know who was responsible. I was there. Let’s step back a moment. You...let’s talk about you, the man, Rafael Arnau i Roca.”

“To what end?”

“Surely you know there’s a great deal of interest in you. You’re a very charismatic, interesting sort of fellow. One might well wonder what makes you tick.”

“I tick just like everyone else.”

“I believe not. Are you an angry man?”

“If you mean am I upset about what is happening to the planet and the dispossessed people on it, sí, I am very exercised on those points.”

“What exactly do you think is happening?”

“The answer is so obvious it makes your question very rhetorical. What do you see happening?”

“Commerce, technology, a lot of people trying to make things better.”

“And just how are they doing that, Mr. Grey?”

“Please call me Jeet...and, if I may, I’ll call you Rafael, okay?”

“That is fine with me.”

Rafael waited, wondering what he might encourage from Jeet Grey, if the man could be induced to observe and evaluate with honesty.

“So...you’re waiting for me to explicate that question, and I’m the one doing the interview.”

“A good interview is a collaboration, a cross-feeding of information that becomes a springboard for ideas...for revelations of purpose. The condition you are seeking.”

“Perhaps. Are you telling me how to do my job?”

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“No. I am hoping you will tell me how you think a lot of people are making things better so that I can respond.”

“Well, just as I’ve said: multinational corporations around the world bringing large numbers comfort, modernity, progressive modes of living, and so forth.”

“Ah, multinational corporations. Exactly what *are* those amorphous conglomerates, and more to the point, to whom are they accountable?”

“That depends on what country they’re a...where they’re located and where they do business.”

“What if I were to tell you that they are located in no particular place, that they answer to no extra-official, no board of inquiry, no legal institution, no country?”

“Well, that would be—”

“It would look a lot like borderless unrestraint, *sí?*”

“Well, there *are* rules.”

“Not for a beast holding all the power while gobbling up resources and lives, growing fatter and fatter operating as a world anarchy accountable only to shareholders -- and that haphazardly done --, doing whatever is profitable, and slippery as quicksilver to pin down or hold responsible for wrongdoing; each corporate giant a hungry beast with an unquenchable appetite, resources and lives in one end, pollution and death out the other...highly destructive defecation that fertilizes nothing, promotes nothing but obsolescence, the waste of programmed materialism, each materialist with an insatiable rote appetite for more.”

“I thought it was called progress.”

“I am far from a Luddite, but benighted *progress* may leave our planet a wasteland and kill us all.”

“Isn’t getting water to people in need of it progress?”

“Not at all. It is merely what they should have had in the first place. Taking the water away or making people into slaves to have it is what is now defined as progress.”

“You’re abusing a good word.”

“Not I. Can you not see who has abused it? Perhaps you should be reminded of a commonly cited environmental collapse, almost a cliché, that of Chile’s Easter Island, *Rapa Nui*, a very remote triangle of volcanic basalt in the South Pacific once referred to by its inhabitants as the *navel of the world*, indeed a microcosm of what may come to pass on the entire planet earth. There was drawdown of that environment, with no thought of replenishment, until its rich palmy growth was decimated and crashed; die-off ensued. I have here used terms of ecological disaster. Loss of food supply and rat infestation may have resulted in cannibalism. On Easter Island -- ironically so happily named because its eighteenth century discovery by a

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Dutch admiral happened on Easter Sunday --, after the cult that carved the monolithic *moai* ended in strife, there was actually a birdman cult. Annually, a challenger swam to an islet called *Motu Nui*, to find and bring back the egg of the sooty tern. The egg, also a pagan symbol, one of rebirth, accompanied die-out -- more incredible irony. Indications of starvation reinforce the questionable evidence of cannibalism. If there had ever been any rationality, invaders ended it...and carried off as slaves most of the indigenous people.”

“Isn’t that primitive foolishness a bit alarmist?”

“Is it? The same sort of foolishness exists today. No one will ever know exactly what happened there, but that inexactness does not matter. The history itself becomes a metaphor, a pathway to illumination that might save us from what it implies.”

Offering a grim smile, Rafael leaned forward, his hands spread over his thighs. “Of course humans can go on for quite a while longer in a very abbreviated form of life, brutal, miserable, chaotically dangerous in the Darwinian sense. The carbon dioxide above our heads ensures endless catastrophic storms here on earth. Quite an unpleasant existence. All owing to the blind greed of complete and arrogant selfishness...careless short-sightedness.”

“I dare say you are quite a naysayer.”

“If I am, I speak for you in your culpable silence, my friend...in the interest of the well-being you take for granted. But it may surprise you to hear that I am also an optimist, with deep reverence for the earth and its often foolish multitudes...or I would not surrender time to you.”

“You’re hard to believe...that you’re for real.”

“Then never mind my motive, only believe what I say. There is proof enough all around you without another word from me...if you look.”

“You’re rather an arrogant chap.”

“*¿De veras?*” Rafael laughed. “I have always felt myself humbly exalted before the majesty of life on this earth...or even the silent stones of restless mountains.”

“Although you care bloody little for the news media.”

“I like you when you manage to tell the truth.”

Exhibiting great puzzlement, Jeet Grey pulled off his glasses and rubbed his strabismic eyes, as if to better see the hardly believable man before him. He fitted the wire stems back around his small blossom ears, and pushed the heavy round glasses above a short flip of blue-tinged nose.

“You present yourself as an inscrutable man.”

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“I present *no* self. I am trying to present facts, but I always have to crawl through the same psychological maze.”

“My God, I’m in a bloody quandary over you. But if I write it as I see it, how do you imagine my story will help you with the power brokers? Surely you need them.”

“I assume you write with honesty. Is it not the most useful tool of your trade? – without it, all you have in the end is no credibility, or at the very least a tortured conscience. The power brokers, as you call them, can know I represent the Maderan government. That very promising government is in sounder hands than ever it has been. Mendoza is not there to line his pockets like the former regime. He is *of the people*, and he is there to make the place work for them like a well-oiled machine. I have not talked with him so long, so many late nights, to have not discerned his integrity and honest intent. His capable leadership and innate intelligence will do the rest.”

“I’m afraid these little tin pot governments come and go. Absolute power corrupts absolutely and so forth.”

“; *Vaya, hombre!* Who is the naysayer now?” Rafael stood up, folding his arms, his pliant body bending forward then recoiling with head thrown back and eyes narrowed all in one swiftly unbroken protest.

“All right, all right, but you will admit it’s a well established pattern.”

“Sí, one such government has just gone, replaced by something far more durable, and this time with all its constituents in mind.”

“Do you really believe those poor ignorant souls will thank you for all the good you’ve done...or may do?”

“In fact many have been grateful, but it makes no difference to me. I have never done anything anywhere in the world for that reason...although I am glad when they are in a position to express satisfaction.”

“Then for God’s sake why?” Jeet Grey demanded, jumping to his feet to look into Rafael’s resolute eyes.

Rafael could then smile with equanimity, his voice easy and smooth and matter-of-factly true. “I do it because I am always aware of an unevenness that brings misery, because I am not miserable in the same way as the deprived with whom I share this one world, and yet their misery is mine. I do it because I see myself as them. I do it to balance the scale, and to honor the earth that will be for some time to come our only home. Ultimately, it is an unquenchable desire for the triumph of reason...the sort that affords of humanity.

“A moment ago, Jeet, you referred to those in need as poor ignorant souls. You did what is most often done. You made them the dehumanized *other*. This is a

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tribal mentality at work. There is the tribe and the other: the enemy of the tribe, the *lesser* beings existing outside and viewed as dross. Once you do this, the dehumanized can then be abused or forgotten with impunity. They do not matter or they are seen only as a threat. Every group of humans on earth must have equally humane consideration. The earth itself must be seen as a living entity to be cared for in the same way by every one of us, or we are all finished.”

“Heady pronouncements,” Jeet Grey said with a critical toss of his head.

“No,” Rafael protested, “simple precepts for survival. As I’ve said, they also apply to our environment. The further we stray from our place in nature, the easier it becomes to destroy that place.”

“If I examined how you live, might I find you a hypocrite?”

“In outward appearance, of course, excluding mind-set. That is the way the flawed system succeeds in functioning. There are really only *haves* and *have-nots*, and if you are a *have* and you complain on behalf of the *have-nots* you risk being called a hypocrite. This, and personal gain, are what hold any serious opposition in check. The short-sighted argument or rationalization made by commerce is that when everyone is a *have* there will be no reason to complain. But the mute part of the equation is that as the population increases the *haves* become less and less possible without destroying viable life: the air, water, plant life, the resources of the planet. Once unmasked, the glorious objective becomes the instigator of death.”

“Rather frightening,” Jeet Grey said, crossing one leg over the other and staring out at the peacefully drifting boaters so oblivious to the fate of their successors. “I take it you are quite opposed to population growth.”

“Population is an immediate demographic indicator of a healthy region or a region in trouble. Some places have an age imbalance that may leave those areas sterile. Some places have far more human density than the environment can accommodate and still replenish itself. In places where population damages the earth and its resources, ultimately it will damage itself -- an ominous truth always refuted by your cry of *progress*.”

“Is rapidly growing density the problem in Madera?”

Rafael’s manner became mildly censorious. “You know it is not. You have been there, and you know it is not a problem of excessive population but one of outright neglect and misuse of funds. Mendoza clearly understands the vital connection between the land and its inhabitants. He will devote himself to making that a healthy lasting symbiosis. Wide support will keep him on that track.” These favorable statements, expressed with strong conviction, were meant as advertisement, assurance for the significant participants.

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Jeet Grey pulled the strap of his bold-faced wristwatch from beneath his shirt cuff and studied the watch a moment. When he looked up at Rafael, as directly as his impaired eyes would permit, his professional ploys had momentarily transposed to personal deference, an exploring candor.

“Perhaps you can get me an interview with Mendoza. I would like to see for myself how much of a student of yours he appears to be. If he’ll do as you’ve forecast, you’ve been bloody good at your job, Doctor Arnau i Roca.”

Punching off his cell phone, Rafael remained sprawled on their large old caramel-colored sofa, watching Semele. She was sitting on one of the straight-backed chairs with Miguel on her lap, talking to the child as if he had already reached the academic level of a college student. She made few distinctions regarding age in her daily chatter to their baby son, and this, along with his own Castilian, gave Rafael pause for thought on what that dark little head might be assimilating. The rich dimension of motherhood had also begun to intrigue him. He saw that Semele’s instinctive nurturing produced a soft sensual quality that heightened her unconscious ability to receive from him an augmented devotion and even, if possible, increased desire. He could readily acknowledge the usefulness of both their instincts. They were part of the human imperative for propagation and survival, predictable and often pleasurable.

Standing up with Miguel clasped to her breast, Semele said, “There’s a larger apartment about to be free just above us, and if you’ll agree to my contribution -- really, I can afford to do this --, I think we should move there.”

He was surprised to discover in himself sentimental reservations. “You want to give up this place where we first lay together?”

“I’ll never give it up, not in my head. Rafael, please don’t think that -- my romantic notions are probably even stronger than yours. We do need a little more space. It has a separate bedroom, a kitchen, and even a dining room. You could entertain your mob a lot more comfortably there, instead of scattering them over this tired carpet.”

“Domesticity.” He remembered that Jeff had wanted her to have a kitchen. “You will not mind more stairs?”

“Me? You know I welcome any exercise available.”

He noticed that she was fidgeting over some heavy unspoken thought, which very soon, with her straightforward honesty, she blurted out in one swift sentence.

“I’ve been thinking of getting a nanny and going back to work.”

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This admission startled him more than he would have supposed, and he found that he had to restrain himself from outright anger. He stood up and whacked down the rolled sleeves of his black corduroy shirt.

“You...you would offer this little *niño* over to the hands of a complete stranger...our son?”

Still brooding over her facile words, he thought how only a short moment ago he had been swimming in love for this seductively devoted mother of his child.

She settled Miguel in his crib beside the screen, and came to him, putting her arms around his waist. He was standing at the window, gazing down upon the street.

“I can’t believe that you’re actually sulking...*you*, the globe-trotting activist...so fiercely driven...and so frequently mobile. Why should this upset you?”

He turned around and stared into those beautiful northern eyes, frozen, it seemed to him, with treacherous intent. It occurred to him that he had initially thought he would be the one to do what she was certainly going to do: break away -- while inarguably pointing out so many generous sacrifices --, back into a time-consuming alien existence.

“You said nothing to me, Rafael. I only discovered the plane ticket for Madera after it fell out of your jacket pocket when I was hanging it up.”

“I was not hiding it...but it upsets you. You knew the eventuality. Is that what all of this is about?”

“No, of course not. I need to work. But you *are* the only reason I’m here, and you’ll soon be gone.”

His fingers tightened over her shoulder. He spoke with an emphatic assurance he had not expected necessary, “I always come back to you. *Always!* I am here now.”

She backed away and walked over to look at Miguel in his crib, calling softly over her shoulder, “And you want me to wait here...some uncertain number of days...weeks?”

Her carefully gentled voice, noticeably opposed to the harshness of his, had rendered her words even more painful. When she returned to his silent response, her serene face induced his own containment. But of his loyalty, yes, he always came back, could not imagine doing anything else.

“Was there not a time when you would have waited? I am sorry. I know we have had this unspoken...this understood agreement that is supposed to prevent us from demanding very much. *Sí*, you are still an independent person with your own life to consider. But Miguel...”

“Rafael, I love our son. I’ll never leave him for very long.”

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“As I will never leave you. I am almost afraid to ask if you still care enough to--”

“Haven’t I shown how much? You knew it would be--”

“You have been speaking to Jeff?”

“I...just about returning. He thought I ought to wait a while longer...but he agreed to--”

“Ah, as he would agree to anything you want.” *Surely he thinks you are tired of me. But why in hell should I care what he thinks?* he chided himself.

“He would certainly not agree to anything I want. You can’t really mean that.”

“No, I cannot, can I? He does not have you. Is it possible that no one does?”

He knew that he had gone too far. He saw frustration welling up in eyes that a moment ago he had thought frozen in cruel distancing. It now seemed a retaliatory cruelty to have caused this kind of pain, merely to verify a love he already knew existed. Yes, he had warned her how difficult it would be. He again conceded that with Semele he was not always reasonable, and that his impatient tongue could much too swiftly issue foolishness.

Intent upon ending her dismay, he led her to the edge of the bed, where he could hold her and offer as much of himself as she desired. The external present, the darkly anticipated future slipped from immediacy. He could never come that close to alienating emotion without reparative desire. To those luminous eyes, to that desired and desiring body, he gave every pleasure save one, but only to relish for a moment her arousing need of completion. His violently erotic antidote left them both breathless, still and intense. They held onto each other without words. He protested her intentions no further, having only sought to affirm the absolute immutability of their conjoined lives. Looking into her dazed eyes, he identified the conviction mirroring his own: neither emotions flaring to accusation, nor absence itself could rupture so densely fused a mental and physical bond. Always their satisfied physical urges continued beyond pure ecstasy to settle in devotion, a verification of authentic love.

Indulged moment by moment, with all of time’s tenses dissolved, their exhausted entangled bodies fell into a soporific state as innocent as their sleeping son’s. They drifted, languidly rejuvenated, post-coital euphoria ebbing away in peaceful sleep. His last conscious vision was of waves and coils of garnet hair flowing over the white pillow, his ineluctable reaffirmed choice.

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They were settled now in their new larger apartment, and Rafael was preparing to leave, which he was used to doing and which took very little preparation.

"I probably won't be here when you get back," Semele informed him over morning coffee in the little blue-tiled kitchen she had welcomed. The sound of her voice was softly considerate, the tenor matter-of-fact, only the irresolvable words inflaming.

He set down his cup and looked at her memorized face, which could still surprise him with some fresh innovation. It was difficult to decide if she was simply being forthright or if she was offering him a last chance to rearrange the schema of his life. His response was given with acute celerity, as many of his life-altering decisions had been unhesitatingly made. It would be irreversible.

"Then I would prefer that you leave Miguel with my parents in Barcelona and come with me. If you need to work, work with me...Semele, your worth has only been temporarily sacrificed...for love...perhaps selfish. I could not stand to see such value wasted somewhere else."

Her agitated face, flaring with inconceivable joy, reflected also a moment of disbelief and then a questioning gaze he recognized as accusatory.

"You were content to leave me idle here forever."

"I have said my love was selfish. You...an oasis in a life lived in deserts...confronting deserts my entire *raison d'être*...until you. I have never had anything like this. *¡Jesús!* to come to you as I do...and to have so much."

"I'm glad...*glad*. Even so, there's something sinister in that. Do you...can you suppose this amazing relationship will be ruined if I'm always around...at your side?"

"It will change a little. You will not have the same position...unassailable...the autonomy of love. And, even then, you cannot always be at my side. You will have to do what I ask you to do. You may not like that."

"Tell me, which one in Mari and Antoine's relationship tells the other what to do?"

"In small personal things they tell each other, as we do. In large external things I tell them. They allow me to do that because an overarching voice is needed to get things done without chaos."

"Oh, that isn't the only reason. They well recognize your incredible ability to—"

Her ears were suddenly attuned to Miguel's soft fussily nattering voice, an insistent, self-proclaiming conversation with his fuzzy Lilliputian world. She went into the bedroom to retrieve him from his gibbering monologue, returning with attentive laughter and holding him on her lap.

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Rafael had refilled his cup, which he held with both hands, leaning on the table and watching. He proudly and joyfully savored the genre tableau of Semele in her pale blue robe, holding their son, the tiny fingers tugging at her flaming hair – here, was the luminous simplicity of a dulcet Pre-Raphaelite nursery painting; followed by solemn regret for the fast-arriving end of this sweetness.

“I’ll do whatever you ask me to do, and my love will be just the same...no, probably more zealous when I see that whole aspect of you I’ve only glimpsed. So much of you has been missing...because I was denied that other part, the main part. If I could love what I’ve been given as much as I do, think how I’ll love you then. Will you love me less?”

He sighed and stood up to press her face against his hip, threading his fingers through the silken red waves that always made him passionate.

“Clever, your argument...indisputable. I could not love you less, but I will like myself a little less. I have thought it my duty to keep you safe. I will fear for you.”

“I always fear for you, my darling.”

For that he had no answer.

XIII

*. . . So they loved, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one:
Two distinct, division none:
Number there in love was slain. . . .*

. . . The Phoenix and the Turtle
William Shakespeare

Weaned from Semele, Miguel was joyfully welcomed by, and tearfully left with, his grandparents in Barcelona. Subsequently, Semele and Rafael had been warmly received in Madera, Rafael by now, along with Mendoza, touted throughout the land as in possession of powers of deliverance that Rafael steadily disavowed. In deflecting that persistent attention, he could and did wisely defer to Mendoza.

“No, let them celebrate you,” Mendoza urged. “They need heroes. They need positive examples, and we are those. Their consideration keeps me honest, and your counsel is always welcome, Water Bearer. You are no threat to me, but on the contrary I look very good in *el señor* Arnau i Roca’s company. Your generous act cannot be denied. By your own hand you have given them back their river...and

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earned *la nombradía*. *Sí*, it is your renown and my governance that help make Madera a more stable and promising country; even with the subversion we expect, that always awaits, that I must put down as one attends a sick marauding animal. I would do well to appoint you my Minister of Finance.”

“*Gracias*, but I want neither notoriety nor title. I am already at the head of something global that continues to grow and demand my attention.”

Within a week of his arrival, Rafael brought the astonishing news to Mendoza that World Bank would sanction a loan to his government, and, even more amazing, it would be done under all the stipulations to which Rafael had held UNIFOLL.

“That was entirely too smooth an operation,” a cautious Mendoza surmised over drinks in a lesser room in the palace, a favorably downscaled room in which he was momentarily more comfortably ensconced but which, by its relative coziness, enhanced his largeness. Above and beyond a gilt-shaded filigree lamp, his darkly cast gigantic shape swayed, breaking apart and reforming across the yellow wall and ornate white ceiling. Even with the calm mood of relaxed confidences, the cave-like scene was as foreboding as the massive sable shadows in Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible*.

“Something is afoot, *Doctor*.”

“I may know what it is,” Rafael answered. “They have all been led to believe there is a rich supply of nickel ore in the south. But there *is* enough to mine.”

“*Sí*, there is some ore. I know they have been bribed with this extra thing...like bait, this *soborno*.”

“But it is nothing like the riches they are counting on. We made it possible for Higgins to look at a richer indication, promising somewhat more than anything easily, inexpensively extractable, at least so a reputable geologist tells me. It will take them a while to find this out, and they have contracted to do the water infrastructure first.”

“Thanks be to you. *¡Vaya hombre!* you have stuck your neck out. You must not be around when they discover the truth. I will have to work too hard at keeping you alive.”

“I have no reason to apologize. They can do the mine and even make some profit. Nickel is increasingly valuable. They are always greedy, but fortunately the project is at a level of urgency that cancels a prodding investigation. At the least, it will be a lesson in temperance.”

“Let us hope it will not be another kind of lesson, one for you. Higgins is rough...a *caballero de industria*.”

“*Sí*, he has left a crooked trail. I believe his hands have dipped in human blood more than once. I could probably prove it, but the priority is your country’s

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dire need for captured water to run in the right directions. Ay, always there is a tradeoff in matters of such importance.”

“*Sí, Doctor*, it is possible UNIFOLL’s shortfall has made them careless enough, greedy enough to answer the heavy needs of Madera, of *La Nava Feraz*...but maybe not for long.”

They were all gathered in the greening valley’s village taberna *La Vid*, but this time Semele was present, and the villagers, whose children were earlier taught by her and most of whom knew her, came politely forward a few at a time to offer heartfelt welcome. They did not fail to notice that Rafael was in a very different mood, more voluble and lighthearted when accompanied by his wife, and far more malleable and less formidably somber with intent, even if the intent was always present. Julia and Ramón Gómez had just arrived: Julia, a little more plump, her matronly breasts nearly bursting from the bodice of her flowered white cotton dress; Ramón’s leathery field-etched face sunburned and windburned and quickly made rosy-cheeked with deep quaffs of a local red wine. Julia wanted to see Miguel, but Semele had not even a photograph to present. She rarely carried a purse or wallet when she was with Rafael, but neither of these would have held a single photograph. Transportable family pictures or various common forms of identification were not to be found in Semele’s clandestine world of necessary caution.

“His grandparents are taking a lot of photographs. Perhaps they will send one,” she offered the hopeful Julia, but without much assurance evident in her voice. This lame explanation was softened with a cheerful smile, and then a sincere hug of gladness at seeing her friend.

Very soon Carlos arrived with a flourish of humorous bravado. Curious eyes turned to his handsomely pliant face, a face often suggesting, as now, a sly clownish mischief. Behind him trailed his opposite, tonight even more like the dark side of the moon: the shy barely smiling Elena. Here was a taciturn, raven-haired Modigliani, in her ingenuous withdrawal planar as a dimensionless portrait. Perhaps some of this was her condition. Her eyes as ever given only to her lover, she wore a loose wine shirt that failed to hide a belly swollen with Carlos’ untimely impregnation.

Rafael frowned with a flash of disappointment instantly covered by a welcoming grin. He extended his hand. He had been trying to get Carlos a scholarship for special studies at the University of Barcelona, and had nearly succeeded by the strange legerdemain that was part of his mysterious and far-reaching network. This was a latent process that very productively employed word of mouth: a barely acknowledged but unmistakable intimation attached to some other purpose; or merely

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clever innuendo making subtle use of another's indebtedness; both always in play, rather like the diffusely spreading underground networks of fungi that suddenly bloom above the ground.

"Come with me," he instructed Carlos.

Rafael walked to the bar where the squinting bartender, Jacint, was keeping something for him below the counter. Signaling to this balding proprietor, who was blind in one shriveled white eye, he tossed his head in the direction of Carlos, and received Jacint's conspirative nod. A black guitar case was lifted up and laid gently on the counter.

"Oh, look everyone...it's so beautiful," Rafael heard Semele's distinctive voice say to friends across the room.

"¿*Que pasa?*" Carlos asked with a surprised face.

Rafael opened the old case and held up a shining honey-blond guitar, caressing its exquisite armature with fondly palpating fingertips.

"This has been in my family many years. It is a Fleta, of which there are few today. Do you know about Fleta?"

"Sí, I have heard this name...the guitars of Segovia. Fleta and his family...they were the master builders of this beautiful thing? Ah, ¡*venusto!*"

Rafael smiled at Carlos, placing a hand on his bony shoulder. "Sí, very beautiful...both construction and tone. *Amigo*, I have heard you play...have decided you can become worthy of owning this instrument -- I am not. It was made in Barcelona for my great uncle who was a friend of the Fletas, and given to me as a young man in that city where I hope you will study. It is solely yours now to own and care for...to achieve the matchless sounds for which it was very skillfully created. You have only to tune it."

Carlos reached out to touch the guitar and then quickly withdrew his hand as if from a searing spit of fire.

"I cannot take it. *Gracias. Gracias*, but I cannot."

"Why is that?" Rafael asked with patient voice.

Carlos' dark eyes glittered with moisture reflecting deep emotional turmoil. He rubbed his faintly aquiline nose and looked as if he would cry in astonishment, effusive gratitude canceled by the sheer frustration of his position.

"You? You give me this? I am afraid, afraid to have anything so valuable. Where will I keep it? What if it is stolen as before?"

"Vigilance is a duty of maturity...responsibility in this difficult world. As you must soon care for a mother and child so must you care for this guitar."

It did not escape Carlos' notice that, confronted with the obligations of a similar unexpected paternity, Rafael had done precisely as he was now advising Carlos.

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Thus had an example been put forth, and received as part of a devoted wish to emulate his beloved *amo*. And thus had the fine old irreplaceable guitar become, as well as a promise of immense pleasure, a symbolic precept of duty and responsibility, a sound lesson bound to endure longer and more forcefully than a few admonishing words.

To this happenstance protégé agonizing before him, Rafael offered a warm smile of understanding -- harshly life-schooled, incorrigible but repentant Carlos. The high sensitivity of creative expression, Rafael knew, could mark a great talent; but it was that same opposing sensitivity that often prevented genius from ever surfacing for its reception. He knew Carlos would have to give up more of the little freedom left to him in exchange for possession, for devolving accountability, the handing down of duty. He was fully aware that Carlos was already caring for his needy family. By that moral fidelity and a very promising innate intelligence, even with the careless self-gratification that had produced a child, he was well on his way to achieving a venerable manhood.

“Do not possess too much in your life, or these things will possess you. We never own anything for very long. But a few good things are sometimes of benefit, *hombre*. It is possible they enhance character. Some day you will give it to another who plays as you do...maybe even your own son.”

Carlos lifted the guitar and for a dazed moment cradled it as if it were the baby he would in future hold. He strummed gently, listening and tuning. Very soon as bodily unfettered as a fluttering descent of empty clothes, he dropped down upon a bar stool and began to play, his head inclined, black hair falling unattended over half-closed eyes. The clear soulful tendering of slow vibrating notes, mellow and haunting, caused a silence to fall over the room. Suddenly agile fingers flew, interpretive pluckings of rich tonal combinations. A diapason transporting the roomful of listeners on varying scales of airy rapture, and sending every mind present into its own lush garden of dreams. Halfway through this amazing piece Carlos began to weep, tears streaming unabashedly over his cheeks. He glanced at Rafael and shook his head, then laid the guitar back upon the counter and walked out of the room. His boot heels striking the hard wooden planks mimicked the crescendo of an impassioned dance; their resounding echo left the breathless room in another spellbound silence. Elena stood up and looked commiseratively after her lover, but had the good sense not to follow. The guitar lay gleaming under the single bar light, the inspiriting act of Carlos' magical fingers having fully revived its rich character. As such, it was more the focus of attention in this humble cave of revelers than a suddenly declared *fantasma*. Rafael slid from the booth crowded with his friends and went to place the newly sanctified object back in its subduing case. He handed it over to solemnly smiling

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Jacint, once again the temporary custodian of Carlos' inconceivable windfall; for obviously the rarefied instrument could belong to no other.

"Sí," Rafael said with a satisfied grin as he settled back beside Semele, in the booth being shared with Mari and Antoine and Julia and Ramón, "the Fleta has found *el músico* equal to its worth...the greatest value."

Very soon Elena shyly approached their table, her diffidence overtaken by concern. "He has not come back," she said, staring toward the door as if he never would.

Rafael stood up and dipped his face before her with a reassuring nod. The back of his loose fist lightly touched her flushed cheek. His consoling grin was witnessed by all, giving license to her smiling trust. Then everyone smiled. Merely by his quelling manner, Elena's future was firmly validated; the entire room had verified that certainty.

He walked to the bar, ordering two jiggers of tequila. These he carried in each hand as he backed out through the scarred swinging doors. The rasping wine doors opened upon coolly dusted darkness. Before him, the time-worn fading pink taberna was again alive with noise, gregarious sounds of boisterous fraternity that softened the closed face of inevitable night. Stepping out onto the creaking boardwalk he turned around. Carlos, mostly in shadow, was sitting on a weathered bench against the chipped-paint wall. Curled fingers stained with machine-oil rested turned up on his thighs – sensitive hands that had amazingly belied their rough appearance. His eyes glinted out of the darkness, reflecting the staring moon. Its high silver light glowed through the small amber-filled glass held out as Rafael threw back his own portion. Carlos slumped lower. With the hand holding out the glass, Rafael gave an insistent nudge to the other's hunched shoulder. He waited as the tequila was lifted from his fingers and tossed down. Carlos ran the back of his hand across his dampened mouth and gasped out an oath of satisfaction: "*¡Jesús, que bueno!*" No other change was evident beyond a soft *gracias*. Averted eyes of contrite humiliation continued to refuse his *amo's* ameliorating look.

"You are making too much out of this, *amigo*."

"*¡De Veras!* I am very much ashamed. It is I who tried to kill you."

"You have no wish to do it now...which is all that matters."

"I insult your *esposa*."

Rafael laughed heartily, feeling the bite of the sweet tequila. "Semele has forgotten. I think you love her, *no?*"

Carlos' head jerked up with protest. "I never--"

"No, no, but you love her with respect, and she knows this. I understand. All clear-eyed men who see her and know the least things about her love her."

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“Sí, it is so. *Es una mujer hermosa...beautiful.*”

This praise was readily interpreted as meant to convey much more than the physical beauty of his wife.

“Are you mad as hell because of what I did to Elena?”

Rafael heard this importuning question as spoken by a repentant son, here in this moment to a father *in loco parentis*, for Carlos had no living father.

“There is no reason for my anger. What you did is often done in love. I know you will do the right thing.”

Softly swearing an oath, Carlos straightened his slouched body, then stood up and faced Rafael. He leaned close, out of the obscuring night shadows, and spoke with an exuberant and rather childish voice that, by its higher elongated stress, wavered into an avowed future. “I will make you proud of me, *amo.*”

Rafael smiled, glancing briefly at the hard moon.

“*Hombre, yo lo creo. Me alegro.* That is good. Now come inside. Elena is worried and pregnant women should not worry too much. We all want to hear you play. This is how you are kind to us.”

“Ay, you are the kind one...to me, *amo...to me!*”

Walking hand in hand in the quiet moon-friendly darkness, up from the village to the rebuilt cabin, they suddenly heard a straining engine. Bouncing lights from a small vehicle flashed around the last bend, invasively probing their illuminated backs. Rafael and Semele paused with curiosity, for this last stretch of dirt road went nowhere but to their temporary lodging. A battered and colorless old Datsun slowed beside them and stopped.

“Give you a lift?” Jeet Grey said.

“My God, even now,” Semele muttered under her breath.

“Thank you, we are enjoying our walk,” Rafael answered with an even voice. Moderate amounts of wine and tequila had not altered his deportment – it was the same pleased countenance as when the evening began – and he neither let go of Semele’s hand nor expressed any concern.

Semele was not as tolerant. This intruder upon their moonlight stroll was the newsman she had dubbed *the ferret*. Nevertheless, she deferred to Rafael’s indulgence.

Jeet Grey turned off the lights, pulled the keys from the ignition and got out, slouching up beside their edging-away silhouettes, with his hands in his back pockets in an annoying stance of self-serving appraisal.

His night-obscured expression was unreadable, but merely by his presence and moonlit posture they could feel the prevailing sentiments so swiftly at play:

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disbelieving curiosity, brash accusation, uncertainty to a lesser degree, dogged determination, blatant intrusiveness. To this Semele would have added what had become quite obvious: fascination; for she knew that Jeet Grey had taken up Rafael with near obsessive interest. Although by now the corporeal Rafael was no greater proof of past and present conduct than was the effect of that conduct, Jeet Grey continually sought out material proof. More and more he had to verify his elusive subject. Apparently, only repeatedly approaching the cause-driven leader sufficiently affirmed his influence.

Distinct marijuana fumes hung about Jeet Grey. Even before this annoying interloper spoke from his car, Rafael had noticed a tiny spark of light flicked from the window like a zigzagging firefly.

“Why did you not extinguish that cannabis? We cannot have a grass fire around here.”

“Right. Sorry,” Jeet said, walking back to peer into the darkness. “Quite sure it’s out...rather a tiny stub. I never waste any.”

“It will waste *you* -- a nocturnal journalist with a head *confuso*. What, Semele?” Rafael demanded, laughing a little because Semele was laughing.

“Confused,” she provided.

“*Sí*, not so difficult to translate.”

“No. Sorry, darling, I couldn’t help laugh--”

“Hello? Are you two together?”

“This is what I call a fine example of investigative reporting,” Rafael said, deciding to enjoy himself.

“He’s just arrived,” Semele joined in.

“From where?” Rafael asked, glancing up at the starry heavens.

They both began to walk briskly toward the cabin.

“Now look, you two,” Jeet Grey called, clearly with his integrity at stake.

“At least I haven’t been drinking.”

“Why should a little alcohol concern you?” Semele called over her shoulder.

“And why are you here?”

Ignoring Semele’s abrasiveness entirely, as a periodic misogynist is wont to do when both sexes are before him, Jeet, his feet planted wide apart in the chalky dust of the road, shouted at Rafael, “In Paris you showed more respect!”

“This is how *you* show respect? You have not answered my wife.”

“Your wife? Your *wife!*”

Rafael stopped walking and turned around.

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“All of this night I have been in a good mood, but you, *periodista*, are beginning to annoy me. What the hell are you doing here? Are you working or just lonely?”

“I had some additional things to...to ask you.”

“*¡Jesucristo!*” Rafael protested. He let Semele wander on alone toward the cabin, while he walked up close and leaned toward the narcotized but surprisingly alert Jeet Grey. “I gave you a lengthy interview.”

“It wasn’t really that extensive.”

“For me it was. This is Madera, not Paris. Helios is fast arriving to scorch our tired brains. We are going home to sleep in the coolness of these few hours left to us. Can you not let us do that?”

“Sorry, but I had a damnable time finding you.”

“And why find me at this hour...at any hour?”

“You are news, *Señor*...Doctor Arnau i Roca...you will always be news, and I find you a bloody, bloody good story.”

“Ay, Jeet Grey, tactless journalist, neither in broad daylight nor at two-thirty in the morning with a few glasses under my belt will I be a mark for this *loco seguimiento*.”

“I don’t stalk you!” Jeet Grey insisted. “You have put yourself in the public eye.” But Rafael had already turned away with a dismissive wave of his hand and loped off into the darkness to catch up with Semele.

When not overly provoked in such hasty departures, his habitual consideration often resulted in a few admonishing words underpinned with a moral. Thus, like the voice of an operatic soloist conjuring remoteness from offstage, his sonorous voice rose out of the murky distance. It was a night-altered more lenient voice, generously conveying a slightly favorable adjustment of his irritation.

“*Compañero*, concern yourself with telling the stories of those who are ignored and forgotten. We are neither, only in need of a little sleep. *Adiós*.”

“I would greatly appreciate...can you at least get me an interview with Mendoza? At least that? Please? I’ll stop by tomorrow,” Jeet Grey shouted back, but received no answer. In a while, they heard the car door slam and a moment of silence ensued before the engine coughed to life.

“Probably the poor *zote* (he pronounced this aspersion tho’tay) has lit another joint,” Rafael said as he stood at giggling Semele’s back and strung his arms around her waist.

“He isn’t a dunce...unfortunately.”

“No, that is so...but sometimes he acts like one.”

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For a moment, with his chin sidling over her cool hair, he held her firmly against him, his right hand cradling and stroking her left breast -- bare beneath her shirt and still carrying vestiges of Miguel's milk, the tenderness often sadly reminding her of their absent dark-eyed son. His left hand drew aside a kinked mat of hair covering the back of her slender neck. Lowering his head, he moved his mouth over that irresistible place of damp flesh atop the third vertebra. This would invariably make her shiver. Above the touch of garnering lips, just below the posterior base of her head at the spot called the occiput, his nose remained happily buried in the silky hairline, inhaling a faint suggestion of toasted almonds -- another incentive to extend the pleasures of his mouth, of his entire self --, until Semele turned in his arms, all heated anticipation, as he expected, as he intended, and said, "Rafael, let's go in."

In the morning, they packed a spare amount of luggage and waited for Antoine and Mari to arrive and drive them to La Ceiba; there they boarded a continental flight that would take them to Rio de Janeiro with a connection to Brasilia. Ten hours later, interspersed with catch-up sleep, they landed at the *Aeroporto Internacional Brasilia* six miles west of the Brazilian capital. Rafael, whose favorable achievements had brought legitimacy, mounting acceptance and notoriety among even the less informed, had been asked to speak at a world water conference, and Semele had come along. Mildly interested in learning what changes had occurred since her childhood visit, in the main she was traveling with Rafael because she wanted to be with him and because, out of his own accustomed need, he chose to invite her along; in this instance, she had purchased her own plane ticket. Rafael's ticket and accommodations were gratis from the organization that had invited him. Neither would have otherwise chosen their high-end ultramodern hotel, Blue Tree Park, with its upscale accommodations and multifarious amenities. Both preferred to mingle with *hoi polloi*, with whom they considered themselves more comfortably connected. Semele planned to hear Rafael's opening speech, but his presence at the smaller seminars she would skip -- although Rafael could have easily arranged her attendance -- instead choosing to explore alone the wide avenues and geometric architecture of Brasilia. These explorations she intended to undertake by her old habit of jogging, done in the early coolness of the day.

The city, constructed in the late 1950s by *fandangos* -- impoverished job-seekers from every corner of prodigious Brazil -- was like no other place, fiercely defended by many of its inhabitants but often criticized by visitors and some government workers who fled to racy Rio de Janeiro at every opportunity. Those dissatisfied numbers found Lucio Costa's spacious master plan, *Plano Piloto*, ill-

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conceived for the convenience of clustering human traffic, and the buildings designed by Oscar Niemeyer monumentalized to an overly stark surrealism. A pedestrian-unfriendly sterility lingered over this advanced city so uniquely without a history. The verve and vitality sought after in nightlife would never reach the wild madness of Rio, but bland day-to-day life was gradually developing a more illusory nocturnal underside simply by virtue of a demanding market, the requirements of a less mobile and increasing populace. In the human jungle of predation there were always roistering bars with bright neon, a wide range of loud music -- this well known cradle of rock assured its pervasive sounds --, the *macho guys*, faddishly groomed, tattooed and earringed, with their wily retainers and female companions in orbit; plenty of eager, pretty almond-eyed young girls at hand, scantily clad in flashy Day-Glo colors -- such outré fashion did not always, however, imply an easy deliverance; the modish collections of certain fashion designers, borrowed from that highly suggestive makeshift apparel flaunted on dark streets, now provided working girls with a method of teasing seduction requiring little else. The routine stress of the humdrum invariably provoked degrees of dissolution. All around the central locale of clean neoteric architecture -- its mainly nonrepresentational form still implying pared-down symbolism of religious significance; eternal myths sculpted into futuristic monoliths -- there had sprung up seething hives of satellite cities, bringing the total population to two and a half million and growing.

They were ten minutes from downtown, in a spacious and streamlined monotonic room three floors above ground level and overlooking *Lago Paranoá*. Below their wide windows was a sprawling swimming pool that seemed to mimic the shape of the lake, and around which the rising semi-circled resort formed a protective red horseshoe; the suggestion of a solid fortress, but more accurately a theater for the observance of human leisure in its standard upscale milieu. The entire development, adjacent to the *Palácio de Alvorada* where the president resided, lay upon a flat blunt-nosed peninsula. This low jut of land floated atop the ceaselessly shore-slapping, recreationally convenient lake; a man-made lake clearly giving that impression, deliberately existing by the latter-day flooding of an arid, barely green, remote and once inaccessible plain three thousand four hundred eighty-one feet above sea level -- blatant artificiality surrounded by an encroached-upon wilderness. The distant shoreline, by its indistinctness, prompted the supposition of an untamed verdure that might include high reeds in swampy inlets and a dense tangle of impenetrable foliage flourishing beyond the shore. This illusory haze of camouflaging green was really found to be embedded with red-tile-roofed houses.

Surveying the panorama before her, Semele whimsically composed her own wild setting, one of swimming, hunting native fauna, of water lilies bobbing along the

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far edge: lavender, pink, yellow, white, an ample sampling of each hue floating up and down, to and fro in wakes of rushing wind, robustly acquiescent and lush in their heady lotus essence. A backward flash caught raw nature, flickering amaranthine light flooding an early pristine epoch, the primordial glow of savage red wishfully superimposed on the tamed immediate surround. Perhaps there really were penciled clusters of spindle-anchored stalks writhing up from the sediment to offer ephemeral blooms to swarms of pollinators; their sole purpose to bloom and bloom again. This instead of multiple housing tracts and the sterility of creeping pollution. It was hoped. To further impose her cunning supposition, she flung back wet hair and briefly closed her light-stung eyes.

They had showered together, Rafael's tensive fingers burrowing through her thick hair, massaging her scalp and generating streams of fragrant suds, using up a tiny bottle of green herbal shampoo provided by the hotel. This languid grooming was received with her back against the gray tiles and a rhythmically jounced bent head. She leaned close, warm and content with arousal, her dreamy gaze fixed upon his streaming dark torso, upon the dark orchid-skinned cluster nestled in black curls. Bits of soapy froth were occasionally flung into those dripping jet ringlets, their prominent and responsive centerpiece having confirmed its potential by the time she lifted her cleansed head. He looked into her revealing eyes and laughingly drew her fingers into the curly priapic nest, his accommodating hand pressing hers over what he felicitously called his *dardo del enamorado*, his lover's dart.

A shared stint at their windows, where Semele indulged her atavistic glance, then they moved over to sit on a large bed. They were still in that pumped-up state of travel fatigue that causes a temporary inability to relax; although the shower had been liberating, also arousing, and Rafael's palpating hands welcome therapy. Fully at play, which he could capriciously turn to with stunning alacrity, his relaxed attitude fascinated Semele. He whirled a huge white towel over her back and used its corner to blot the water-laden red tangles of his entanglement.

Reflections of the sun-struck lake, shimmering beneath a hard blue sky, intensified the white-ceilinged, very pale silver room, and illuminated their bodies in a cool diamond-bright light. With the warmth siphoned away by the quiet air-conditioning, the withering heat of the bleached world outside was rendered entirely unimaginable. The soundless exterior became a static background, a removed atmosphere as still as a large plein-air painting, or the detached image of a silent film.

Semele flung herself off the bed. "I can't take much more of this...all this blinding dazzle...need to find my sunglasses."

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“We should sleep. I turned off my phone. After our drinks I will close the curtains. An iced bottle of French champagne is about to arrive, remember? That should help.”

The champagne duly arrived, and Rafael, donning a pair of shorts, went to open the door, offering the greeting “*Boa tarde.*” Reasonably comfortable in the language, he spoke in Portuguese to the stocky young bellhop whose horizontal, barely divided eyebrows were thick and black atop his square swarthy face. Semele’s knowledge of the aspirate language here spoken was minimal, limited to a few polite phrases.

“You asked him...something about where he lives?”

“Sí, he would have to travel some distance, and so has a little room -- you can imagine how spare -- in one of the barrios. He said there are places near his family home very beautiful...waterfalls, streams with fish, wildlife.”

“Ah, the unreclaimable dreams of childhood,” Semele equivocated, tightening the sash of her short white robe.

“Dreams better left as dreams.”

“They have to be left that way, don’t they?”

“Sí, *querida*...put on your glasses and drink with me.” He snatched the dripping green bottle from the crunching ice bucket and held its gold-labeled wet neck, gesturing with the same hand while the other clasped the stems of two fluted glasses between his fingers. “Come over here...and sit at the table...this hard light will shock us awake while we have our drinks. Then we will close the curtains.”

As they drank she pulled off her dark glasses, for a few more minutes plunging into a serious discussion of how she remembered this once far more rudimentary outpost.

“Where in the world did you not go in that wandering childhood?”

“A few of those stark places you’ve gone, I think.”

“Where no tourist ever goes or cares to go,” he said and touched his glass to hers.

Both increasingly stimulated by the crisp very cold champagne, they sipped in deliberate silence, occasionally laughing at the uninterrupted luxury of idleness. Blinding water reflections rippled over Rafael’s relaxed face. His eyes narrowed, bedazzling her with spectral elusiveness.

“You’re mesmerizing, my dark mystery. This French champagne is very good...mm, sending me bouquets.”

“Sí, undoubtedly...after three glasses.”

“Oh, listen to me. Am I laughing too much?”

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“I like it very much...your laughter...for me, probably an addiction...*you*...you are.”

“A little more of this and I’ll sing to you. All that terrible brilliance is softening. Every ada–adamantine thing softening...softening.” Her voice, too, had softened.

In the sharp light a gossamery web of drying hair strayed errantly around her pale face, catching fire, the thicker damp-curved strands falling in disarrayed waves over her shoulders. Her swollen breasts, thinly covered by a white silk robe, held the moistened outline of distended nipples, reminding him – with a sudden jolt from possession so arousing as to seem prodigal -- that this incandescent siren was the lactating mother of his offspring, fatefully cast in that especially reserved abstraction called *wife*. How then was seduction possible, seduction spurred by such needful impatience? It profoundly was. He knew what he could do, what he would have as both seducer and seduced.

His own slowing concentration settled upon her seated body, her chair pulled out and the slippery robe falling away from angled long bare legs. He reached out a little clumsily to refill their glasses with the last of the fizzing citrine spirits -- the effervescence flashing with distilled sunlight as it tumbled into tall crystal flutes; miniscule explosions of excited gas popping and tickling their noses as the infusing Ultra Sec intoxicant pricked their throats. His guttural laugh insinuated. He threw back his head and lowered it with unmistakable intent, his gaze scoring her mouth, the glass-blue eyes.

“Softening? Is that what you said? Not this one, *mi querida*...eh, far from it. You have the opposite effect.”

Her mouth exhaled words: “It’s the champagne.”

“No... ¡*Jesús!* not for me. If anything, that makes it more difficult. It is *you*. You, foxy *mamacita*.”

Her full lips pursed in an airy kiss, then smoothed to an inviting curve of mouth that he, through with this part of their mutual seduction, directly rose to taste.

“*Dulce*...sweet...your mouth, even with dry champagne.”

“I thought we were going to sleep.”

“Ah, you did not. But we *will* come to that.”

His fingers clasped and wound a flaming clump of red tendrils, in this way drawing her up tight against him and into that mutually required empyreum of desire. It was the method he employed in bringing her tense equivocation -- a strange involuntary action, swiftly overcome but which always increased the excitement -- into the hot realm of pleasure that burned away everything else.

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Rafael stood confidently resting his arms upon a podium raised at the front of the hotel's high-ceilinged, taupe and gray rectangular conference hall. Neatly aligned below were rows of black-seated chrome chairs filled with earnestly expectant bodies. The greater portion of these politely focused attendees were not specialists, scientists, or the well informed, but motley laypersons here for the expedient purpose of becoming more productive. They came from small and medium-sized businesses that regularly, or very often, dealt with the use and conveyance of water, and they needed to hear the elemental facts -- the dangers of pollution, the necessity for conservation and purification -- that Rafael could deliver so precisely and with very little preparation.

"How is it that an economist does this?" Semele had wryly and rhetorically posed earlier that morning.

"By a useful stroke of pragmatism...because what I do always involves finance," he had answered. "Essentially, I informed myself with hard-core experience; formal degrees came along...but that is not the answer you wanted, is it?"

She looked up at him from the back of the room where she had unobtrusively placed herself, looked up and realized that however unfamiliar he now appeared to her, it was not a superficial role he was playing here, not merely tacked on to all that she knew of him. It was a huge part of himself, the self-ordained part, of which she had frequently caught glimpses without ever participating in the more definitive and perhaps dangerous aspects. The others were here to learn about water, elementary facts and figures she had by this time very purposefully acquired. She was present at this particular moment to acquaint herself with the true Rafael, the mysterious portion that would consequently deepen her understanding of the more familiar shared qualities. This complex cause-driven man many called a provocateur had, at some cost, taken her into his uncommon life. Perhaps he had done so because he considered her life uncommon, and because she had taken *him* into it, also at some cost. He understood so readily her long repressed desire to do what he did, to use herself in that socially progressive way. Had he not remarked on the same enigmatic qualities in her that she saw in him, and loved her for them, for those intriguingly oblique revelations of the unexpected, slowly revealed, infinitely unfathomable, running so deeply through and between their lives?

In a stylishly simple sleeveless silk beige dress and tan sandals, her right elbow absently supported in her left hand, her slender gold bracelet flashing as the tips of curved fingers lightly touched her emotion-flushed cheek, she sat pondering with fascination the subject she would never fully expose. Indeed, it was the challenge of this endless pursuit that afforded one of her deepest pleasures.

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As she listened, his words, some of which were jotted down by the others, flowed over her in a resonantly fluid accented voice, unsurprisingly familiar and yet somewhat less familiar in its instantaneous purveyance of fact.

“The water covering seventy percent of the earth is a finite resource; only two and a half percent of it is fresh water, and of that seventy percent will be found in ice caps or glaciers and twenty-nine percent in rather hard-to-reach underground aquifers -- the serious problem of what happens as the earth continues to heat up is another lecture. Finally, we are left with an amazing one percent of the earth’s total water for humans. But, no, from this small percentage we must further subtract the pollution of lakes and rivers and of depleted aquifers, such as those fouled with sewage in Gaza -- from which people must drink even as they are sickened. Alas, only one of many such places. Only a fraction of that one percent is suitable for humans. The growing slums of large cities in developing nations are rife with disease and death from pollution, and thousands of children in the world die every day for lack of sanitation and clean water. The presently cost-prohibitive application of reverse osmosis technology for the consumption of seawater or polluted lake and river water is also another lecture. Today one and a half billion people struggle to exist without access to clean water. A viable supply of this precious resource cannot long sustain the earth’s increasing population, and certainly not the required irrigation of produce for the world’s endless consumption. Already it begins, the wars over water. Always the haves and have-nots. And still we waste and pollute with little or no consideration of the consequences. . . . Let me here begin to enumerate some of the things that can and must be done. Incidentally, sympathetic outcries or misdirected complaints, however loudly expressed, are of no use. A continuous effort of specific education is needed, and there must be a steady, fact-based, strategically applied barrage of strong pressure for worldwide changes in policy...changes you can foster.”

When Semele approached Rafael after his lecture -- while he was surrounded by people vying for his attention with lively comments and questions -- she lowered her head to softly praise his effective speech, then offered a hasty *good-bye*, again mentioning her intention to explore the city by foot. Hurriedly moving off, she was already considering the hot day and thinking that she would have to make good use of the morning hours if she intended to do much jogging.

Then Rafael was behind her, catching hold of her arm. “I meant to tell you a friend is driving us to his house for dinner. You will have returned before then, *sí?*”
“Oh, easily...I think.”

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“Please, *querida*, be extremely careful crossing the wide avenues. Even on one-way streets there are six lanes here, and the drivers never slow down.”

An Englishman came up as she was walking away, saying something that induced from Rafael a spontaneous, instantly recognizable laugh. His succinct answer reached her ears as she made her way past clusters of people waiting to capture his attention: “*Sí*, my wife.”

“How fortunate,” the man remarked before launching into an unrelated comment, something about Sudan.

It was late afternoon when she arrived back at their room to soak in an eagerly sought bath. Rafael had not yet returned. She knew how his day would go: people fastening on him and eventually dragging him off somewhere to engage in a spirited discussion, in which perhaps she ought to have been participating. Lying back immersed in airy mounds of fragrant bubbles, she closed her eyes. Salient images of the latest version of Brasilia’s starkly spare architecture paraded through her relaxing mind.

She reckoned that she had jogged nearly a dozen miles before the heat began to slow her down, slipping in and out of dedicated buildings displaying handsome multichromatic tile murals or dazzling colored glass ceilings and windows -- all with symbolic elements -- and crossing numerous consecrated spaces, among them the National Congress before *Lago Paranoá*, its large half spheres suggesting a station platform on Mars; and the minimalist dark sentinel figures of the Square of the Three Powers: *Praça dos Três Poderes*, surrounded by government buildings. Gazing at the *Templo da Boa Vontade*, she thought this split-tipped pyramid was about to disgorge a squadron of extraterrestrials.

In another open square a lively dance group gyrated in a colorful flurry of the omnipresent samba, rudiments from one of the prevalent *escolas de samba*. When they stopped for a short break, Semele located a member who spoke some English, a rosy-cheeked young girl in revealing black bustier and white shorts. Semele asked if she could be shown a few movements. Instead, the girl introduced her to their slender young instructor. He then had the resting musicians resume the incredible two-quarter bounces of sound that had first caught her attention, thence demonstrating the driving syncopation of suggestive motion. Without any English spoken, her attempts were adjusted to the rhythm, knees bending, hips rolling while she learned to hold her torso still. His attractive student translated whenever necessary, praising her nimble and very Latin surrender of restraint, a decadence that Semele found quite hilarious.

“I did learn to tango one summer in Paris--the amazing Argentinean tango, with variations. I loved its sensual playfulness,” she communicated through her interpreter.

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“Ah, if you dance the tango, you have true romance,” her instructor conveyed through the words of his student.

Finally she made her way back to *Palácio da Alvorada*, the Palace of the Dawn, floating on its broad green lawn beside the lake and adjacent to their hotel. It was a low white understated building with an arch-columned loggia, the official residence of the current president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a former leader in the Workers’ Party. She had paid attention to the policies of the former president, the neoliberal professor of sociology, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. He had curbed inflation and agreed to attempt a reduction of logging in the Amazon rain forest, admirable in light of so many human needs within his big country. But the policies of the current president were still unproven. What was his policy in regard to the environment, with so many other problems in this unwieldy Brazilian democracy?

Her jogging clothes were soaked, her sun visor pasting her sweaty hair against her prickling scalp as she stepped off the elevator. Ah, the air-conditioning. Drinking an entire bottle of water while running her bath, she peeled off her clothes and sank into a tepid warmth infused with herbal essence. This luxuriance lulled her into a dreamy state happily motionless. “Water,” she murmured, then closed her eyes, breathing slowly for perhaps ten minutes.

Regretfully, she climbed out, dried off and massaged a light floral-perfumed body lotion into her receptive warm skin. First fresh lacy lingerie; then a filmy sky-blue sleeveless chiffon dress covered with showers of tiny pale pink blossoms, suitable for the late dinner Rafael had mentioned. Lastly, she slipped her tired feet into taupe sandals and settled down upon the large buff sofa, staring idly into space. Her wide unfocused eyes remained fixed in thoughtful speculation as a jumble of the rigorous day’s collected images arranged themselves. In that removed and contemplative state she was startled into a leap of surprise when the phone rang. A woman’s voice, straining with English, told her that a person in the lobby was requesting to see her.

“A person? Who?”

“There was a muffled exchange, and the receptionist said in a thick accent, “Jefferson Davis Smith.”

“What! Really? Well...well, please send him up.”

His muscular frame passed through the door as if he had regularly come through it, as if he owned the building and she were instead his guest and, as a matter of course, about to be accommodated beyond any small requirement. The easy urbanity seemed more pronounced in this setting, disarming, smoothly varnishing the adamant granite beneath.

Removing his cream linen jacket, he laid it over the sofa back and rolled up his white shirtsleeves.

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"I've ordered reinforcements sent up. Where's Rafael?"

She stared at him, nearly speechless, while he gazed back with that familiar appreciative grin.

"Jeff, have you...have you any idea how astonished I am? I mean you've...you've--"

"Why so astonished? You certainly know how easily I move around...using entire data banks to fuel the transit. Been at it so long I'm like a magnet; lethal filings of unfortunate news just fly at me and get imbedded. Sorry, but I'm not here on a social visit...not that you'd care one way or the other...would you?"

Shaking her head in protest, and impeded by a sudden bewildering emotion, she could not so swiftly think of a suitable or even very clever answer, and looked back at him until he was reduced to an essential contrition.

"Hell, I'm sorry. My God, you're the one person to whom I really enjoy being courteous. How are you, Semele?"

"I...don't I seem all right?"

"Very all right."

She had balanced herself on the arm of the large sofa, and he sat down beside her, but leaned back, his smoky-gray eyes reflecting the innuendo she would rather not have to consider -- it would be far easier if it were only to be about her abandoned position. Still, she could not quite let go of his abbreviated personal attack.

"Care one way or the other? That was... Jeff, weren't you really describing...yourself?"

"I deserve that, don't I?...but I can't let you--"

Someone was knocking on her door. Semele leapt from the sofa arm to answer before Jeff stood up. A loaded cart of drinks, in fact a small varied bar, was rolled in.

Jeff came forward and said, "*Boa tarde*," then patted the bellhop on the back, tipped him generously, completely unconcerned as to whether or not it was acceptable, and called, "*Obrigado!*" as the smiling fellow closed the door.

"This country brings back memories," he revealed as he mixed them each a drink. "I haven't taken my Malarone, or even brought any -- I was in a hurry -- so I can't really drop in on the malarial regions up north...and for other reasons -- no use tampering with memories." The last remark, part of some private remonstrance, went unexplained.

Searching bottles, he had fixed her a scotch and water.

"How did you know I wanted that?" she asked, laughing softly with her lips near the edge of the thick glass.

"Hasn't been that long. I remember...a lot of things."

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“You’re different somehow, Jeff.”

“Maybe...yes...like ripe fruit dropping from its familiar old tree and splitting open. I’m fired up, my associate...with something I don’t want to tell you...the messenger with bad news. You know how that goes -- you finish off the messenger...but you’ve already done that haven’t you?”

Leaning forward to study the depths of pellucid slate beneath lids that refused to blink, she said, “Jeff, have you been drinking...I mean before this?”

“Not enough to matter. I’m good for what I’m telling you. Solid information as usual...you know that.”

Semele took a quick swallow, then glanced at her watch and folded her arms, one hand turned-out at the wrist and continuing to hold her glass. “What’s this all about? What information?”

“Shall we wait for Rafael, or should I tell you now what he probably already knows?”

“You’d better tell us both...but tell me now.”

“All right...but you might call him on his cell phone first and see if you can get him back here...since it concerns him.”

“Just tell me first.”

“Please call him. I want assurance that he’s on his way...so I’m not inclined to misbehave in his absence.”

“Oh, what nonsense. That isn’t the reason. You’re worried about something to do with Rafael.”

“Yes...mainly because I don’t want to see you in any kind of misery...but also because Rafael is uncommonly valuable -- a promise to be kept. Surprised...a little?”

A needling fear started up as she punched in Rafael’s number and very quickly heard his preoccupied voice. The rather anticipated result was that Rafael did not appear concerned, but instead unaffectedly calm, even without the details she couldn’t yet supply. His own endangerment was far beyond a looming threat, had receded as an accepted attitude. She saw -- after her own voiced fears -- how well known her sinister news already was; her concern merely reintroduced an irritant he had considered and put aside.

“He’s coming,” she offered, replacing the receiver.

“Good...probably more swiftly than intended -- with me in his parlor.

“We were investigating Higgins...you know who Higgins is?”

“Of course, the contractor in Madera.”

“...investigating Higgins, never mind for whom -- well you’ve probably already guessed that --, when we came across something, a tenuous association barely possible to trace, except that *we* saw it. That man -- not a very nice man in the matter

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of past exploits -- really has it in for Rafael. Unfortunately, Higgins has recently done some laggardly investigating himself...and discovered that the sack of gold stashed under the bridge is pyrite, in a manner of speaking.

"The mine in Madera," Semele acknowledged. "But it will produce...it can be profitable."

"Not in the way he was led to believe before he signed on. And now, according to the indisputable fact of Higgins' own alcoholic tongue, if Rafael sets foot back in Madera, it could very well be the last step he takes."

"But what on earth good would that do?"

"Good doesn't enter into it. Judging from his record, Higgins is a vengeful man. Beyond a proposed hit in Madera, I'm not entirely certain your high-profile husband isn't being hunted down in the world at large...so..."

Semele shook her head, her eyes growing moist. "Oh God, is this never going to end? Damn, damn, *damn it!* You see the kinds of evil that monumentally good intentions heap on a person -- the greater, the more exposed. You see?"

Having jumped up and rushed to the broad windows, she saw nothing beyond her rage except a blur of fading light.

She heard his glass abruptly slammed onto the glass-topped coffee table, and he was there standing beside her. She thought that he would touch her, and then knew why he would not, why neither of them would get any closer.

"How late it is to apologize...but still I need to do it. I'll berate myself forever because of the way I left Paris that morning, Semele. It made all the rest my fault. But blame is the least of it. I was high and my judgment cancelled...just that habitually inflexible me. I should have either done nothing at all -- hardly possible -- or committed to a relationship worthy of nothing less. I somehow convinced myself you were more drunk than anything else, a slightly-out-of-control, needful, lapsing associate. Ah, but so tempting. That made it very easy...foregone. My God, even with all the intelligence you'd shown and *this*, our...our inevitable attraction, I had absolutely no real understanding of who you were...*are*. Still I wanted... When I left that morning I was thinking that eventually--"

"Jeff--"

"You could have had me sooner or later. You must have had an inkling of that. I didn't run off for the usual selfish reasons. I had to consider what it all meant and how I'd handle it...handle it very carefully because one more impulsive move, one more damaged life--"

"Please don't, Jeff."

"I didn't count on the critical impact of his...his damned charisma...because I'd never actually met him. If I *had* met him, I'd never have let you near him."

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“Jeff, don’t you know how painful this is? Don’t you know how this hurts?”

“Christ, I’m flayed! I don’t want to hurt *you*...just to apologize. I’ve wanted to at least do that.”

“All right, you have...you have done that.”

“In this business I’ve always had to weigh every angle very carefully...come down hard on those around me. It spills over into my private life. To you, I seem a callous bastard who--”

“No. I don’t think that...couldn’t possibly think that...not after Madera. Oh, please, let’s stop. Could you fix me another drink? Then just settle yourself over there. *Please*.” She pointed to the far end of the sofa.

What a reversal of dominating influence, she thought, as Jeff submissively handed her a fresh scotch and water. For an instant their eyes met over a flurried unspoken assessment of mutual feeling. But there was no triumph in her position; whatever influence there was had reconfigured into something no longer determinate, something impossible, sad and painful.

“How did you find us, anyway? I know it’s a silly question...I just wondered which method you--”

“You certainly know I can find anyone...generally with concentrated effort and time. For this, all I had to do was check the Internet. Where in the world was Rafael Arnau i Roca? At a water conference in Brasilia.”

When Rafael entered they were seated at opposite ends of the sofa, nursing their drinks and mutely staring out of the windows. Semele ascertained at once that Rafael knew the irrepressible had surfaced. As she spoke she attempted to refashion that inquietude into a worried revelation of the threat on his life. But Rafael could not be supposed insensitive to their strained manner, the unsettled current between them, nor was he.

It was the cavalier manner in which he laughed amidst Jeff’s admonitions.

“Ay, Higgins...already on my enemies list. Thank you for coming. Have you had a good visit?”

“Rafael, a lot of time and air fuel has been expended for your safety, and if you won’t even take it seriously--”

“Sí, I do take it seriously...and I am very grateful that Jefferson Davis Smith cares for your well-being.” He was speaking to Semele and looking at Jeff.

“Rafael?”

“No, he’s very nearly right...but not quite.”

“Eh, I thank you...but Higgins is *un fanfarrón*, mostly a bully full of noise. He may have done some public howling over his beer, made some blustering connections, but he will not do anything to me, at least that accrues to himself. He

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knows he would be thrown out of Madera...or shot. He wants the job. Higgins knows there is enough nickel in that mine to supply the makers of tough steel, stainless steel, and that the U.S. market depends on foreign nickel. It is a base for super-alloys. Just what the U.S. requires for jet engines and for its missile and space technologies.”

“You’re right about that. Well, now I’ve done what I came to do...better take my leave.”

“Please, not yet. We are going to the house of a friend...a celebration, drinking, eating...and probably we will do a lot of talking. I invite you to come with us.”

“Well...thanks, but I--”

“Sí, you will join us.” Rafael turned to Semele and winked at her with his disarming grin, this followed by an ungrudging assurance that settled the matter: “Semele wants you to come.”

Jeff glanced at Semele, tightening his mouth at her surprised face, which became agreeable as soon as his eyes were upon her. He then offered a rather tempered smile of near acceptance, dipping his questioning head to one side and lifting his eyebrows in a mockery of his own position.

“You can visit while I send myself into the shower,” Rafael suggested, “but not too much of that scotch, please Semele, because we will be drinking this evening.”

Upon hearing the bathroom door close, Jeff asked, “Have I been censured for all the booze?”

“Of course not. But I won’t finish this,” Semele decided, setting her half-full glass back on the cart.

“You’re very well-behaved.”

“Oh come now, I’m rarely ordered to do anything I don’t want to do.”

“I’d like to order you to return to work. Will it ever happen?”

“I’m moving in a very different direction, Jeff. But I would never say never...only it would probably be for some extraordinary reason I can’t imagine.”

“I won’t be the one to close that door, Semele. And, by the way,” he added with softened voice, “if he lets you into the difficult parts of his world he’s a bigger fool than I suppose him to be.”

They were driven over the new Juscelino Kubitschek Bridge designed by Rio architect, Alexandre Chan; these previously known facts were offered by their host as they traveled beneath the striking new bridge’s lighted arches in an ethanol-powered white SUV -- three high arches leaping from side to side over a suspended deck.

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Kubitschek was the governing president who had presided over the Le Corbusier-influenced construction of Brasilia carried out between 1956 and 1960, their host further explained. Construction done in forty-one months, he hastened to add with pride.

Semele and Jeff exchanged a quick knowing look, both somewhat familiar with Brasilia's more salient history and amused at this touch of chauvinism. They sat in the shadowy back seat while Rafael sat in front beside his friend from Stanford days, Jamil Serra. They were discussing advanced and viable energy sources: self-sufficiency with sugarcane.

"You are way ahead of most other countries," Rafael praised. "These Ethanol-85 vehicles reduce oil-dependency and pollution. You have shown the world how to *grow* fuel."

Rather swiftly they wound into a sprawling residential neighborhood with dark clusters of domestic vegetation here and there and broad blocks of similar houses that would have appeared as white stucco with red-tiled roofs in the harsh brightness of daylight. One such home, with a few palms rising from its interior courtyard and silhouetted against the streaking crimson dusk, was to be their destination.

An attractive dark-haired woman, whom Jamil Serra introduced as his journalist friend Dalva Ribeiro, met them at the entrance -- a wide blue door that opened to an even louder rendition of the inspiring music Semele had already identified as bossa nova.

"Always music," Jamil said as he led them through the dim and sparsely appointed house and out into the courtyard. There were candles burning everywhere, high on wrought iron stands set before small fan palms and, further on, denser varying shades of vegetation. Spread over the floor of the terrazzo terrace were the engaged musicians, playing with fast throaty singing interspersed with laughter. "Instead of money we have music. Therefore we have very much music."

"Why it is so good," Rafael adjudged. A carefree mood evoked the steady flow of sardonic humor he had been sharing with Jamil since their first greeting in the hotel lobby.

Jamil invited them to sit on chairs placed at a long, smooth-planked ebony table that held a low wrought-iron candelabrum filled with squat flickering white candles. For a while longer, they remained standing and talking.

Dalva came from the house bearing a round of drinks.

"*Obrigada*," Semele offered in thanks as this pretty woman approached her carrying an ornately painted tray of refreshments. Her dark eyes flashed, deep-red lips pressed into a friendly smile. Below the mid-hemline of her orange full-skirted dress she wore high-heeled caramel sandals, and above the dress's appealing swell of

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décolletage lay a thick silver necklace. A pair of ornate silver earrings dangled from her ears, catching in her long black hair when she moved her head. As she presented the tray, a few plain silver bracelets softly jangled on her wrist.

Rafael had never met Dalva, who was apparently someone new in Jamil's life. Upon alternately bussing his smiling profile, a routine custom, Dalva took his eventful presence analytically into account -- the besieged Catalan *agitador* at close range. She quite openly demonstrated professional consideration of his newsworthy notoriety, of his emblematic suggestion of purpose, but also of verified results, *éclat*. The motives quietly smoldering beneath his calm reserve were involuntarily manifest, always telegraphed in some manner. Dalva perused his black silk shirt, tan slacks, and the perennial sorrel Spanish boots, while he threaded reparative fingers through his hair -- mussed in her greeting -- and reached out to her extended hand. He had often experienced, and well understood, the enthusiastic wish for a nearly tactile association, an attempt to capture something of that danger-ridden persona: the world-trod advocate of vital causes. This conception, even if countered by an assertion that he lived and breathed the same as anyone else, forever brought him the wrong sort of attention -- his protest also undeniably inaccurate. He left their discussion to hers of her work and reportage, refraining from his own experiences of her profession's alternating nuisance and usefulness; thereby holding impolite opinion in abeyance.

Jeff was the next to be introduced to Dalva. His straightforward response included a subtly instinctive reaction to a sensual woman. He, too, conveyed a polite interest in her journalistic endeavors. Then something happened that noticeably precipitated a sharpening of his attention. Dalva had called forth her older sister.

The sister was sitting some distance off, on a bench under a drooping young palm and beside a brilliantly plumed macaw nattering on its metal stand. She had been smoking while sizing up the newly arrived guests, and quickly stood up, extinguishing her cigarette; a lean angular olive-skinned woman of dark sophistication; a mannered style of attractiveness bespeaking careful attention to even the smallest facial flaw. She wore a simple white silk blouse, beige slacks, and finely tooled mid-heels of sienna leather.

"My sister, Augustina Ribeiro, visiting from Sao Paulo," Dalva said. Augustina offered a swiftly de rigueur cheek bussing that was agreeably accepted by Jeff.

Rightly assuming by her surname that she was unmarried like her sister, Jeff speculated in an amicably forthright manner, "You must have a very satisfying profession to have ignored the marriage process."

Augustina gave a high tittering laugh and answered in a slow thickly accented voice, "I am a liaison at *Bolsa de Valores de Sao Paulo*, the stock exchange."

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“A liaison between BOVESPA and what...maybe the ICC?” Jeff surmised, a discernment which surprised Augustina.

“*Pois nao! Sim...*yes, the International Chamber of Commerce. How do you know this?”

“Just a guess...but to be fair, your financial world is something I know.” He turned aside to receive the drink Jamil was offering him, and gave it a cursory taste.

“Is this a *caipirinha*? My God, I haven’t had one of these in a long, long time.”

Augustina responded with curiosity. “Ah, you are acquainted with Brazil’s national drink.”

“So well I’ve never forgotten.” He took a long swallow and nodded with a plaintive air of nostalgia. “*Cachaça* sugarcane liquor, lime, and sugar. God, that taste sends me up north...and back in time.”

“And you drank this where?”

“In Belém...anesthetizing myself in one of many bars. It seems a long time ago, another lifetime. With a few of these deceptively innocent gastro-explosions you can forget the works...almost.”

Augustina gave a throaty laugh and touched her glass to his. “Maybe you have something still to forget?”

“Always something to forget,” he answered, his side-glancing eyes flicking so subtly and swiftly toward Semele that it was only she, and perhaps Rafael, who noticed.

Semele lowered her eyes, remonstrating with herself over a responsive rush of feeling, an unbroken connection, especially after recent events, that would perhaps always surface in his presence. Pondering this would only lead to something painfully insoluble. She turned her attention to the short stocky squinting Workers’ Party advocate, Jamil Serra; a ruddy-faced man as enthusiastically cheerful as he was fastidiously intense.

When first they met at the hotel, he had done the normal *beijinho* thing, but more exuberantly than the usual side to side buss, alternating three kisses on each cheek. “Because you are Rafael’s beautiful woman,” he said at her surprise. Now she was wondering how this affably humorous, yet seriously directed, rather inscrutable intellectual – perhaps these striking contrasts could only be seated in an earthy combustible South American nature such as his – had ever paired with the independent young journalist. Dalva stood bantering comfortably with Jamil and Rafael. From time to time she looked at Rafael with that Brazilian female flirtatiousness in play, slightly raffish but courteously urbane; perhaps even weighing how a few coy jests, at her lover’s expense, registered with this prominent figure.

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For a moment everything stopped as the reassembled musicians, having finished their drinks, again took up their instruments and plunged into a samba. Everyone sat down at the table, drinks replenished as they listened. But it was not the sort of music to be enjoyed in a motionless state.

Semele turned to an already involuntarily swaying Jamil. He grinned, placing his stubby-fingered hands under his chin in a response of unconstrained delight.

“Please tell me about all of those instruments, Jamil.”

His hands brushed over hair so closely cropped a pink-flushed scalp shone through the black *brosse*. “Truly this would take a long time...but I can say a few things.”

“Is that a tambourine?”

“Something like it, a *pandeiro*...stretched animal skin, sometimes of snake. See how he plays, four beats followed by a shake, emphasis on the third beat.”

“And the curious one that looks like a strung bow?”

“Ah, the *berimbau*, originally from Angola...the slaves brought it. They also brought many drums and rattles.”

“Such interesting sounds it makes...the *berimbau*.”

As Jamil explained this instrument, they looked at its curved and decorated bow, the name coming from wood used originally from the *berim* tree; it had a taut wire strung end to end, played with a thin stick held in the musician’s left hand; this hand also held a metal washer that touched the wire to change the sound. A third of the way up, an open-mouthed gourd, a *cabaça*, was attached to the wire, the open part resting against the player’s stomach and making a distinctive *wah-wah* sound. His right hand held a stick beater called a *vaqueta*, and a small woven basket shaker, a *caxixi*, filled with little seashells or seeds.

“Next you see the *caixa*, that snare drum with skins at both ends; it has wires across the bottom that vibrate.”

“What are those strange black things on the ends of that inflexible loop? They look like cow bells?”

“Those are cow bells,” Jamil said, his eyes crinkling in a mirthful grin. “They are called *agogo*, double or triple bells, making distinct notes high above the samba.

“The aluminum hand shakers are called *ganza*, and that high-pitched flat wooden whistle is called *apito*. Two more instruments -- the rest you will forget -- the *repinique*, see, with metal sides? It is played with stick and hand. You can hear that loud tinny percussion; then the *surdo*, a drum with a deep sound. This one is wood; they can be aluminum. See how the drummer uses a beater, a mallet?”

“Now what can you remember of all this?” Jamil teased.

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Semele pointed to each instrument, including parts of the *berimbau* that Jamil had named, and gave back their names with unhesitating precision.

“*Não!* You have known this before!”

Rafael, who had been listening, laughed and said, “Jamil, this *hembra* has a memory like a video recorder. For her, that was child’s play. Believe me, you have no idea.”

With his discovery of such a curious and retentive listener, Jamil grew more enthusiastic, explaining to Semele how this music originated and was used.

“*Sim, senhora,*” Jamil said as he patted Semele’s hand, the hand pressed flat against the table’s dark-grained wood, her fingers tapping. “Samba is how we exercise our bodies and souls, music brought here by slaves coming from Angola to work in the cane fields. The word *semba* from the Quimbundo language means to pray or to honor the god, the *orixá* -- this god, a saint, a protector, a helper, is of the *Candomble* religion. When worship of their religion was denied the slaves in our country, they camouflaged their prayer, their worship, working it into thousands of drums and moving bodies, and so we have the samba.”

“And how much music it has influenced.”

“*Sim, Semele...yes, very much. And I must not leave out the other source of samba, the Capoeira. This is a dance of violent self-expression, martial art, fighter-dancers, perhaps you might say the war dance...like the Native Americans. This ferocity also is part of samba.*”

“But it’s such a happy sensual dance...everyone leaping and bouncing, gesticulating and urgently coming together; all in two quarter meter.”

“That is so, and that is the good of samba.” Jamil had to shout his conclusion amidst a sudden brace of wild drums.

Semele looked around the terrace, and saw Jeff and Augustina at the far end of the long table, apparently trying to talk above the music in a heated discussion of finance, world markets, and the exigent monetary needs of deprived nations. Jamil rose to join their provocative exchange, and Semele was about to do the same when something else drew her attention away.

Rafael, too, had risen to lend his voice to the weighty economic discourse, but Dalva detained him with a hand on his sleeve.

“Do you tango? I will ask the musicians to play.”

Rafael laughed. “Ah, the tango, born in the brothels of Buenos Aires. A wild habit in *España*...a wildness Jamil insisted upon in our carousing Paris nights...that was just after our university graduation. He intended to debauch any virtue left us.” He added a teasing wink and doubtful nod.

“Come then, we will try,” Dalva encouraged.

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Rafael glanced at Semele who smiled with enthusiasm, cheerfully nodding her head. He had not asked her to dance, not so inclined himself and having no idea she had recently been reminded of her own tango days. For his considerate glance alone, she would have given her silent encouragement, if such was needed, but she really only wanted to watch him dance. She was amply rewarded.

A piano had been added, and together the well-suited pair plunged into the racy sounds of tortuous rhythm, each tonal prompting intuitively expressed. Far more than a metaphor for sex, in her fiery orange dress with long jet hair flying, Dalva's intimation resonated in every whirl, every contortion of hip, every exaggerated stance. Talk ceased, approving eyes fixed on the dancers. The versatile musicians had their own samba-influenced interpretations of tango. Simulated moods of passion reverberated with the insistent jingle, the breaking keys, the emphatic pauses and hot compression of stretched animal skins and metal.

Semele sat mesmerized as Rafael's pliant hands slid over Dalva's tendrilous waist. Momentarily averting her gaze to digest all that it took in, she glimpsed over the rapt onlookers and found Jeff watching her, not the dancers but *her*. She turned quickly back to the blurred bodies coming together in a final dipping pose, the arresting finale of Dalva's flamboyance, Rafael's nimbly deferential accommodation. Everyone clapped as the music resumed.

Then Jeff was leaning over her, asking her something, and she looked up into his questioning gray eyes.

"What?"

"I said, can you dance the tango?"

"Can you?"

"I learned it drunk but I remember it. And you?"

Despite the effects of rum, her answer above the music was steady, imperturbable, anticipatory. "Think I remember a little of that delicious madness...it's been a while."

She could already feel the tango in her bones as Jeff lifted her toward him and drew her out onto the smooth terrazzo floor. He stood a moment looking into her eyes as his seemed to promise, *nothing else but this*. Smiling, he raised his hand, and she placed her palm flat against his. A fluidness rippled through her athletic body, resolving itself in the smooth stylized gesture of arms, flaunting legs, the delicately sensual roll of hips. Here was mannered unconstraint, a sultry physicality heightened by just enough alcohol. Her mouth curled in playfulness.

"Something else you did in Belém," she gasped when their bodies came together and she lay briefly against him, inhaling alcohol and lime cologne. "You're good at this."

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“Only with you.” He whirled her away. The skirt of her cerulean chiffon dress floated up and rippled out in a fanning swirl, revealing the whole beauty of her prancing long limbs.

The momentum of his admission carried her off into a sublime forest of throbbing instruments transmogrified; now the high-low tinny rattling cries resounded, the wail of endangered species furiously clashing in dark heat; feral fortissimo of rut popping in and out of bosky camouflage, flashing synapse of startled brain; momentary embrace. An instant synchrony of motion, the striking meld of paused bodies, fortepiano, then the next tom-tom thrum jumping from the animal wilderness of desire into sublimated fulfillment.

The music rose to a vibrating crescendo of suspended animation, the impact of silence. They came together and stopped, her head on his chest, his hand on her neck.

“*É campeões! É campeões!* You are the champions!” Jamil shouted, clapping his hands over his head.

“Oh, that was...” Still held, she tilted her head back to look at him with a gasp of airy laughter, her eyes then adrift in a smoky-gray unmasking of something undeniable. “I think I drank too many of those--”

“*Caipirinhas.*” He ran his finger slowly down her nose, his eyes never leaving hers.

In her illusory endorphanic state, accountability sank beneath the natural, the unintentional and sweet. This followed by an abrupt awakening, startling, for she found herself in deep arousal, unbearable arousal.

“Sorry...excuse me.”

She hurried off, spotting Augustina and asking for the *banheiro*. Directed to a spacious dark-tiled bathroom filled with obscure plants and luridly flickering candles, she stood in its midst, looking around her and breathing deeply.

When she had relieved herself of a processed amount of the conspiring drinks, she stepped to the sink and splashed water on her face. Looking up, the ensorcelled creature in the mirror shocked her. Its dark fiery hair like a venting diffusion of some lethal combustion, its damp cheeks flushed a shadowy crimson, its translucent eyes throwing back the candlelight with burning points of accusation that made her cringe. Bracing herself with both hands on the counter, she lowered her head. How could she possibly, possibly feel this way when she was so in love with Rafael?

Filling her lungs in one long inhalation, she stepped outside the room. Rafael was leaning against the wall with his arms folded. He took her by the wrist and drew her back inside, closing and locking the door.

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She propped her limp body against the cooling tawny-colored tiles as he braced his hands on either side of her, closing in until her averted eyes were captured, held.

“*Um segredo nos teus olhos.*”

His warm-throated emotion-charged evaluation slowly grasped, she knew herself culpable. Her answer came out unbelievably obtuse, defensive, her voice hardly more than a whisper. “I don’t understand much Portuguese.”

“It means you have a secret in your eyes. If I had known you could dance that way I would have danced with you...only you. Why did I not know?”

She swallowed and had to moisten her dry lips, looking into that darkly assessing lambency, inescapable.

“Today...when I was jogging, I came across a samba group in one of the squares. I asked them to teach me. That rhythm made me think of the tango...and I thought that we would...I intended...if the chance arose to...but--”

Her odd effusion of words was smothered by his grasp. “*Lo siento, lo siento, querida.* Now you are all hot, your body wet, and it was not me. He lifted the skirt of her dress and slipped his fingers beneath the thin lace finery between her legs, affirming a dampness at once augmented by his caressing hand and an intensely warming kiss. Her rapid heartbeat climbed near the level of climax itself, and her body grew limp, almost sliding down the wall as he caught her in his tightening left arm. Pausing to let her breathe, his ensuing voice held low, his words were delivered with unmistakable assurance, foreknown. “Is it me now?”

“Yes...always you...always.”

“Hold your dress.”

She gathered the skirt into a clump in her lifted hand while he knelt, pulling down the thin lace undergarment, his ankle-wrapped fingers firmly supporting each raised foot.

Looking up at her, eyes burning with the resolution of so many candles, he spoke, low and intense, jerking his head toward the door. “*¡Cristo!* do you know what that was like?”

“Yes, now I know...how beautifully you dance.”

“That was only dancing.”

Tossing the crumpled lace on the counter, he stood up and yanked at his fly.

“Oh, Rafael...isn’t this bad form? Jamil will be wondering where you are.”

“Right now Jamil does not concern himself with me, or what I am doing with my wife. But I can tell you anyway that he is a passionate Brazilian who heartily approves of answering necessity.”

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“You haven’t drunk too much?” A clumsy spatial remark instantly regretted, because it sounded as if she might be stalling, and she wasn’t; was in fact struggling to slow the nearly delirious anticipation of what he would do.

He tossed his head back, answering with a dismissive laugh, “Alcohol? No effect...not with you...like this.”

His eyes remained on her face as he lifted her up onto him and pressed her back against the wall, positioning her thighs against his hips. The question she had dazedly awaited -- or out of her own contrition imagined -- sought no explanation. Grasping her hair, his silent narrative mouth moved again and again over her lips and along her damp throat. *Have this...only this, only this* were the words never spoken, an urgent importuning of fused bodies.

Moaning, she threw back her head and felt at once a blunt, almost hurtful contact with the tiles.

“Careful, *querida mía*. Did that hurt? I am only here to give you...pleasure, *mi amor*...and myself.”

“Rafael, was I...I never meant to--”

“Not now...we will speak of that another time...or perhaps never.”

“Oh, but you--”

“; *Chito!*...sh, sh.”

Her throat emitted eager little cries as he worked himself hard up inside her, until she tightened her shaking knees and tried to muffle a rising scream. As yet unspoken was the clamoring interior voice now pleading and pleading for the sublime relief of his sweet hot aggression.

“*Amada mía*...tell me when...*tell me when*.”

“Now, now, *now!* Oh God, oh God!”

With her head braced in his hands, he ejaculated so swiftly and deeply her body was thrust up and her limp arms thrown back against the wall. Her last involuntary cry, barely muted, came as his low groan pulsed against her throat and ended in a short laugh. His tongue grazed her burning lips. “You taste of *Cachaça*...a lot of it.”

Her eyes were closed, her throbbing body supported by his and pressed against the wall. When she could stand without him, he went to the sink and returned with a damp cloth smelling of almond soap. Gently cleansing between her legs, he snatched up her briefs and helped her into them.

“Are you better? Are you all right now, my beautiful, beautiful tango dancer?”

She dipped her head, kissing, ruffling his hair, then smoothing the disheveled waves beneath her needy fingers.

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“*Semele asombrosa*...so amazing, I keep thinking that you are not my wife. Unfortunately, so do others.”

“You said we wouldn’t speak of it.”

“Sí, my love, sí. ; *Vamos!* Now we are going to eat.”

They sat at a table that steadily received a variety of Portuguese dishes steaming with enticing aromas; real food, nothing like the garish excess Semele had spurned in the Bellaco palace. Older women in the kitchen, who never appeared, were cooking or had cooked all of this. There were skewers of tender beef with garlic, and broiled chicken called *frango grelhado*, which was seasoned with the hot pepper and olive oil sauce *piri-piri*. Each temptingly attractive platter of food received Dalva’s explanation as it was placed on the table. *Favas com coentro*,” she announced, setting down a colorful flat blue bowl of fava beans mixed with bacon, onion, tomatoes, and cilantro. “And here is what I want, *bacalhau à gomes de sá*,” Jamil said, appearing with a terra cotta casserole of cod, potatoes, and onions, which he distinguished as his favorite dish.

“*Qual é a palavra em Português para your scrambled eggs*,” Rafael asked. “Remember? We used to have them for breakfast, mixed with salted cod, potatoes, and onions.”

“Ah, you mean *bacalhau à brás*,” Jamil answered, rolling his eyes and patting his stomach.

“Sí, that was it...with salty cod.”

Semele tasted the cod casserole, and said, “I see why you like this, Jamil...basic...substantial and...oh so good. There’s an expression: it sticks to the ribs.” She reached for her unfinished rum drink, left standing on the table.

“I wouldn’t drink any more *caipirinhas*, Semele,” Jeff warned. “Too many can really raise hell with your stomach, especially with this food.”

“No, have more red wine,” Jamil quickly suggested. “*In vino veritas*.”

“Or if not truth at least joy...but then the painful consequences of too much *vino*...and overexposed truths.” Semele put her palms together beneath her chin as a sign of something learned the hard way. “But *I*...I know I shouldn’t have any more alcohol,” she admitted, laughing and nodding at Augustina. Dalva’s sister was holding her hand over her own wine glass, which Dalva was attempting to refill.

Rafael left the table, and soon returned with a cool glass of water, which he set before Semele.

“Oh, thank you...perfect,” she responded with a soft grateful voice. She took a long soothing swallow.

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Jeff finished the wine in his glass and said, "I remember something called, I think, *picadinho*, a sort of hash that had everything in it.

"It does have many things," Augustina agreed: "cut up steak -- *picado* means to cut into small pieces -- onion, garlic, tomatoes, and green pepper. You put this on rice. Then on top of this you put chopped eggs and a, what is it, stuffed? yes *stuffed* green olives."

The musicians continued to play a gentle salsa, and when Semele asked if they weren't hungry with all of the savory sensations wafting toward them, Jamil told her that later they would eat; now they would rather play than eat.

"Ah, music in the belly," she responded with playful discernment, thereafter falling uncharacteristically silent.

Pondering Rafael's state of mind, she listened to the others without joining in, as they commented on the volatile sociopolitical conditions of Brazil. This spirited exchange was traded between bites of dessert. Augustina interjected her undying fondness for the golden sponge cake served to them with various sweet fruits, explaining that this light *Pão-de-Ló* treat was very popular. "Now you have eaten Brazil," she told the guests, adding her sultry laugh.

Semele leaned forward in fragmented thought, sipping her thick black coffee. Intermittent aftereffects of Rafael stirred her languid body, revisitations of his violently immolating lovemaking. His arm was slung over the back of his chair as he leaned sideways talking. When he suddenly turned his assessing gaze upon her from across the table, her heart leapt. His eyes roved over her face in a marked inquiry of her well-being. She responded with a slow smile, that moved him to send her a reassuring wink. She could hardly look at Jeff, but knew she must speak to him before Rafael interpreted this flagrant omission.

"There is such...*such* disparity, so much crime," Dalva said. "Economic aid should not hold a people captive."

At once pulled back into the problems of the world, of this massive and mysterious land, its clawing and climbing population approaching two hundred million, Semele then experienced a sense of self-indulgence. But one more time reason resumed its steady dissolution of guilt. An inner voice inveighed: *You are human, animal-linked, raised to know this; with all the logic of intellect, you are still emotionally vulnerable; for you, there will always be these complicated polar entanglements, the painful wrench of personal and public involvement; if the tensile strand of opposing forces -- private love/public duty -- can be held apart without snapping, every action, public and private, should persevere reinforced.* She looked down at her rigidly folded hands, seeing them as Rafael had first defined them, the guarded flesh of one ephemeral human, hard-compressed in abeyance of life's hazards. Relaxing the fingers with slack opened

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hands, then drawing them over her arms, she smiled to encourage a suppleness of mind – expansive and for the nonce hopeful. *Back and back we strain toward oblivion...or the sublimely unconscious fetal sleep.* Fetal then fatal, she sardonically lamented. Resolving yet again to objectify her chosen path, she lifted her head and added her voice to Dalva's lamenting complaint of social problems.

"International financial institutions use public monies to initiate and support investments in other countries. And some of these multilateral development banks, ostensibly existing to alleviate poverty, actually support a gainful private sector that acts in ways harmful to both that needy populace and the countries IFIs draw upon. The best thing you could do as a journalist, Dalva, if you can and if you will, is to expose these exploitations with an onslaught of facts put in bold-faced type. Oh, but forgive me, please, for my audacity. Probably you already do this."

"Not often enough. You are right, Semele. If I do not do it, I have no reason to complain. But, as with the...the organized crime, it can be dangerous."

"Yes," Semele agreed. "One hardly knows anymore where organized crime begins and ends...if one ever did."

Jeff remained silent but engaged, apparently pondering Semele's sharp comment on IFIs, which appeared to disturb him, but then, when about to speak, deferred instead to Augustina who said, "BOVESPA was the first stock exchange in the world to join the Global Compact, and we are committed to reducing poverty. Some good must come from those varied investments you speak of, Semele."

"Currently not quite enough to justify them," Rafael interposed. "And even above the dangerous privatization of public services, the prevention of civil society input, the financing of reckless fossil fuel and mining projects, there is always an ecological debt to be paid."

"Right now, the truly disenfranchised worker pays everyone's debt," Jamil's inflamed voice exhorted. "And as to educating the masses, we have better luck banishing AIDS than we do getting literate people to read. Seventy percent of our population is under thirty, and over sixty percent of literate adults have no contact with books."

"That's discouraging...although it seems book reading is really diminishing everywhere," Semele responded with regretful voice. "I couldn't go on breathing without access to books. Without the encouraging discernment of very good authors very early on, I would have believed that rational thought hardly existed outside my family."

"Access, that is the operative word. We have only fifteen hundred bookstores in Brazil, and in proportion to our population there should be ten thousand."

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“Surely you shared rational thought with your young friends,” Dalva said, still pondering Semele’s remark.

“I had none. I traveled a great deal with my parents.”

“Semele was very much *in* the world but fortunately very little *of* it,” Jeff observed with shrewd accuracy. And still she had not glanced his way.

They were jolted as the musicians began to play again, having just finished their hastily eaten dessert.

Semele looked up to find Jeff’s eyes an invitation, not to dance but merely to recognize his existence. This was an opportunity not to be put off, yet not without regret at her decision to feign her innocence. His look was returned with soft laughter as she aimed for gentleness. “I could never repeat that inspired performance, but I know the tango will always be alive and well in you, Jeff.”

“Alive always but not well,” rebounded his quillet reply; it was for her a barb of irony exposing a regretful charade, with neither conceit escaping Rafael.

Semele awoke to find Rafael already away at a meeting, and marveled at how soundly she had slept to have missed his departure. She was thinking longingly of Miguel, of the large and small quotidian joys of having this centering little being in their midst. They had both spoken to Rafael’s reassuring parents the previous night before going to bed. Emphatic declarations of the joys of having their grandson were followed by effusive accounts of the attention lavished upon her sweet little boy. Rafael’s father was resolved to achieve full recovery, and a beautiful dark-eyed grandson bearing his name was, as Carman described it, the best medicine of all for her determined husband.

Seeking a newspaper printed in English, and likely a good cup of coffee, Semele descended to the ultramodern minimally appointed lobby; its russet accents were splashed with mysteriously entering rays of sun. At last ferreting out a readable world news sheet, she found nothing of much import there, idly searching while seated in a corner of the hotel café. Giving up, she slowly sipped her coffee and nibbled on a buttered roll. When she glanced up she saw Jeff sitting across the room. She was aware that during the previous night he had informed his crew of his decision to stay over and fly out in the morning, but she was taken aback to see him talking with someone facing away, a person who struck a chord of familiarity. As the woman turned her head, Semele saw that it was Augustina. She folded her paper, paid her bill and slipped away. Had Augustina simply alighted here for a rest before returning to São Paulo, or had she possibly spent the night with Jeff? Observing them together at their initial meeting, she had seen at once that Jeff was attracted to Augustina. A very

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sophisticated professional woman, witty and with an obvious financial expertise, Augustina exuded a smoldering promise that was bound to captivate.

Her loose pale green silk blouse fluttered over her white slacks at the swiftness of her step as Semele crossed the polished lobby floor. She flung herself down upon a comfortably large chair covered in a thick damask of burnt orange. There she sat, staring occasionally out at the lake and occasionally at a huge tan pottery vase of dried brown stalks. What she saw most clearly was inside her head: slightly inebriated versions of herself and Jeff liberating libidos with sublimations of a very sensuous tango -- both of them so inventive and highly charged as to be blissfully oblivious to all else. And now in this moment of truth she was more distressed at her *reaction* to what she had seen in the café than at the sighting itself. Stroking reflexively at her loose sleeves, she laid her head back and closed her eyes. *He came here concerned over Rafael, I suppose because of me, and then spent the night with...with probably a very gratifying woman.* How nice, how nice for him and how very fortuitous, she told herself, smiling a little sadly, then almost laughing at herself but with her eyes still closed.

"I'd guess an amusing daydream." Jeff's startling voice carried a slightly different tone, somewhat playful and self-indulgent, much less assertive.

She fairly leapt from her chair, and found herself a little too close to where he stood. He held his ground, assessing her with that masculine unselfconsciousness fully owned and blameless. His white shirt-sleeves were evenly rolled, his hands in the pockets of chino slacks, cuffed above sockless feet well-heeled in casual brown loafers.

"You had a sort of involuntary grin...and closed eyes."

Semele glanced around the room and, seeing that he was alone, said something so spontaneous it surprised her. "I'm going for a swim. Did you bring your swimming togs or... No, I suppose you're on your way out."

"I *was*...on my way out. Brought some khaki shorts that double as trunks...meet you at the pool."

That was fast, an incredibly swift, almost foreordained response, she realized, wondering what he could be thinking, wondering herself what she had meant by her invitation.

By the time she was in the water she had still drawn no conclusion, except that she believed quite sincerely she only wanted to have a mollifying talk with a friend.

The day was heating up, and they swam for a while in a pleasant silence, as if simply sharing the cool water were the only thing desired. Taking long effortless strokes, her body glided smoothly across the blue-green water of the white-bottomed pool. Jeff got out first and stood with his arms folded, smiling and watching her swim toward him.

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For a while they lay in deck chairs, still with very little conversation. Turning on her side, she studied his ruggedly injured body: tan, no excess fat, well developed solid musculature, as good as it would get. In sunlight, more visibly prominent was the thin scar high on his left cheek, the always humanizing manifestation of ineluctable vulnerability. With one arm behind his head and his right leg slightly raised, his loosely relaxed body reminded her of a certain marble figure slowly developing in her jogged memory. Fully visualized, there appeared the exquisite Roman copy of a Hellenistic production of the late third century. The classic head, eyes closed, full lips slightly parted. Here sprawled the Sleeping Satyr, the friend of Dionysus. She was about to name him the Barberini Faun with her usual deft epithet when he sat forward, tapped down his excluding dark sunglasses and said, "If you weren't such a married woman I could say I've just hung around to see how you look in a swimsuit."

The remark should have been amusing, but now she was thinking that he'd once seen how she looked *without* a suit, however vague and shadowy that over-heated illusory night.

She lifted her head and stared at her emerald green one-piece, thought it fairly unremarkable, and said so.

"Not from where I'm holding my breath. No one would ever guess you're a mother. Christ, are you blushing?"

She sat up, shaking out drying matted strands of flyaway red hair and sliding her sunglasses over the top of her sun-burnished head.

"You were quite taken with Augustina last night. You should probably be swimming with her today."

He looked at her long and hard, likely realizing that she had seen him with Augustina. The slow discerning curl of his mouth made her stare off across the lake.

"What I should probably be doing is getting back into the sky. I'm supposed to be in Caracas."

"Oh. I'm really glad to hear it, Jeff. I feel much better now. I thought you'd gone way out of your way...but this stop-off wasn't so difficult for you after all."

"You think so? I worry about you, Semele. Do you know that? Not just the immediate danger but... It seems to me you've done a very reckless thing. What the hell are you going to have in the long run anyway? Can you even imagine your future? And please don't go back to Madera; it's not at all as safe as you think. Before...at least to some degree, I could protect you. Now--"

"I can't believe I'm hearing this. I don't know how to respond. I don't know why you're saying this."

He stood up and leaned over her chair.

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“Goddammit, did you expect to hear a batch of silly niceties? The more I learn the more responsible I feel for your life. Have you forgotten you were my associate when you lost your otherwise intelligent head over--”

“Once over you...remember?”

“Oh hell, you were drunk.”

“It was just the alcohol?...is that what you think?”

“It wouldn’t be much easier if I did.”

“Oh, Jeff...sorry I...you...better keep to that incredible schedule. Too late for any of this...too late.”

“I seem to recall being invited to swim...to swim with *you*...while trying to keep my head above water.”

He stared out at the lake in silence, clearly pondering something momentous, then sighed and crouched down beside her to make what would be an irrevocable statement.

“Semele...Semele, can you at least look at me? For quite a while I’ve been...in love with you...I love you.”

“No, don’t say that. Once you told me not to say it? Now I have to tell you. Yes, I *am* a married woman and I have a child...a husband who loves me. How very ordinary that sounds, but it’s neither anything at all like ordinary nor reversible. It’s extraordinary...which is what my life had been since Rafael came into it.”

“But is he really *in* your life?”

“Yes, oh, yes.”

“Then there’s nothing more for me to say, is there?”

“No.”

“Except for one thing...one thing I’d like to know.”

Her heart was racing, leaping inside her chest as she looked up into that unambiguous gray accusation...the final crystallizing exposure. Perhaps he would see in her eyes that he should stop now, just stop.

“Please answer with the honesty you’ve always shown, the honesty I love in you. Do you still love me...at all?”

Her mouth quivered with terrible indecision.

“If you do, just say it...just say it once before I leave. Please. Either way my punishment is complete.”

“How can you ask me that...and how can I answer? How? I love Rafael.”

“You’ve damn near answered me already, so say it and finish me off.”

“I don’t really understand how you...it’s troubling, confusing...but when I see you...something just...”

“Semele?”

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“Yes.”

“Say it then...in forgiveness...just the words.”

“It was never a decision, Jeff...my love for you.”

He thumbed the tears from her face and took her hand.

“Come back to my room. No, no, I swear to God I won’t violate Rafael’s woman. I only want to say good-bye, a private good-bye, that’s all.”

Hardly knowing how she arrived there, but standing awkwardly in his room, a white beach jacket pulled over her swimsuit, she said, “We shouldn’t have done this. I know I have a lot of blame in it...from the beginning. I don’t want to let you go but I can’t do what you want...I think I’d rather die than look at Rafael after that.”

“I’m not asking you to do anything.” He was rolling up the sleeves of a creased linen shirt he had donned while she was talking. “Except maybe let me hold you and kiss you good-bye. Then out the door you’ll go. Come here.”

He held her with her head under his chin, quietly, for a long inextricable moment. The heat of his body and the carefree summery lime cologne scent of his shirt caused her vulnerable flesh to quiver, a jittery fragility of self-denial and sorrow, ungovernable, unanswerable.

“Don’t tremble. It’s all right. Everything is all right. I’ve got to leave. I’m way off schedule. That’s you, of course...will always be you. Can you say it now?”

“I...have loved you...do in many ways...”

“God, that’s preventative medicine. No, don’t feel anything but that...no guilt, Semele. All right?”

“Yes.”

“Now the kiss.”

“Oh, Jeff...I don’t know if I--”

“Just the kiss...then I’m sending you down the hall.”

She glanced over at the rumpled bed the maids hadn’t done up yet. His eyes followed hers.

“No, my darling, I didn’t sleep with her...because I’m painfully in love...and because she’s very nice -- a little too serious -- and it wouldn’t have been fair at all to fuck around like that...pretending.”

“Oh, please...you don’t have to--”

He stroked her hair back away from her ears and said, “I’ve learned a few more things about love, actual love. The first is that yes, it really does exist -- I mean the kind I feel for you -- which is a startling revelation from a cynic like me...even more startling that I’m saying it now. The second is that although I’m standing here with a part of my body straining toward heaven I don’t have to use that part to feel for

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you the way I do. The third thing... Jesus! The third thing...the saddest thing, is if I had you now – this for the rest of time -- it would ruin all of us.

“Once I kissed you and had you all night long without saying much of anything. But behind all of those mute actions was what I have now...so I have to pay a price at last; and that’s to kiss you good-bye. The next time I see you it will still be love...and the time after that--”

Unable to bear any more, she raised her hands with an utterance of release and acquiescence, drawing his head down in accordance with his request. There at last was the feared and fatally answering mouth, warm and opening to all the pleasures she would always remember as having never quite occurred.

With her body held in his arms, he walked her dazed self to the door, opened it and said, “Go.”

She was lying on the bed with her hands behind her head when Rafael came in. Sitting down on the edge of the bed and leaning over her, his discerning brooding eyes examined her face.

“You have been crying.”

“I’ve been swimming,” she explained, rolling away from him and off the bed. “I got a lot of chlorine in my eyes.”

Walking to the bathroom mirror she studied her eyes and called out, “Oh, that’s why I hate swimming pools...all that damned Chlorine...and it ruins your hair.”

Coming back into the room, she found that he was removing his clothes for a quick shower. She reached up to help unbutton his shirt, and heard: “I have to go out again. You were invited, too, but I think you should stay here and rest. You look tired.” He hesitated, once again looking at her carefully. “Did you say good-bye to Jeff?”

“Yes, I did. And you know it turns out we weren’t so much of an imposition...I mean his coming here. He was on his way to Caracas. Although, of course, it was good of him to stop over to...to let you know about Higgins. I worry--”

“Semele?”

“I’m really very worried about that whole business. I just hope you won’t have to--”

“Semele.”

She knew she was talking too much, almost babbling, and she was trying to look at him very casually at the same time, but he was so perceptive, so very perceptive, and especially on this particular subject, that she felt he might as well be reading her mind.

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He dropped his head to one shoulder and simply stared at her with a tight comprehending smile. “Jeff came here for one reason, Semele, and that was...*is* you.”

“No, he was concerned for you, too. But me...yes, he’s always been like that. Once you’re employed there, you’re valuable company property...forever under the auspices of J.D. Smith & Associates.”

He lifted her idly stroking hand from his arm and said with a cool voice, “Have some food sent up to the room and just sleep. You need a lot of sleep when you feel...tired. We will be leaving early.”

She felt so utterly rejected that tears were actually welling up in her eyes yet one more time this combustible day. She turned away, absently folding clothes that had been flung over the chairs. Staying alone in this room could not have been a more disagreeable prospect, especially since Rafael seemed to think she needed solitude so badly.

She was still lying awake in painful rumination when he returned after midnight. Closing her eyes so as not to intrude upon his present disaffection, she listened to him in the bathroom peeing and brushing his teeth. The faucet ran as he sloshed water over his face. When he crawled under the covers and lay still without touching, she caught a whiff of alcohol. Remembering how he had moved heaven and earth to come to her in the night in Madera, she turned her face away and cried softly against her pillow. He must not discover her like that because he would only assume she was crying for another reason. And in truth perhaps that was part of it. All at once, without the supportive warmth to which she had grown so accustomed, everything seemed dark and dismal and hopeless. Gradually, tediously, she fell into a restless sleep.

The first nightmare she could ever remember very soon left her sitting up in bed, perspiring, eyes opened only to the dark threat, and with broken shrieks of terror rending the air – how could this ineffectually pleading voice that mewled and whimpered save her? Rafael was far away, gone forever. Some stalking figure had entered the room and was reaching for her throat. A terrible heavy darkness was now holding her down, and she was swiftly coming to an end.

“*Querida*, open your eyes...now...right now. Listen to me, you are dreaming.”

“What? Yes...awful. You were gone. You left me and some horrible blackness was...” She rubbed her eyes while he gently pushed her back against the pillows.

“Just calm down...*cálmate*...you were dreaming.”

Still only half conscious, and the half that was conscious besieged by alienation in both dream and reality, she cried out, “What have I done? Are you fed

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up at last? You've been so good...all because of poor Miguel. Oh God, should I go away and just let you--"

"Stop it, stop it! Please wake up. *Wake up!* Do you not realize, you *mujer disparatada*, I am completely obsessed with you...obsessing *over* you...and it is making me *loco*. I cannot do this. I cannot fucking do this!"

"I know, I know. I'll go...back to Seattle. I'll take Miguel and go back to Seattle. Somehow...somehow I'll figure out a way to go on working...I'll find a nanny for him and...I've always known we couldn't... Or I'll...or--"

"*¡Jesucristo, calle!* No more! No more! Ay, look what I have done to you. You think you have done something to *me*. What have I done to *you*? Goddammit, why do I care what Jefferson Davis Smith tells you?"

"No. No."

"*¡Sí!* For that one I am only an obstruction, the ruination of you. At least from time to time, you have to *live* with me, but *him* you can idealize. Are you happy when you are with him? Are you happy then?"

She switched on the bedside lamp and leapt out of bed, uncertain where she was going, rushing over the floor so swiftly she caught her foot, stumbling on his shoe, crying out and sprawling awkwardly upon the polished floor.

"*¡Por Dios!* I have made my gazelle into a clumsy sleepwalker. Are you all right?"

She chose to remain where she was in silence.

Dropping to the floor beside her, he scooped her prone body up in his arms, running his fingers over the base of her neck and inducing in her a dreamy tremor of arousal. In a sudden need to search the depths of her eyes, he pulled her head back by a wildly clutched fistful of hair.

"*¡Cristo!* I am going crazy with this love...this damned *love!* *Jesús*, Semele, can you know how I love you? Can you ever know? *¡Tú amo! ¡Tú amo!*"

"Darling, my darling love, please take me to bed...take me to bed and make love to me. I can't sleep at all without you...can't do *anything* without you. I was miserable when you left me alone. Please go on loving me...please, please never stop loving me."

XIV

The Altruist's Dilemma

*Love, you crave to enter Death's hot valley,
You crave to hold noon's sovereign fire at bay
(Light without shadow cannot long stay),
Descend instead upon this lonely eve;*

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*Extend flamed bones requited love's reprieve,
Wiser years will have you now, come lie with me,
But wake me when I dream of Man, and cry,
For truth was once a bold astronomy,
Now I must dream awake until I die.*

..... KMK

In early morning he lay awake, intending to let Semele sleep just a few minutes longer. With what was left of the night, they had taken such impassioned possession of one another that she was dead to the world. Perhaps he had dozed off for only a few minutes, but he would sleep on the plane. He was thinking now of this very complicated side road, not a detour but a parallel private path hardly known to the greatest number of his followers, well known to a few of his closest associates: the unforeseen path of Semele, never regretted and, uncharacteristically, never denied himself. Yet he had at last to come to terms with what he had denied *her*, and what he had always known: winning her love so deeply as to inspire total commitment, and with his own necessarily unpredictable life, he had very seriously altered, perhaps seriously damaged, not so much her chosen present as the prospects of her unconsidered future.

If he had not drunk a little too much with Jamil and his friends during their lively discourse last night, he might have kept silent about Smith. Now he grudged the man his unremitting sway over Semele. Jeff Smith was not at all uncomplicated and probably something of a mystery even to himself. It was that inviolable work-sanctioned dominance that first captured her, and of course his estimable value as an *homme du monde* that held her to him; yes, a sagacious man of the world, and self-made, or as the French said it, *l'artisan de sa fortune*, his mounting achievements earned by a willingness to engage in risk. Rafael had this same persevering risk-taking willfulness in himself, and knew it was a quality that fascinated Semele. She equated it with strength and virtue, however indirectly interpreted.

This beautiful animal force in his life -- now silent, satiate, slumbering peacefully withdrawn, her plundered lips slightly parted, her love-tangled sunrise of hair spilling over the pillow -- when only looked upon, caused such pain and dreadful longing in his heart that even now he could barely stand to let her go on sleeping.

He turned away and thought of what Mendoza had recently told him on his cell phone. There was an incipient problem. Insurgents, mostly those ousted from positions in the former government, were stirring up zealous migrants encouraged to flood across the borders on the heels of chaos, some already settling in La Ceiba,

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looking for work in the proposed mine. If jobs were not forthcoming an unleashing of crime would follow, brutalities always born of privation, idle unrest, and rancorous inequality. Mendoza had asked him to return immediately and speak to these unruly alien crowds, persuade them to settle down and temporarily accept the status quo, or return to their native lands and give the birthing nation a chance to formulate social programs for its deprived indigenous people. Nothing of the mine was to be mentioned, for when and wherever and *if* it occurred it was to exist solely for the livelihood of Maderans.

The acting president had told Rafael that he wished to have his own less artful public addresses reinforced, and that Rafael's undiminished popularity was invaluable, his persuasive eloquence before crowds precisely the motivation needed. Mendoza had of course a strong military bent, was a man who naturally delivered unpleasant news of necessarily harsh measures with the sparely qualified broad strokes of an impending campaign, this set before unregimented laymen. Experienced in the sweeping, generally unchallenged actions of the militarist, he had seldom dealt with the subtle nuances and readjustments required for social cohesion in times of relative peace. In soliciting Rafael's help, the forthright Mendoza was at least willing to concede something of his dilemma; even jauntily conceding it with a hearty belly laugh, a sanguine capitulation to his oft-professed exemplar, *el Arrojo*. The problem seemed far more soluble to Mendoza than it did to Rafael. A well-seasoned activist, he knew it would be no easy task to stand before a very hostile crowd with nothing much to offer, to glibly dissuade and reassure a contentious mass of belligerence while considered one of its impediments, and moreover do it in a vulnerably unofficial role. He was still awaiting a formal signing, solid confirmation of the water contract, having favorably addressed stipulations. This sudden added burden -- himself as a virtual NGO for strong government policy -- assured an emasculating divergence, an interruption perhaps harmful to the contract's sanction itself; disconcerting, very much so.

Finally, he knew that he could under no circumstance allow Semele to accompany him to Madera. But how could he explain this when Antoine and Mari would be at his side? It was once again as if to say that she was not a part of his life. On the contrary, his fortuitous companion, the multi-talented mother of his child, had become so much a part of his life that he could not countenance the thought of her endangerment, especially when it was a possibility he could easily prevent.

They had stopped in Barcelona to rather cruelly snatch cheerful Miguel from his aggrieved grandparents, and had to repeatedly promise frequent visits. Striding

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briskly beside Semele, her large shoulder bag stuffed with diapers and a bottle, Rafael had carried his wide-eyed son through the busy and prosaic Spanish airports -- they were flying to San Francisco via Madrid. Throughout their journey, Semele was full of amusing commentary: the newsmen-dodging, black-leather-jacketed activist, beneath his aloof and sullen distancing so attentively protective, tenderly cooing in Castilian and sometimes even Catalan to his captivating little dark-eyed reproduction -- feeling remiss, he had been thankful for the rich Spanish voices of his parents, briefly marking the subliminal *tabula rasa* of his developing son.

Now they were temporarily settled in a comfortable room in her parents' and Marion's home. They were having tea in the fire-lit white sitting room: Martha quite humorously discussing something arcane with Miguel, who gibbered and swayed in curious awe upon her lap, pointing at the fire; low-voiced but voluble Semele, describing memorable exploits in Madera to her father, leaving out the dangerous parts, some of which were known to him anyway; and smiling Rafael, standing with his hands in his pockets studying the colored photograph of a very young and petulant little redhead.

Martha looked up and said, "She was five years old and she wanted very much to climb to the top of that pyramid in Tikal. I could hardly restrain her."

"Sí, Martha, this is the one I know." Rafael turned around to smile at Martha and then Semele.

"Let me have my grandson now," George said, standing up and sauntering over the sapphire carpet to lift Miguel from Martha's lap. Rafael observed with keen pleasure the two of them fascinated with this lively extension of the family.

George settled Miguel upon his serge-covered knee, the child's hands fluttering up and down as his grandfather ran a pale thick-jointed finger over the tender cheek and said, "*Buenas tardes*, little one."

"Ah, *aquí se habla el español*. That is good," Rafael said with a grin of satisfaction that, if a little vaunting in approval, still contained a natural pride.

For a moment the child's searching eyes fastened on him from several feet away, the cheerful little mouth smiling at his recognized voice. Here is the beginning of the man, he thought, as we all began from our earliest measure, in this small helpless body with its irrational, fragile, exploring mind. How will his life pattern itself? What will shape his thought? Proclivities of me, of Semele, our ancestors, of multiple stimuli we cannot foresee. Settled into the cushioned white sofa next to Semele, where her father had previously been sitting, he pondered the possibilities.

"So you didn't have much luck with Brad," Martha said.

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“Oh yes we did, Rafael did...a few outright suggestions and strong innuendo...and that very forceful influence of genetic wiring...the whole persuasive ligature of Rafael.”

“I am a ligature?” Rafael said with laughter, imagining himself wired as a Giacometti figure, spare and skeletal.

She touched his denim knee with her fingertips, her *azul* eyes scolding him, so that he was strongly moved to kiss that voluptuously teasing mouth, as he frequently did when she was heady with sly pleasure or adroit criticism.

He leaned back, taking in Martha and George with a more serious expression.

“Brad is a useful intelligent human being. Those academic venues bankrupted by his absence – without the chance to know any such thing – would do well to have him in their employ. Everywhere, and especially in this country of so many other kinds of riches, there is serious scarcity of sound reasoning. It is not taught...in fact considered dangerous. Truth, logic, and reason are given no value. The intangible has no value...save where myth is concerned. Everyone wants to be a dilettante, or worse a principal in some shallow scheme that has only money at its root. And those who cannot think, have never been taught to think, are the willing victims.”

“How right you are. Oh, I wish Marion were here to participate in this *tertulia*...isn't that the word, Rafael?”

“*La tertulia, sí*. I have grown up with this kind of talk...intellectual discussion, often in my parents' home.”

“Did you say Marion is in Vienna, Mama?”

“Yes...another conference. It's her way of escape, dear...her way of dealing with boredom. Perhaps she does some good. Who knows? We all pretend so...as your father and I audaciously imagine we're of some use. At least you can see the result of your actions, Rafael.”

“Very minor in the scheme of things but--”

“I wouldn't say returning a river to its people is minor...their life force minor?” Semele interposed.

“It can easily be taken away again, without vigilance. Madera has a well-intentioned leader now. He needs to be supported and encouraged. It is an unending process.

“But returning to Brad: Perhaps you two could use your professorial influence, *sí*, your tenure, to reinsert him in some useful place.”

“Brad has good credentials,” George said. He had been holding Miguel high in the air with both arms locked, and now set the teased and squealing child back on his lap. “Certainly, we could all help...if he's ready.”

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"I think we'll visit him again when we get back to Seattle," Semele mused. "I have to get a few things in order at my house and then—"

"Are you going to Madera with Rafael, Semele?" Martha interrupted with a surprised and worried voice. "You'd have to leave Miguel with us. What else could you do? Surely you'll stay at home."

"No/sí." Semele and Rafael said at once.

Damn, he swore to himself, not this now. He thought of the most inarguable response.

"We cannot expect you to baby-sit Miguel for an unknown length of time. Of course Semele will stay home with him."

"No, I'll take him with me," Semele quickly answered.

He saw how agitated she had become, but still had to respond with a firm, rather assertive voice that he tried to soften. "No, you cannot do that. You know it, *querida*."

"We'll talk about this later," Semele said in a voice of pointed warning.

"Semele, dear, please don't take Miguel to Madera," Martha implored, quite willing to intercede. "No, you must not take him, Semele," George at once reinforced.

"She will not," Rafael answered with certainty. He knew that in the offing was an argument that could turn bitter. And he knew that beneath all of the heat was fear, Semele's fear for him. For the hundredth time, he cursed this predicament precipitated by his selfish love.

Later, alone in their room where sleepy Miguel was put down nearby in a new crib, Rafael's warning voice carried a presupposition of Semele's intent. "Please do not raise your voice and cause a scene here. Please no argument now, my love." He held her rigid back against him and kissed her temple, feeling at last that he was winning her away from dissension by the clear ebbing of her sullenness, the steady softening of flesh and attitude, his fingers stroking her breasts, his lips reading her pulsing neck; intentionally winning her, but his mollifying kisses leaving a thorough satisfaction in his hands and body; need undiminished, an overriding magnetism as powerful now as at the beginning of their relationship; so that he or she could ultimately do this to the other, do it until, for a time far too short, they were released from provocative commitments, into sheer pleasure. And always what stood, like a solidly redeeming object beyond the varied passions of the moment, was the unshakeable foundation of profound mutual veneration.

Rising early in search of coffee, while Rafael played with Miguel in their bed, Semele fluttered down the back stairs to the kitchen in her white satin pajamas.

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Hearing voices below, Rafael dressed himself in a rapid manner, throwing on Levi's and dark green shirt and carrying Miguel down the narrow old servants' stairs. He did not want to leave Semele and her mother enough time alone to unsettle crucial matters, to possibly *fix* anything that could not be undone. He stood a moment in the back hall with an angled view of the kitchen, listening and adjusting his thought. Regretted, but overarching every presently spent moment, was an uneasiness that dropped into his consciousness from time to time, settling over large and small diversions now woven into the relentless pattern of his unyielding public life.

Apparently Martha and the housekeeper, Gretchen, were preparing coffee, toast, sliced oranges and bananas.

"Oh, Mama, that's not the way you peel an orange. You should see how Rafael does it. You'd remember it always."

"I'm sure a lot of people remember many talents of your man, my daughter, but oranges?...sounds rather subjective."

Rafael smiled at the heavysset Gretchen's debunking loud laughter. She was a firm member of the family, a hearty old German factotum who from time to time voiced pithy opinions.

"Your father is still sound asleep...it's what comes of staying up half the night talking," Martha quipped.

"Then you should be sleeping, too, Mama. Gretchen and I could have rustled up something."

Rafael glimpsed the visible half of a fatigued Martha, disheveled but still handsome -- or more handsome owing to her languidly unstudied condition --, retying her loosened black robe as she spoke. "I'm here especially to relate our midnight discussion...or debate...or whatever it was."

"Oh, I see."

"Darling, we very much wish you would not go to Madera, wish in fact that Rafael weren't going either. But you cannot take Miguel with you. You must realize that. I've always known you to be reasonable."

"I hope I still am. It was more of a sudden response, a flimsy tactic really. Rafael knows that...and he knows I have to go."

"If you absolutely must go -- of course we do see the importance of maintaining your independence in that worthy cause -- if you must go, then we'll keep Miguel here. We can take turns watching over him. We'll somehow manage our schedules to accommodate...and you know we have Gretchen here -- this saucy old fixture comes in mighty handy (a squeeze of Gretchen's shoulder) -- and Marion will soon be home to help out. No, no, wait, don't argue. After all, his Catalan grandparents have had him. Now it's our turn."

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“Oh, but that was a very short period of time. This might be...well, longer.”

“Nevertheless, we can do it...we’re willing to do it. You’ve seen how your father loves Miguel, and you know that I adore him. We’ll work it out, Semele.”

“Work what out?” Rafael asked, feigning ignorance as he stepped into the kitchen with squealing Miguel.

“Poor Miguel. Dotty grandparents are after him again,” Semele said with a half yawn, half sigh. She kissed Miguel and touched her finger to the tip of his button nose.

Miguel threw back his head and stared up wide-eyed at his father, almost aghast, as if sensing Rafael’s changed mood. The dark cast of Rafael’s face indeed precipitated a few seconds of heavy silence all around.

“I am sorry, Martha, but our son is going to Seattle with us. I want to have him until...until I must leave.”

“Yes, he’s just fascinated with you, Rafael...isn’t it interesting how very thrilled and good-natured he is when you hold him? He can sense your moods very deftly.”

Rafael pushed a thin dark curl away from Miguel’s eyes and kissed his forehead then handed him to Semele.

“His mother has the same effect,” he said to Martha.

As if to refute this, Miguel immediately gathered his rigidly tensed body into a wail of protest.

“Eh, *no, chiquitín, no llores,*” Rafael soothed with a laugh. “No crying, lucky one...this is your mother.”

“He senses my mood, too,” Semele fretted in a woeful voice, hugging Miguel, swaying with him to halt the crying.

He did not want to acknowledge her innuendo, certainly not contemplate all that it presaged, and so stepped over to Gretchen to have his cup filled with hot black coffee.

Just then George entered the kitchen, fingering back unkempt hair and tugging at the ties of his loose wine robe. “Give that poor child to me at once,” he said, his emphatic rescue a touching comedy of adoration. Laughter pealed from the others as he reached for Miguel and snatched away the warm bottle Semele had been about to give her howling son.

Nothing had been settled by the time they landed in Seattle, both appearing reluctant to broach the subject of Madera; Rafael certainly knew himself to be reluctant. They had lain in bed this first morning back in Semele’s house, laughing at

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the lyrical strains of jabber emanating from Miguel's crib. Semele called it self-entertainment, and thought also that he might be calling to his false-hearted feline friend. Catney, peeking cautiously around corners before entering rooms, had made himself scarce at the sudden reappearance of this threatening, doted-upon and noisy little rival invading his territory.

Semele settled against Rafael and, with a crimped frown of sudden recall, skimmed her lips gently over the rose scar below his shoulder while he stroked his fingers through her hair. He actually felt not the scar's minimal sensitivity but the sharp edge of her transferred anguish.

"Does that hurt?"

"Your mouth hurt?" he chided, aiming for diversion. "Only when you criticize my divided attention."

"What? I don't criticize your *divided* attention."

"Then only when you lie?"

"You're playing with me."

"I want to play with you. Ah, what are you doing now?" He watched with fascination as the crimson shower of hair spread over his taut belly. "I thought we were getting up."

"I'm getting you up."

"Ah! ¡Jesús, Semele! ¡Sí, sí, sí!"

Later in the shower they quietly scrubbed and lathered each other with a rough bar of rosemary soap then, with wordless solemnity, rinsed their bodies. He stood behind her in an intense moment of appreciation and recurring desire, succumbing to a predilection no less mitigated by the previous hour of lovemaking. As he grasped her waist and lifted her onto him, he held back laughter at her soft cry of surprise. Taking her hands, he placed his hands over them, bracing them both against the tile wall.

At the curving right angle where long alabaster neck joined pale shoulder, he rested his chin and said to the surprised half-smile of her profile, "You are such a fecund temptation I cannot leave you alone. I want to make a little girl in you...a little red-haired copy of the moon goddess. Should we do that?"

She threw back her head without answering until, as his body pulsed against her, she had sorted out a breathless, uneven response. "My God. Oh, Rafael...I...oh...have a...oh, have a little son who doesn't even...look like me."

"All...the...more...reason," he muttered, losing his thought as he rocked deeply into the plush heat of her.

They progressed with intentional slowness, savoring each new stimulus, each delicious tremor, finally moving with increasing aggression into a feverishly sought

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climax that left them incoherent, silent. He turned her around hastily, to catch her sated expression dissolving in dazed satisfaction, so exhilarating. Then, trying to assemble exactly what he had meant to say, he reasserted his thought.

“It was you who first spoke of the next one.”

She leaned into his kiss, laying her head on his chest to catch her breath while a fine warm spray fell over them.

“Have you...*you* considered population?”

“We are still only replacing ourselves.”

“Rafael, is it that you want me to stay home with babies? Is that what it is?”

“*No*. It is that I love making children with you...not to hurt you -- I hate that part -- to *love* you...you as a mother...so wonderful as a mother. I even like myself as a father, unworthy as I am. ; *Cristo!* the hell with biological necessity, chromosomal imperative. I will have you and let our besotted genes go their besotted ways -- one more time? I think I want a little more of your flesh running around.”

“It’s why I love Miguel so completely, so devotedly. Because he’s *your* flesh.”

“*Our* flesh.”

“But especially because of this elusive wild Catalan, this...oh, this intractable *Rafael Arnau i Roca*.”

“And because of the only living myth...fiery disciple of Pythagoras...exhaustively involved with secret numbers.”

“Involved with a man half a sort of reformed Ovid, and half a stern Marcus Aurelius.”

For a moment considering the sensualist Roman poet, presently in Semele’s revised version -- which meant that Ovid’s touted coitus had been elevated to love --, and the wise and most prolifically stoic emperor who struggled with wars, he said, “That is all right, too.”

While Semele was chatting on the phone with Marion, newly returned from besieged Tiranë, and then visiting with her neighbor, Dora, he had spent the morning writing a long letter he intended to place in Brad Taylor’s safekeeping.

Now they were on their way to Brad’s country house, and he was driving in the silence of heavy thought. He glanced over at Semele who had her head back, her eyes closed. Poor beauty. Once again he had worn her out with his exigent, always generously reciprocated love-making. In the rear-view mirror he could see Miguel securely and peacefully slumbering in his new car seat. His son was at last to be introduced to Semele’s extraordinary distant cousin, a caring man compromised by the indifference of what might as well comprise the entire world. He strongly appreciated

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the fierce honesty of that tormented recluse; a torment he readily understood and hoped to play a part in alleviating.

He was pondering Semele's accusation, perhaps more accurate than he wished to admit: that he wanted her to stay home with babies. Even though he had discovered how he loved to make children with her, most certainly it was also an unconscious desire to keep her safe. In his hazardous company, in his self-imposed peregrinations to places where life was marginal, he could *not* keep her safe, any more than he, as he had always known, could keep himself safe. But even more of a cruel paradox: he wanted, would probably even admit to himself *needed* to have her with him, and at times almost at all costs. How else could he interpret such an unquenchable desire, except as selfishness?

"Well, you were certainly accurate, Semele. This little replication is nothing if not its father."

While Semele offered her I-told-you-so smile, Rafael, looking down at the giggling, squealing Arnau i Roca issue carried in his arms, provided Brad with his usual protest.

"Eventually your judgment will be disproved...and you will find that Semele, too, is in this little head. Already I have seen signs of her -- look how Miguel laughs at me."

"Oh, he's so cute. Hello, Miguel, hello, Miguel. May I hold him?" Sarah begged. Still shy but bouncing forward on her leather clogs with enthusiasm, she stood in rolled Levis and red plaid shirt, holding out her arms for Miguel.

Rafael handed over cheerfully waving Miguel, tucking his fallen blanket back around him and looking up to find a discerning glint in Brad's eye.

Sarah, cooing and clucking with the innate nurturing response of an overwhelmed fastidious mother hen, hurried off to settle herself and Miguel in an old rocking chair. It had been newly placed before a window letting in the late spring sun at the far end of the keeping room.

As his eyes followed her, Brad spoke aside. "For God's sake, please refrain from exciting her maternal instincts. So far it's been only kittens, puppies, colts...but this is far beyond my capability."

"I would not have believed it beyond your capability," Rafael said, his head angled back with a mischievous grin.

As they followed Brad into the keeping room, where reflections of a snapping fire danced on the hearth, and the big red setter lay slowly swishing his tail, Semele

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gently teased, "You could make a darling baby, Brad...a long and slender little ectomorph, predisposed to Wittgenstein."

"Christ, Semele, what has happened to your sensible scholarly head?"

"I did mention Wittgenstein," Semele responded with laughter.

"Ludwig and babies have little in common."

"Oh, but remember he sometimes studied the way language works by observing children," Semele protested.

"You are not going to win this argument," Rafael said with the pleasure of certainty.

Brad was cautiously edging toward them holding small over-full glasses of sherry.

Semele and Rafael sipped their drinks together on the red leather sofa. Brad was sprawled in his oversized wing chair, his long solemn face barren of emotion but hiding some weighted, steadily measured function, like the closed door of a ticking tall-case clock. With his stocking feet balanced on the leather footrest and his hand idly turning the glass resting atop his plaid-covered belly, he lifted his chin off his chest to face Rafael.

"So you are on your way to Madera," he speculated, striking at the core of a present difficulty. Rafael flinched inwardly; from the offset he had intended to segue as soon as possible into Brad's worthwhile prospects.

"Sí. By the way, I had an interesting discussion with your San Francisco relatives. They would like you to have a nice sinecure. Ah, I can see that you are not happy with this. I did ask Semele not to involve me, but of course I recognize the worth of you...and the waste of you. There are not enough Brad Taylors around to have the original disengaged *you* left to dissipate -- forgive this hasty pragmatism, but right now you are not very comfortable in any event."

"You're relentless."

"Very possibly Semele and I will seem to be relentless, but only to your advantage."

Brad drained his glass and glared at them, red-faced and with fierce Nordic eyes of a deeper blue than Semele's.

"Is this what I have to put up with just to have a live viewing of the Taylor de Arnau i Roca offsprings?"

Semele slid off her loafers and swung her tan-slacked legs up onto the sofa, folding them snugly beneath her with a deft gracefulness. Watching her gathering response, Rafael saw that, even with Brad's sharp indication of an imminent explosion, she was not in the least disabused of supporting his own candid approach.

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“Papa would say you resemble the madly vengeful Peter O’Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*, about to cry: *No prisoners!*”

“You know very well George *has* said that, and more than once. Don’t be too colorful or clever -- you’ve no need to further dazzle your husband...one can see that.”

“You know why you’re so angry, Brad?”

“Is this going to be a Socratic invasion of privacy, a two-barreled attempt at shooting me with my own bullets?”

“You’re so angry because presently you dislike yourself.”

Slamming down his hastily emptied glass on the side table and slapping his knees, Brad uttered a very hard enunciation: “Ah, I was right. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Semele said, sweetly unruffled. She rose for a moment to kneel and stroke the setter, who had lifted his head to whimper at the harsh voice of his master.

“What’s expected now? Am I supposed to throw myself down before you in disgusting repentance and surrender? Let me tell you something,” Brad said, glancing at Sarah softly humming a lullaby, and lowering his voice considerably. “I have been thinking of marrying Sarah Brandon. Yes, that one over there dandling your prodigy on her child-like knee. I know what I’ve repeatedly said in the past, but goddammit, her hypocritical drunk of a father is a Catholic chock full of idiotic sin. He swears I’ve wronged her. For Christ’s sake,” he swore in a harsh whisper, “she was sleeping with that imbecilic tavern owner -- the complete epitome of a moron -- just to keep her worthless job. But not one mention of *that* situation has been made in the sanctimonious Brandon family. The poor girl was paying her parents room and board...and working weekends at a riding school just to board that damned hay-burner.”

“Why Brad, you’ve rescued her...you’ve done something genuinely heroic. I’m really proud of you.”

“No, don’t say heroic...a term, I believe, reserved for your husband. Unfortunately...” His voice died away, and Rafael knew he had meant to deplore the fate of reformers.

“If you are seeking approval of nuptials, I think you have ours,” Rafael said, quelling the laughter rising in his throat. Brad’s crotchety, sarcastically droll admission was easily construed as a cry for support and understanding.

“Ah, but wait,” Brad resumed, leaning forward with a softened, confidential voice. “Can you imagine the new little wife -- naïve, artless, a vulnerable target for every cruel arrow -- plunked down in the supercilious milieu of academia? Goddammit!”

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“Oh Brad, your heart is as big as this whole place. I had no idea what an old softie you are.” Semele jumped up, managing to plant a kiss on his gaunt dry cheek while he pretended to fend her off.

“Jesus, I’ve never gotten much of anything that I wanted in life -- oh, I’ve turned a few minds, traveled around a bit, seen the world...can’t complain on that score. But as to luck of any kind, hell. I *will* have her.” His emotion-charged near whisper grated like coarse sandpaper. “I’ve grown...well, really very fond of...well, goddammit, I *am* going to have her, even if -- very likely -- I have nothing else of merit in my life.

“We like Sarah...she has a very natural intelligence,” Rafael soothed, modulating his voice to a softness that would not carry across the room. “She would be an asset to you in any milieu...s¹, Brad, a most valuable mate...capable of dealing with much more than you imagine...of learning anything you or any wise person will teach her. She cares for you in a very beneficial way for both of you. And, *amigo*...” Rafael hesitated then went on, “it is very clear that you love her...that you need her.” He knew his sympathy for Brad resonated as he locked eyes with Semele.

Their discursive dinner conversation was heartily enjoyed, humorous banter interspersed with sharp criticism charging over world situations; and the filling dinner itself enjoyed -- Sarah’s second dedicated attempt at an entertaining meal. The savory rich Hunter’s stew of rabbit with potatoes and pearl onions in very dark red wine sauce had proved a success, although the potatoes, roasted first and then dropped into the stew, had gone a bit soft. Still, the herbed spicy wine flavor of the sauce combined with the tender deboned pieces of pan-browned rabbit was excellent. Their glasses steadily refilled with burgundy produced enough conviviality to have engendered praise of much less.

“She’s baked this dill cheese bread,” Brad said, biting into a thick slice. “Delicious hot.”

“Yes, it *is* delicious. I can’t understand how you stay so thin,” Semele remarked as she laid a stripped little missed bone on her plate rim. She touched her napkin to her mouth and smiled at Sarah over the flickering candles.

“It’s worry,” Brad said. He chased the word with a dismissive laughter that somehow turned anxiety into an asset -- something meant to keep him thin and contentious, a persona now habitual, but which Rafael saw as a masking affectation. *He continues to see himself as a failure.*

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Then, with another pouring of wine, Brad suddenly touched his glass to Sarah's and said, "And lovemaking. Lovemaking keeps you thin." Sarah blushed painfully.

After generous servings of warm cherry pie à la mode, Brad threw another alder log on the fire, and they relaxed in their former seats, digesting their supper and staring at the rising sparks in silence. Sarah was in the kitchen with Miguel, opening a jar of his applesauce, but soon returned to her rocker, apparently thrilled at spooning wayward amounts into his unaccommodating and messy little mouth.

"What a good mother...a really good mother you are," Semele called across the room. Sarah looked up with a dreamy smile and then dropped her attentive head back over wriggling Miguel. Her devotion to such helpless innocence bespoke the same strong inclination as Semele's tenderness for her son, an animal imperative but no less a definition of good. This speculation led to scrutiny of Semele. Her eyes lingered on Miguel. Rafael recalled a recent comment she had made, reviewing it here as he studied her:

"I often try to picture Miguel at maturity, shaped by experience and striding with fits and starts and turnings over his short allotment of time. Watching him struggle into life, I see how his infancy proves what I myself proved as a child: how very connected we are to our simple animal beginnings...and how dangerous it is to forget this." "Sí, of course," he had answered, quite in tune with her keen observation. But he most cherished how, still thinking of their son's future, she had so aptly followed up with a generalized summation as clear and deep as any wise maxim: *I think a love of limited space -- wherever our feet first stumble -- shapes our desires; then some of us strive for more, reaching for the stars, finding order in chaos -- it is hoped in an informed and considerate manner. But only by valuing...by acting upon that first love of place can we preserve all of this...can our children really make a long future...on this miracle planet or anywhere in the universe.* She laughed and said, "What an idealist I am." He protested with a tempering response, "No, no, *querida*, you are really talking about choice...there is still the possibility of a sustaining future...if chosen; so simple and so difficult."

From Sarah and Miguel she turned her pondering eyes to him, and perhaps for a moment they were thinking along similar lines, but he could see that once again the wine was making her contentedly float. Then her gaze tightened as she sought to concentrate on what Brad was saying.

"You see, no one cares about philosophy anymore...if they ever did. Good God, certainly *not* about Wittgenstein. He is really above philosophy, having passed a very accurate and useful judgment upon its arcane and closed systems. Few are able to realize...will take the time or have the ability to understand what he has said...yes,

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mostly uttered in his forgotten classes...or written on scraps of paper. But the whole basis of language and the way it works, or does not work, can be found in his explication: without the words of clear thought there can be no clear expression, no clear communication, no feasible attempt to understand anything.”

“Isn’t that where you come in?” Semele asked. She and Rafael simultaneously shook their heads, refusing the port that an impassioned Brad had reached for and held up. He uncorked the bottle and poured himself a small tumbler.

“I’m no longer useful...no one wants to *know*. They prefer to speak and write in meaningless rambling sentences as muddled as their illogical thought; shallow statements unknowingly followed by contradiction...Jesus, one stupidity begets another. No wonder humanity falls prey to so many delusional traps. Everywhere we find only the hilarious assumptions of *Alice In Wonderland*, tricked-up speeches, specious nonsense constantly taken seriously. Lord, the ignorance of the interlocutors! Verbal mongrels biting their own tails. My God, our own educational system has admitted that thirty-four percent of the population is functionally illiterate. Ah well, if these hapless students are interested in anything perhaps it’s John Stuart Mill: *The greatest good for the greatest number*.”

“Why do you not begin with a course on how to think clearly?” Rafael proposed, even though he had something else in mind. Ultimately he would be more persuasive if he first allowed Brad to cancel out his array of possibilities.

“Perhaps I could teach informal logic; that might get their engines running. But the parroting of fallacy is so prevalent that few can even grasp the need for using logic to arrive at truth. And this makes them indiscriminate, vulnerable to every chicanery and lie...the good and the beautiful enthusiastically replaced by the bad and the meretricious. No, there’s really no place for me.”

Rafael stood up and walked to the long plank table that held the tray with the port bottle and glasses. Deftly, but with unconsidered effort, he uncorked the bottle and poured the dark fortified wine into a glass. Holding it up to the fire to enjoy its deep crimson glow, he then took a sip and looked out at Semele with a questioning gaze.

“No thank you,” she said, watching him and knowing, waiting, he saw, for the forthcoming solution, fully shaped.

He carried the bottle to Brad and refilled his glass, smiling as he did so.

“What have you got up your sleeve now?...it’s certainly something, you sly devil.”

Setting his glass down and returning to Semele, Rafael sat with his hand lightly stroking her thigh.

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“Sí, it is something, Brad. A gift. I will tear the wrapping. Inside is what you already possess. With your special interest, particular background, I am surprised you have not already used it...both a great satisfaction and a great need: You must teach the meaning of *environmental ethics*. I will help make it possible.”

Semele had gone out to commune with her horse, Chancy, and Sarah was cleaning in the kitchen, while Miguel slept snugly tucked into the middle of Brad’s large upstairs bed, its giant bolsters fencing him in.

Brad, alive with this provocative new unveiling of Rafael’s, sat pondering into the flames; occasionally his voice matched darting thoughts presenting larger and larger possibilities. Perhaps he had considered something similar in the past, yes, vaguely, but having his unfocused idea made clear and viable had precipitated a whole new agenda, now settling ever more firmly into place.

It was at this moment that Rafael went to his leather jacket and withdrew the sealed envelope containing the letter he had written that morning. It was to Semele.

“I am asking you to put it safely away and give it to her only if at some time in the future something should happen to me,” he said very matter-of-factly to Brad.

“My God, that’s sinister. Deeply sorry I ever implied any such result.”

Rafael laughed as he sprawled on the creaking red leather sofa. “You are not clairvoyant...or a soothsayer. Only I can allow such a thing to happen...by my presence in the wrong place...where I am mostly found.”

Brad sat forward in his chair with a drawn and very telling expression of regret on his normally stoic face.

“So, you’re starting that again.”

“I cannot start anything *again*, since I have never stopped...speaking of the language of *Alice In Wonderland*.”

“I assume you’re not taking her along.”

“No, I am not...and please do not mention this.”

“Christ. So I am to be a party to this...this awful deception. Then if something happens...she would never forgive me if anything should happen to--”

“If anything should happen with Semele along she might very well not be alive either. Think about that.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll do exactly as you say.”

“Good. I thank you. I like my life – more than ever because of her – and I hope I will not make it too easy to prematurely finish it. It is only a precaution. Because you see, I cannot say anything now...cannot stir things up. Semele is very strong and forceful, incredibly persuasive. I am not certain I could refuse her if she

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wanted to come along. She has already spoken of leaving Miguel with her parents. It sounds so simple that at times I have almost given in. But I will not. You probably realize that the best way to handle this is to say nothing.”

“You’re just going to leave?”

“Sí, *amigo*, I am.”

“But what are you heading into, and why do you need to go there? Isn’t there a better government now?”

“Right now things are a little uncertain in Madera. Mendoza has the people, but there is a dangerous faction being encouraged to make trouble. Mendoza has played this down in order to have the water contract. But those who want quick gain are about to be armed – few principals outside the country yet realize this – armed probably in part by the company doing the water infrastructure.”

“My God! How can that be?”

“They would like nothing better than to see the return of the old regime. There is a very beautiful agricultural valley they want to tear apart with a mining operation.”

“Semele told me about the river...how you brought it back to the farmers...how you made water more available for everyone. To me, holed up here in relative tranquility, it sounds like a perilous heroic saga...an incredible piece of near fiction...of warring good and evil.”

“Sí, it is war but not fiction.”

“But that you would do such a thing seems--”

“Because of the water I have a certain following there. Mendoza wants me to use that influence to allay the fears of the people...and to either persuade the insurgents and foreign troublemakers to concede, or turn his majority against them and drive them out. I believe we have succeeded, or will succeed, in getting the water project confirmed...ay, by doing business with the devil. As to my usefulness for Mendoza, I continue to struggle with this. I can hardly refuse to do my part if it will help to stabilize the country. I do not flatter myself that I can do very much, but I cannot refuse to try.”

Brad dropped his chin into his hands, then rubbed his fingers across his commiserating face and lifted his head.

“I’ve heard of only a very few like you, Rafael, and I was skeptical of those. Never known one before. God, how I’ve whined at my own failings. How do you keep on?”

“I am not much different from you...except perhaps I am more relentless in *means to end*.”

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“Oh, you’re different all right...and far from the typical inactive bleeding heart. I wonder what drives you.”

“Each one of us decides what he or she will be and do. *No* overt decision is always a decision, a decision to yield. There is no purpose until an active decision is made, the purpose one has chosen. It is really quite powerful. No one can do that for you. You motivate yourself, with clear reason. Once done you apologize to no one; you have only yourself to blame if you do not keep going. But most often you *want* to keep going. Over yourself you have quite a lot of control, even as you prize life and even to your death. But you must always value life on the planet and the planet itself as an entirety...value the least of those who walk this earth, value your own life as theirs. Their bigotry and ignorance, even their animal instinct to kill the stranger in their midst, cannot matter in your decision to care for them. Life is very short, so you must always teach others to carry on. You strive toward a future time when humans will have evolved to a reasonable, reasoning state -- this project is unending. Meanwhile, there is no guarantee that a pandemic or a nuclear war or an abused planet or even a galactic alteration will not annihilate us.”

Upon their return and when sleepy Miguel was put into his crib, Rafael said, “Let us not talk about anything. Let us just make love.”

“I’m too tired to talk anyway.”

Semele was charily indefinite, choosing to be enigmatic instead of argumentative. Without interfering, he watched her tug off her clothes and stride toward the shower.

“Do you want me in there?”

“It’s going to be quick,” she called.

“Then I will shower next and meet you in bed.”

Was she pretending to sleep he wondered as his freshly bathed body slid between the crisp sheets. He drew her against him, the warm moist sweetness of her also faintly emitting one of her tropical fragrances, frangipani or freesia. Her slightly damp russet hair fell around her in the rose night light, spilling over the reseda-green pillow like the dark coils of a rushing wild river.

“I’m so tired.” Her voice was unconvincing. Could she sense his imminent solitary departure? Was her refusal of self an attempt to prolong their short time together?

“You cannot be that tired. You did nothing but sit around all day talking and eating -- for that I was glad. You did not even ride Chancy. Is it the alcohol?”

“Oh, a little...but, no, it’s--”

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“Are you tired of *me*?”

She pulled herself away and rolled onto her back, then moved nearer him, studying his face.

“Never, never...oh, never. I only wonder...”

He kissed her rose-lit white shoulder, a dispersion of pale, pale freckles now invisible. “What?”

“How I can love you so...go on like this when I know you’re going to...to betray me?”

“Betray you? That is dramatic...very literary. How am I going to do that?”

Silence. Her body rolled away again, as if she must distance her sinister thoughts from his blameless purpose.

“Please come here. Come back to me. There is no betrayal ever...not of you, my self-indulgence. You, the extravagance I could never deny myself...for that I beg your forgiveness. I hope you are not thinking it was a mistake. I will never think it. Right now I want only to share a lot of pleasure, always better than before...in our own special ways...here and now with my entire self for you.”

“Oh, I love you so...but how can I answer?”

“Do not...do not answer. There was no question.”

He kissed the palm of her hand and lay with quiet thoughts of evasion, not wanting to go anywhere near the betrayal thing. He knew it was still going on in her head and, of course, had to do with his leaving her.

“Jeff has reliable information that if you go to--”

“Jeff only wants to salve his conscience in case he should have you.”

“How can you say that? He’s really come to care for you. It isn’t just me. It *isn’t*. If you don’t care about yourself it’s the same as not caring about us, isn’t it?”

“No. None of that is the case. I care about you and Miguel and I care about my own life. But you seem to have forgotten that what I am about to do is what I always do.”

“Then I’m going to come with--”

“Please stop talking about this. *Please*.”

“Then let me only say that it isn’t what you think: that I can’t live without being constantly near you. It’s so much more. You’ve opened a door for me that neither of us can close. I want to go with you and do what you do because I believe in you...in what you’re doing. It’s the right thing to do...what I’ve always wanted.”

“I understand. Our son would not.”

For several minutes a heavy silence hung over them. Finally he turned a calm face to her and offered himself by way of a single sentence: “I am thinking in English.”

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“You know...when you speak this language foreign to you, *English*, your speech is almost high-flown, almost--”

“No, it is only that we are both intelligent and we can speak intelligently to each other.”

“Yet it’s something more...you often sound a little ambiguous...ironic...and...as heartrending as a poet. I think you *are* a sort of rebel poet...soulful, creative in that way. I’d give a great deal to know...just for a moment to *feel* what it’s like inside your head.”

He laughed, taking her head in his hands and waiting for a wailing police siren to diminish. “But this head is more interesting. Beneath this red silk, this white skin, this delicate skull, lies an intricate map, and out on its perimeter are a few new roads I have made. I am always on those roads...always. Remember that.”

“Incredible...see how you verify my assertion.”

“As you verify mine of intelligence.”

He thought how she excited him, and that it was because she persistently maintained her own personality, had never adapted herself to his habits and means of expression, as other women had tried to do. At the beginning, he had said he did not want to know too much about her, fearing stifling familiarity. Almost at once, he saw that it was not in her to mold herself to anyone, even as much as she could know him, anticipate him, and that she was an endless depth of singular Semele. Antoine and Mari were like brother and sister. They knew each other so well there were always the same mannerisms, the same interchangeable expressions, predictable habits. But with Semele there was that rich mystery, out of which sprang informed spontaneity, continual surprises from an insightful individuality. Much of this was owing to a thoughtfully devoted upbringing, her parents encouraging a sharply inquisitive, very honest personality; sophisticated yet natural and unaffected. His indulgent parents, although more limited by certain nearly unconscious traditions, had done something of the same thing. They had left him his final shaping by allowing him to objectify his early willfulness – fortunately a positive accomplishment. He had swiftly seen how Semele resembled him in humanitarian motivations and untainted individuality. Paradoxically, it was the undiscovered, the nearly unobtainable, that drew them so fiercely and steadfastly together.

He ran his hand down the length of her body and pulled her abruptly against him. Feeling an immediate and supple consent, he responded with an aggressive hunger; a hunger that persisted, never long quelled because of ever fluxing impulse. Together they pleased each other, answering the acute desires of agile bodies insatiably entwined. Soft avowals, sometimes sharply uttered cries of satisfaction,

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echoed within the exploring silences of unrestrained need. This exclusive lovemaking was to continue through much of the briefest of nights.

In the very early morning when she had returned from the bathroom and was just drifting into a leaden sleep, he whispered against her ear, "Please know that I am grateful for all that you have given me. Please know that."

She lifted her head and said in a slowly stirring voice, "Rafael, what--"
"No, go to sleep, *querida mía*. I love you. Go to sleep."

XV

"This is *my* morning, *my* day begins:
Rise up now, rise up, great noontide!"

THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA. . . .Friedrich Nietzsche

He stood on a street corner with his thick-strapped black leather satchel hanging from his shoulder. The corner was a block away from Semele's house, sufficient distance for the taxi driver to safely pick him up -- he had feared a honking horn. Stretching below lay thinly fog-muffled Puget Sound and, swimming atop the fog line in the distance, rose the monolithic profile of snowy Mount Rainier. A widening streak of light on the eastern horizon had begun to break through the intermittent cloud bank, illuminating a sky mostly rolled in gray. Floating moist night airs were just departing sleeping Queen Anne Hill, bathing his face with tiny prickles of refreshing salty mist.

Before leaving he had gone in to look at Miguel. The child's healthy little cheeks were flushed with sleep, and Rafael gently drew his soft white wool blanket around him, lifting the black curls away from his eyes. Afraid to awaken him with a kiss, he paused only long enough to speak in a voice nearly a whisper: "*Adiós, mi chiquitín, mi hijo.*"

Waiting, he thought of Semele soundly sleeping back in her Tudor house. His lovemaking had been so insistent that he was certain she would not soon awaken, but such ulterior motive had been only a small part of the spent night. He could think of her no longer without a powerful desire to return and lie beside her. The need was so strong he had to end further contemplation of the florid pleasure that lay behind him by pulling out his cell phone. A fast link to a network that never slept. Turning

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it on would mitigate the regret of separation, throwing him back into the turbulent external world, a hostile, unforgiving world he plunged into with cool determination and practiced opposition. The phone rang almost at once. A sign-topped yellow taxi was just pulling up to the curb, on time, efficiency one more proven commercial signal of this rousing American city. With the pressing sound of Antoine's distant voice he was already back in the raw struggles of convulsed Madera.

"I have heard that you have a beautiful wife who thinks like a man and has given you a son," Mendoza said.

They had returned to the comparatively small and more frequently chosen golden-yellow palace study. Discursive phrases were initially exchanged in friendly voices intended to convey, however unrealistically, a relaxed expenditure of time. In light of this, Mendoza was smoking the large sort of cigar meant for leisure: an olive green leaf generously hand-rolled; another of which Rafael had refused. Cursorily revealing personal fragments of themselves in rich Old World and New World Spanish, their extended hour would be for the besieged Mendoza a sacrifice of time both productive and pleasantly rewarding. For Rafael, their congenial meeting would at least play into its more serious phase with a comfortable likeness of mind. Because his assistance had been requested and because the grave implications of that request were obvious, Rafael was in the decisive position.

A curly-haired attendant entered the room, a young man in crisp khaki with soulful brown eyes that lingered dutifully upon Mendoza, awaiting any further needs. In this aide's vaguely familiar stature, Rafael detected something deeper, a true propinquity. He had brought them a silver tray holding a bottle of Jack Daniels and two heavy crystal tumblers. While Mendoza was speaking he nodded and waved the young man off, preferring to pour his own drink.

Rafael took the half-full glass offered him, grinned and said, "What you have heard is mostly the truth. *Pero*, I cannot verify the rumor about my beautiful wife thinking like a man...and that unlikelihood is not at all to any woman's -- perhaps the entire world's -- disadvantage.

"You have mentioned a wife and several children."

"In my village...a daughter and two sons. I will not let them come here. This is not their reality -- it is *no* reality. My village compared to this...*eso es Jauja! Sí*, the land of milk and honey is how I think of that humble place left behind...even without convenient water. My woman and my children are safer where they are. She is my second wife, too young perhaps, but good. The first fought by my side long before Bellaco. She was killed...died instantly before my eyes. The aide-de-camp you just saw

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is our son Otavio. I will not allow him to waste in idleness. He must earn his way, but in these times I think he is glad of it.”

“You are a longsuffering man and a wise father.”

Mendoza, seated in a large pale-lemon easy chair, folded his arms and dropped his head upon his chest in thought, always, Rafael supposed, remembering his calamitous past, which in ever more constricted and frustrating ways played into his hard-written future.

After a few seconds of silence, during which Rafael finished his drink and leaned back on the dusty-rose satin sofa where he had been asked to sit -- and which he had briefly considered incongruous -- he mused, “Well, General Mendoza, I am here unannounced -- very quietly this time -- to learn what it is that you believe I can do.”

“Sí, *Doctor*, you are kept a secret from even your eager supporters because I do not want any street fights right now. All at once you will appear when you can do the most good. I think you yourself will be able to tell me when that is, *no?*”

“You know, of course, that Higgins is after my head.”

“Ah, he is after both our heads. But I am used to doing business with traitors, swindlers...dangerous *rufiáns* who crawl out of the sewers and hope to immortalize their useless lives by dealing death. Most of the greedy ones can be turned to purpose with a stick holding a large enough carrot...as in this case...even if you have made the carrot seem much larger than it is.”

Mendoza took several little sucking puffs on his cigar then slowly, as if imagining himself on an uneventful, idle holiday, dropped his head back with exaggerated protruding lips and released rising blue rings of thick smoke.

He appeared to believe that being in Rafael’s company was in certain ways like being alone. This observation made Rafael turn briefly away to savor a smile of appreciation.

“You may or may not have noticed, *Doctor*, that I am having you followed. I am having you watched for your own safety.”

“I have noticed.” He finished his whiskey.

He had also noticed how fatigued the large-framed, shambling Mendoza appeared, his still-fierce gray eyes now watery with sleeplessness and underlined with darkly etched pouches. Mendoza, who always wore field fatigues without insignia, was a hands-on leader whose vigor was enhanced by constant strenuous and risky engagements in the so-called trenches. Conversely, this vigor was being steadily eroded by the sedentary, personally loathsome existence required at the presidential desk. That polished mahogany prominence now commanded deployments of others to do what he did best.

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“Infiltrators are being enticed across one of our more remote borders...in the northeast. Very soon I am going to leave this extravagant bed of roses and myself vanguard a detachment over to those lawless donkey trails. They are camped there ready to overrun the city...as soon as they meet with the culprits bold enough to outfit them and lead them astray. In that case, we will shore up the breached places with the bodies of those doing the breaching...as it may become necessary.”

“Are you not needed more here?...unfortunately, I think it is so...as acting president. Right now the people need to know you are here in the capital. Everyone is already used to you on La Ceiba television, delivering reports of the progress being made. They will gladly vote for you because they trust you as their highly visible and effective leader...an honest man with long experience who is getting things done. They will find no better person for the job.”

“*Doctor*, you offer a convincing tonic for a man under attack...attack not only from my enemies but, ay, from overzealous well-wishers.”

Rafael stood up and paced before Mendoza with folded arms, pondering a swiftly forming idea. Staring down at the radial brown medallion in the cream carpet, he saw himself fast at the center of something precarious and complicated; exigencies spreading in too many directions -- omnipresence quite unobtainable. *Keep to your objective*, an inner voice warned. Undeterred by his own reservations, he spoke out.

“Why do you not send *me*? I can take some of my people to the northeast, along with a peacekeeping detachment of your soldiers. If there is an encampment there, that is all to the good. I am used to handling rowdy forces. If I can convince them to leave, perhaps I can even persuade them to make themselves gainfully useful in their own countries.”

“Ah, I ought to appoint you something...my Minister Plenipotentiary. You have more common sense than this gibbering flock of novices around me.”

“At least they are loyal. No, *gracias*, I want no office. Official standing is restricting...it forces one to lie. And I am already handling the water...precisely what I came to do. I still have to deal from time to time with the devil. UNIFOLL is stalling, hoping for Madera’s reversion to a freewheeling government...as you well know. Most assuredly they are embroiled in covert actions to that end. It is time to light a fire under Higgins.”

“Please do not get within the burn of that scorpion. I cannot promise your safety. Are you serious about going to the northeast? *Ay de mí*, I would like to clean that staging ground, before it decamps this way and begins pounding on government doors still under construction. But you are probably right about my staying here now...at least until we can have a legitimate election.”

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“Give me leave, the sooner the better...let us see if we can turn those baited vagrants to good purpose. From there I will call the cutthroat Higgins...prod him into performing as promised...before World Bank changes its mind. I may have to threaten cancellation of the contract.” His final remark was made with a questioning look at Mendoza.

“Threaten if you have to. *Threaten*, but holy shit! we need that water system in place soon...*damn* soon.”

Mendoza stood up, leaned over the handsomely tooled leather-topped desk and viciously smashed the life out of his cherished cigar, in a large square-cut green marble ash-tray. The rocking receptacle hammered into the desk as a frail whisper of smoke rose from its concavity and died; and with it went a heated substitute for rout: deadly enemies, procrastinators, inept single-minded cronies with their absurd expectations, and not least of all, in-for-the-kill carpetbaggers, all snuffed one after the other. His frustrations vented for the nonce, Mendoza’s impetuously choleric histrionics dissolved in a boyish grin.

Otavio reentered the room. His lean and virile young body provided a speculative glimpse into Mendoza’s roguish past. The son nodded at Rafael with quiet respect, his polished regulation boots gliding over the carpet toward his stern-faced father. There, he delivered a concise apology. Representatives of laid-off factory workers were grumbling testily for an audience, after two days of fruitless appeal. *Their patience was turning to anger*, Otavio explained.

Mendoza walked away from this stale message in silence. In a short while he turned from the window, where he had gone to stare longingly at the low sun drenching the palms, escaping his day with languid honey-red light.

“Can you not pass those fellows on to Adjutant Herrera? I am busy. Ay, I suppose I must finally do this...*pero*, I would rather face a line of fire.”

He turned to Rafael, taking his hands from his pockets with an apologetic shrug. His impatient and disinterested gray eyes made his interlocutor think of two shucked oysters woefully bereft of their shine and about to be served up.

“We will talk again at dinner,” Mendoza said, as if to console himself as well as Rafael. But this inextensible conversation was over. The dinner would not be a private affair. In the tenuous and pragmatic reorganization now at hand, the dining table would necessarily support an ample collection of nervous officials from concerned neighboring countries, courted implementers from wealthier nations, factory owners, new army brass, and a few prominent local petitioners whom Mendoza regularly included. For Rafael, this assemblage meant little more than collateral food ingestion; palatable fare, but he was eager to be away.

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At the end of a busy week of preparation, Rafael, Antoine, Mari, and those loyal young lieutenants hearty enough to have recovered from their wounds at *La Nava Feraz* were flown by government helicopter to the northeast. A number of Rafael's followers from La Ceiba were traveling into this steadily populated emptiness by whatever means they could find available. This was high plateau, some of it scabrous open space and some parts mountainous and semi-forested. Up to this point, a scarcity of man's negligent leavings had preserved sweeping aspects of elemental beauty.

The peaceful and nearly forgotten peasants of a small border village in a narrow sheltered valley had fled in the night, as potential insurgents suddenly invaded their remote and unsuspecting community. Their spare food stores were pillaged, their lives threatened. But the locally scattered indigenous people were stubborn, known to be dug in, camping throughout the hills adjacent to their village -- each man or woman entrenched in the native surround in the same way a fiercely loyal dog will not abandon its dead mate. Having long existed unprovoked and in seclusion, they could hardly comprehend what had befallen them. Rafael and some of his leaders sought out their rudimentary encampments, riding in on captured horses belonging to the peasants. They were met with immediate hostility. The villagers, armed mostly with pitchforks and shovels and a few old hunting rifles, were unable to do much more than threaten while Rafael patiently explained his mission. His inflected Castilian was strange to them, but clear and fascinating. They listened with blunt curiosity, uncertain and wary. He was very familiar with that gaze of stupefaction held up to the unknown: the wily stranger who perhaps has come as a wolf among sheep. They had seen no other like him. He had seen many of them.

Introducing something positive from the outside world was for Rafael an advantage already proven. These herders and farmers were not yet so despoiled as to doubt a just motive. They fancied they could recognize honesty. And fortunately here it was. Inflamed by a most instinctual territorial anger, the unsettled peasants were more than willing to join the newly arrived opposition to invaders.

"Drive the devils out of our midst!" they shouted.

"The earth still has a lot of footloose hungry people," Rafael answered.

"Imagine what you would be willing to risk as one of their number. Let us first try peaceful means of solving this problem. It *will* be solved, *amigos*."

Methodically coaxed from their hiding places in the hills, these hardy folk were soon gathered into the diverse Arnau i Roca coalition. By a presidential order that included the limited detachment of government soldiers hastily transported in two troop-carrying helicopters -- and whom Mendoza could hardly spare --, it was decreed

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that these combined forces were to instigate no fighting, but to let the soldiers swiftly suppress any hint of violence. The soldiers held fast to their rifles, hungry themselves and eyeing the startled sheep scattered in the hills. But the men were veterans under Mendoza and would follow orders. They were present as a show of force and to keep the peace, while Rafael worked at his unwieldy task of persuasion.

Even before leaving La Ceiba, he had decided that the most effective method of capitulation was through the belly. The sporadic and near-starving camps of invaders received news that food supplies would be forthcoming and available to all those willing to assemble and listen to a voice of reason. Rafael knew these restless strays had already been listening to agents provocateurs who had filled them with promises impossible to keep, appealing lies. Such inflaming fabrication was always negligent of practicality, not to mention moral conduct. Alongside humble truth, its opposite had far more compelling slogans, inciting dangerous results: *Providence is on our side; it's all here for the taking; might makes right; we will all get rich*. His unenviable task was to win acceptance by humble truth.

“*Esto es algo difícil*. No, not easy. It is a piece of work,” he summed up to Antoine and Mari.

Often confounded by his calm acceptance of rough circumstance, Mari asked, “Then why are you smiling?”

This mildly accusing curiosity provoked an instant commonsensical response: “I have as yet no reason not to.”

A loudspeaker system was set up near the soldiers' encampment. The hungriest of the illegal aliens were the first to drift in. They were kept away from the soldiers' more substantial mess, over which Rafael had no say. Modest portions of thick beef stew were ladled into plastic cups by encouraging volunteers. Bottled water was distributed. The Arnau i Roca Relief Corps, a conditional title of Rafael's troops and purposely not linked to any government office, was waiting, not altogether patiently, for larger numbers to assemble at the village staging ground.

Soldiers had ordered the squatters out of the village, and the villagers hastily returned, fastidiously cleaning the reviled infestation from their cherished old huts. When this was done, the rescued villagers invited Rafael and others involved with ARC into their modest dwellings.

Several households vied for the attention and bed and board of Rafael. He liked to do this, to assume a very different lifestyle, settling into the dwelling of a village elder from whom one learned old habits, routine practices born of harshly made wisdom. The simpler and scarcer the accoutrements the less distracting, for this was when the human aspect shone through in all its accumulated history, its order of priorities, passions, complaints, and prosaic manners. His own entanglements would

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fall away in a very short time as he plunged into a dissimilarly performed but ordinary regimen. The marked similarities of all mankind in motivation, fears, myths or dreams no longer surprised him.

Rafael had chosen to stay with an ancient man who seemed to have the veneration of the entire village, *Señor* Gregorio Fierro, called *Don* Goyo, or sometimes simply Goyo by his older friends. The old peasant was proportionately small with no discernible fat on a tilting time-cured frame tough as gristle. His narrow-eyed flat face, reflecting a strong tincture of the long swallowed up native population, was almost concave, as if the elements had been beating it back for nearly a century. A matured married granddaughter came daily from her own busily restored domestic toil to see that her grandfather was fed, his meager cornhusk bed pulled together, his clothes and rough linens washed in the yard. A cot for Rafael was carried in and pushed against the log wall where firewood had been stacked; two great-grandsons had been ordered by Goyo to restack it against a weathered outside wall.

On a crackling cornhusk mattress covered in village-loomed cloth smelling of lye, from hand-mixed tallow and wood ash, Rafael regularly fell into his seldom untangled, or even pondered, dreams. This usually happened very late at night, for *Don* Goyo liked to talk.

Late into the first night Rafael had taken his cell phone from his pocket and placed it on the floor beneath his cot. This instrument connecting him with the modern world was turned off. Even its incongruous possession in such austerity seemed to require an apology. He sat on the edge of his cot, dreaming into the dying orange-blue flames dimly lighting the black-stained rough stone fireplace. He was thinking of the following day and how he lately spent his time in persuasive talking, often speaking in a necessarily coercive voice, to small numbers of justly gathered but nearly impervious captives. It was a voice that he as one of them would not yet believe. He was thinking how to change that. The present silence, with only the modestly drumming flames, was a relief, an inducement. Steadily replenished air in the uninsulated cabin made the smells of sweat and smoke and lye tolerable, almost forgettable. His host shambled in from the rickety old outhouse behind the cabin, the opened door letting in a freshening waft of cool air rushing down off the piney hills. He threw a pine log on the fire as Rafael stood up and offered a few more words of gratitude for this village patriarch's humble board.

"You will be comfortable, *Señor* Arnau i Roca? It could be you are too long for this bed," the old man speculated. "We are not so tall here."

"No, *Señor* Fierro, I will be quite comfortable."

"*Señor* Arnau i Roca, you must call me Goyo."

"Then you must say Rafael, *por favor*."

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“How long have these hewn logs stood here?” Rafael asked, glancing around him and settling back on his cot.

The wiry little man lowered himself down upon the soft deer hides covering the only chair not a backless stool, and bent his head in thought. Working his way through memory he continued to stare at one source of the question: the worn foot-polished gray floor of split timbers. After a minute or more of reflection, Goyo lifted his head. Firelight flickered over his dark face, weathered to a rich *moreno*, irradiated skin more lined and toughened than abraded leather, yet as mellowed with age.

Rafael saw that an evaluation of personal history had recast the old leader’s diminutive appearance in a larger form, a vigorous physical presence now augmented by memory, recollections of the flowering years of ponderous deeds. *Yo soy un hombre*, his imposing endurance quietly affirmed. *I am a man* and, by this implication, all of the experience contained within – *not only the humble mass of aging flesh you see before you*. As the surviving sum of that original vitality, all the swiftly passed seasons of dogged trial and error, he was prepared to answer.

“My grandfather and his young sons cut and dragged the logs from these hills.” His hand rose over his head toward the smoke-blackened low ceiling, and made a wide circle encompassing the barren slopes of the known valley outside, encompassing his world. “You can see we have not used all of our trees...trees higher up...much harder to get now. Some must always be preserved. The young fools who do not run away want to cut everything, and I say *no*...as long as I live...but after I am gone I do not know. I too was young and wild once. It does not shame me to remember...it is only our nature. That is how we begin...raw green saplings. *Si, señor*, it is so...destructive...the untaught now falling to drugs.” Giving a shrug of forced acceptance, his moist eyes looked at Rafael; even so long inured to reality, those dark wells floated impatience, frustration.

Rafael leaned back on his elbow, speculating with an explorative voice. “Village water is carried from the springs...not too far, but not convenient. You have no electricity. Do you wish for these improvements?”

“I am comfortable with what I have...some food, a candle, a lantern, a pail of water, a cooking fire. I cannot desire what I do not know. For the young it is different. They want everything...the things of man, and even to muddle their childish brains. What I love, what I value is not from man...but of what man is only part. From the highest hill above you cannot see everything at once.”

Goyo’s unimpeded thought had washed the valley back to its pristine state, by his own pure idea of it. His human limitations had clearly never prevented him from seeing well beyond himself. Rafael pondered the happenstance of looking and actually

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seeing, of learning what nature indifferently taught, how this could sometimes make an ordinary man a man of principle, far superior to an idealistic visionary.

“You have not interfered with nature too much, but you have worked just hard enough to belong where you are.”

“It has been hard, *sí*, but a head down in work is a head out of trouble. It is one good way to use a life, *no*? Why do you come so far? Why do you do what you do, Rafael?”

“It is another good way to use a life.” Rafael winked in sympathetic accord. It was meant to be, and would be received as, the wink of an enlightened fool. And such a one, Rafael had long understood, was a person who, while acquitting himself in a positive manner, was fully aware of his actual place in the vast randomness of existence.

At Rafael’s manner of response, Goyo gathered into his lungs a deep gasp of silence, very much like a startled baby preparing to howl. It seemed he had waited a long time for this risible moment: shared humor, the joy of unexpected communion. He pitched himself into the abandon of it, his white-shocked head thrown back, his squinting black eyes wet with laughter. His coffee face creased in myriad lines of gratitude, his empty-spaced gums and crooked stained teeth welcoming the fortune of camaraderie, the chance to sharply mark a steadily blurring present, the very rare chance to be understood. He took his time, shaking his head and heaving with laughter, rubbing his bony hands back and forth over faded and torn brown trousers covering sinewy brittle-boned thighs. Finally he rose from his hand-fashioned pine chair and reached up to a spare shelf where he wrapped his crooked fingers around a tall corked bottle of clear glass, half full. Bending down, he stood it hard upon the floor between them, producing the hollow plonking sound of very old dry board. His hand reached again for two chipped shot glasses.

“Now you will drink with me *aguardiente*. This night we celebrate your coming down into the valley, *no*?...you who say the right words. The way you live is strange to me, but I believe you are here for good use. Before you came to our Lucero I thought to die in the hills...tough old food for buzzards...but not so bad for wings. Still it is possible to die now in the bed that knows me.”

In between conversations with the villagers and the rounding up of increasing numbers of restless migrants, Rafael made time to call the office of Higgins and force a conversation with the scheming procrastinator, scheming even toward Rafael’s own dispatch. Sitting on a hill above the valley and watching billowing storm clouds roll over without leaving a drop of water, he heard the self-absorbed voice of crass

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mediocrity: Higgins swearing into his phone at being interrupted. Rafael envisioned him lazing with his polished loafers up on his desk, doing nothing at all in his fancy Madera office. Waiting for the fall of Mendoza.

“You are stalling, dragging your feet, Higgins, and it will not win you anything you want. Your time is up. If you are not up at the mountain catchments moving earth and laying pipe by the end of this week, I will call in another contractor only too happy to take your place.”

“You’re bluffing, Arnau. No one wants this job the way you’ve got it set up.”

“No, I am not bluffing. I have contacted a company we used in Africa. They want this job badly because it would be the biggest project they have ever undertaken.”

“What company is that?”

“Never mind. I will not allow you to get in their face. In your case I know the one who conspires.”

“There’s no other company,” Higgins taunted with a condescending snarl.

Rafael laughed and said, “World Bank knows otherwise. And when this company’s equipment starts arriving to replace yours it will be too late for you.”

“Or for you. I won’t be dealing with *you* much longer.”

Rafael might have laughed at the overt threat, but his anger boiled over. “*¡Cuánto hablas!* Higgins, so far you are nothing but empty words. If you are unable to perform as agreed, take your crew and get the hell out of Madera. If you cannot move that scrap metal fast enough, Mendoza’s army will confiscate what is left. *Ya es la hora*, Higgins. For you, time is up.”

In the early morning of the third day, and before its dawn roused the village, there was a loud banging on Goyo’s door. Who would disturb the sleeping patriarch in such a careless manner, Rafael wondered as he was awakened from his few short hours of rest. He dressed quickly and hurried to throw open the door, while the semi-conscious, unsettled old man was still looking around the room from his bed.

“Carlos! *¿Qué hay?*”

Carlos stared with gaping mouth, apparently beside himself at the discovery of *el señor* Arnau i Roca actually alive and standing before him. His oily work clothes and hair were wind-whipped, his face burned red from exposure. Excited words tumbled out in a breathless cadence as he explained how he had come over the mountains on his old motorcycle, carrying an extra tin of gasoline and riding through the night.

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“Sí, sí, *amo*, it is me. I have heard the loud-voiced friends of the ones who paid me to kill...they are coming here. They are coming to make trouble...*también*, they are bringing guns for *los extranjeros* to shoot.”

“Carlos, *por favor, cálmate...amigo*, please calm down. I thank you very much for coming, but it was not necessary. I already know everything you have said.”

“But why then are you not leaving this place?”

“Because your news is the very reason I am here.”

“No, no, *amo*, you must go.”

Just then Goyo’s granddaughter Catarina appeared, surrounded by a sleepy group of yawning young children and carrying a pot of hot coffee. Rafael drew distraught Carlos back inside the cabin and led him to a bench beside the rough rectangular table where Goyo had just lit a lantern and seated himself. Goyo’s lolling head was propped on two cupped hands, elbows on the table, eyes rheumy from sleep.

Carlos was introduced to the old *patrón* – more alert now and curious about this exuberant fellow who had pounded on his door. The new arrival’s heated anxiety momentarily settled beneath a polite demonstration of respect for *el señor* Gregorio Fierro; but returned as soon as Rafael began to explain the purpose of his stay here. Discounting the gathering migrants, Carlos seemed to believe Rafael’s presence, viewed as very naïve, was the fault of the local peasants. This remote and insignificant little village that crazily called itself *Lucero*, as if boasting of a bright solar nucleus, had somehow stolen away his cherished mentor’s good sense.

When his patient explanation was finished, Rafael advised, “Go back to your work, *amigo*. Do not involve yourself here. You will soon become a father.”

“¡*De veras!* Are you not also a father?”

Realizing that he had said the wrong thing, Rafael answered, “This is what I do, *hombre*. But you...your family needs you in La Ceiba...soon I will see you in Barcelona.”

“Have I not been with you before this? I will stay here...until you are leaving *también*.”

Rafael’s terse response was his final word: “*Compañero*, I am not going anywhere.” His assertion left Carlos moodily perverse. He walked out the door and went a short distance, shaking his head and swearing softly in the colorfully profane street language he and every rowdy young boy in La Ceiba had learned at an early age.

Sí, I am a father...and a husband, Rafael reminded himself half an hour later. Earlier, Carlos had settled down and finished his coffee with him and Goyo. Now Rafael was walking alone in the dawn light, up onto a pale rose slope that climbed above the reposing valley. He stopped at a familiar high promontory of pronged basalt, where lately he briskly took himself each evening to think and to escape the

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constant demands for his attention. With him as usual was his cell phone, and without hesitation he turned it on and punched in Semele's number. Her message announced that she was out of town and gave a number where she could be reached. When he punched that number Martha answered.

"I hope you are well, Martha. May I speak to Semele?"

"Yes, we are all well. How good to hear your voice, Rafael. How *are* you?"

"I am fine...and Semele?"

"Of course she's fine, and you could speak to her if she were here but she isn't. You see, I thought...you must know...don't you? She's gone back to work."

His heart muscle tightened, released, tightened again, more like a grappling fist inside his chest. "And Miguel?"

"Oh, Miguel is wonderful. We love having him with us. He's certainly altered the routine around here. We're really all so grateful...because he makes us feel young again. He's simply an awful lot of fun."

"Where is Semele?"

"Well, she's here, but of course at work. That is, it's ten after nine in the morning here...I don't know what time it is where you are...exactly. Isn't it about four hours difference?"

"Here it is a little after five a.m.," Rafael affirmed while looking at his watch.

"Well, then you could call around seven p.m., our time. She should be here and have dined with us by then. I mean, at the moment she's just downtown working on an assignment from the New York office."

"Thank you, Martha. I will try to call around seven your time, three mine. Please kiss Miguel for me."

"The little darling. We're always kissing him. I'll tell Semele, Rafael...and it's so good to hear from you."

Walking back, he found that his feet were slamming a little too hard into the earth. He stopped, looking down on the valley with unfocused narrowed eyes. He had not called when he should have, had not called because her voice could send his body into a painful immobility of longing, had not called because he could not stand to hear that mellifluous voice turn hostile and accusing.

A day of stringent exchanges from the back of a horse and then, at the appointed hour, he did call again. This time Semele answered the phone, after only one ring, her voice expectant, as if she had been waiting close by.

"Hello, Semele. Are you well? Are you glad to be back at your work?"

"Rafael...you sound cross."

"If so, it is only because I am tired, *querida*. It has been a long day and it is far from over."

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"I'm not all that glad to be back at my job, this time. It's rather like a demotion...but this cinchy work was all that was available in San Francisco. I wanted to stay near Miguel. At the end of the month there's a project coming up in Seattle. I'll have a nanny for Miguel during the day."

"I am glad."

"That I'm working...or near Miguel?"

"Both...if you are happy."

"You knew when you left what would've made me happy."

"Please...let us not argue. We are the parents of a beautiful child...our sweet *Miguelito*."

"Oh thank you for reminding me. I thought a stork had dropped its bundle in a hurricane...seems more likely."

"You can still make me laugh."

"I've done what I said I would do, haven't I? I've gone my own way...as you have."

"I have not *gone my own way*, as you mean it, *querida*. It is only that I do not want you in a difficult place."

"You mean a dangerous place. Are you afraid to say that's where you are?"

"All right, sí, all right."

"Now you *are* angry."

"No, it is fatigue. I only needed to hear your voice. This is not where I want you...*you*, the mother of our son."

"It's not where I want *you*."

"By now you should know that I--"

"Yes, yes, it's what you do. I know that."

"Semele...please say the one thing I have called to hear. Tonight I want to fall asleep with those words in my head. Can you say them?"

"Can you?"

"*¡Jesús!* I love what you are. I love you for giving your love to me...for giving me Miguel...for always being your strong self...*you*...even if you must go back to work, I love you, *querida*...and always will."

"Rafael...Oh, Rafael, I miss you. I *miss* you."

"And?"

"And I love you. You know it. You *know* it. Please take care. I love you so. Sleep well tonight, my darling."

"Not well enough...not until I have you in my arms. *Adiós, mi amor*."

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A veiled disquiet, vaguely marking some approaching transition, pervaded the becalmed air of the trespassed valley. Rafael could sense imminent change, as a barometer senses a heavy dark atmosphere plummeting toward a wild storm. This subtle reverberation suggesting malice, he read as the escalating infiltration of subversive influence.

Before noon most of those who had crossed over the border, seeking rumored largesse, were massing in the field beyond the jerry-built platform. As Rafael and members of ARC stood by, it was decided by Goyo that his eldest son, Juan Fierro, whose hair was turning gray and who could not be mistaken for an explosive young militant, must climb onto the platform and speak into the microphone. It was the first such amplified speech he had ever made, in fact the first speech to any gathering larger than a dozen. He stood awkward and squinting in the sun, sweat soaking through his tan work clothes. Tapping the jerry-rigged microphone, with a jerk of surprise at its loud crack, he began to speak.

“You who have nearly ruined our village are now called upon to hear the voice of a wise man. It is this man...*sí*, the man standing over there, *Señor* Rafael Arnau i Roca, who without any evil...*sí*, with only a little help from General Mendoza’s good soldiers...this man has come here in time to save our peaceful village from *you*...your bad behavior...he comes also maybe to help you, if you will only listen. *Sí*, it is this man’s talk...his words that can save you stray animals from your reckless selves.”

Juan Fierro, however ineloquent, had shown himself to be naively honest, admonishing but fair, and primed with a just anger. His last remark, placing blame where some was due, Rafael thought quite well put.

There was none of the old cheering from a sympathetic crowd as he stepped to the microphone, nothing but stony silence. Below the hems of his close-fitting jeans his sorrel boots bore a little more evidence of their wearer’s long path as they clicked over the jouncing uneven boards. His blue shirt – washed only yesterday by Catarina – was worn as usual with the sleeves partially rolled, affording protection from the sun and ventilation in the heat, but just now suggesting a determined man of purpose, prepared to wade into the fray, figuratively suggesting a willingness to arm-wrestle into compliance the most contentious opponents.

Convince us of something, you interfering bastard, was the concerted message of scorn Rafael imagined when he looked into the motley sea of implacable faces.

Below and some distance off to his left, Rafael focused on a row of spaced dark pines that decades ago had been planted as a shadowing windbreak. Seeking a little shade beneath the high-pruned maturing limbs, milled a watchful assemblage of the ever-present fourth estate. How did they do it, arrive so quickly when no mention

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of his current endeavor had been made to any of the media? He was even more surprised when his roving eyes chanced to focus upon Jeet Grey. This self-styled disciple, dressed in his usual baggy work attire, was standing in profile and appeared to be arguing with an obstructive cameraman.

Half encircling the crowd was a wide-spaced and easily penetrable gauntlet of blank-faced soldiers, their rifles held waist-high and gripped far too loosely for immediate dispatch. He had wishfully decided to interpret this lax attitude as the confidence of experience. Beyond the spare-ranked militia, in a field of trampled dry grass, a fueled black helicopter waited in foreboding readiness.

Long into the night his assessing thoughts had weighed the situation at hand, how the vagrants had been enticed out of their deficient homelands by Bellaco functionaries living in exile and, by proxy, stirring up crowds in the hope of support. There was nothing for these transients in Madera, a land that could now barely feed or employ its legitimate populace. The restless and seeking breed newly encamped on Maderan soil had been led to believe that if they assisted in retaking the country they would be amply rewarded, given jobs in a mine that would eat up an extraordinary valley, or rewarded by placement in a militia required to sustain Bellaco's hoped-for resumed brutal dictatorship -- the oppressed once again striving to become the oppressors. He knew that he could offer this displaced crowd no solace but only a bitter pill: safe return home. Continually an advocate of peace, forever striving to end thirst, he now found himself in the necessary position of demagogue; an odious position: the ruthless capture of their emotions, playing upon their fears to frighten them back across the border. But it was exactly the position required...before smuggled arms reached them, leaving no peaceful alternative. His address began with an ear-riveting roll of succinct Castilian.

"I do not live in this country either. I came here to help Madera get a decent system of water. But I am opposed to unreasonable death, the coming horrors that are certain to befall you. I am here today because I know that you are likely to lose your lives, lose them in a very cruel and meaningless way. You have no idea what awaits you in La Ceiba: no work, certainly not the luxury of which you have dreamed; instead, quick dispatch and a trench in the ground large enough for all of your lifeless bodies...bulldozers ready to push you in and cover you up. Your families will never know what happened to you, or find your rotting flesh, your leaching bones. Madera cannot afford to give you a decent burial. When you said good-bye to your relatives, your mates and children, it was forever...unless you leave this place in the same way you came, and immediately."

"They are giving us guns," a defiant voice shouted.

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“Do you imagine that when you are handed rifles you will not have to use them until each of you receives a fatal bullet? You have been duped, *amigos*, duped by oppressors who demand nothing less than your lives. You would not even be fighting for freedom, but for a tyrant who will never be allowed to return. He is far away in Freetown, living on the people’s stolen money and counting diamonds. His evil henchmen want to use you for their own gain. But General Mendoza is not going away. Believe me he is no tenderfoot. He wins his battles. Moreover, he has the will of Maderans on his side. They are sick of Bellaco, and they will shoot you in the back to prove it. They will never let you take their jobs. Go home. We will give you packets of food and water and watch you cross this border. Stay here and you will die very quickly. Is not whatever you left back there better than death itself, than no chance at all?”

“Liar!” someone accused. Soldiers lifted rifles.

“Shut up!” another shouted at the accuser.

Rafael felt a stirring of approbation, and held back in quiet patience, prepared to receive more slurs. A tolerant few might well silence the noisiest members of this wavering crowd, and provide him with a chance to rebut with truth.

“You are a lying arm of Mendoza,” the ragged young man who had first cried out persisted.

“No. I myself will soon be leaving Madera. I hope I will have a chance to visit you in your own countries, maybe help you find a better way of life so you will never have to do this again. *Amigos*, go home and live out your lives. You must go home or stay here and die...die for nothing.”

He watched as disillusioned groups began to argue and commiserate among themselves -- mostly men but also a few sun-scorched women seasoned by harsh circumstance. “I am going back,” he heard one man shout. “I have had enough of this. They are all liars...there is nothing here for us. We were fools to believe them.”

The soldiers relaxed their uplifted rifles as the audience grew a trifle more docile; a few listeners glanced wistfully toward the far hills over which they had traveled only as a last resort. But still the hopeful belligerents remained in place en masse, their eyes finally locked upon Rafael, eyes begging for something; they hardly knew what. In their desperation he saw a yearning to receive some uplifting message, powerful enough to carry them back to their miserable beginnings. It was time to switch from fear-instilling demagoguery to something more promising. Once back in neighboring countries, they might recall and put into practice any guidance he could offer. He chose his words with care, honest and simple advice. *We were fools to believe them* echoed in his delivery.

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“Believe in yourselves,” Rafael counseled. “Then each of you will always know where the one to blame and the one to praise is standing. There are difficult times ahead for all of us. Keep your families small so there is enough for everyone. Always consider the futures of your children, and in so doing squander no natural resource. Treat neighbors with the same respect you must maintain for yourselves. You came here to fight for pay, but there is no gain in killing for gain. Today we disrespect enough to kill, but remember this: all life remains cheap until you credit your enemy’s life with the same value as your own. Work together for relief. When you work as one for a just goal, instead of each against the other, there is a far greater certainty of getting what you need. When you have a large need, organize and use your minds and hands for the good of all. If you must dig a well, do it together -- never waste the clean water you manage to find and use. If you must begin an entire village with a single house, build it together. If you require a just law, seek it together. This is how you will make and keep your prized independence, your cherished privacy. *Amigos*, strive very hard to educate your children. An oppressive government has no greater advantage than an ignorant populace. The strength of many good minds and strong hands working together is the great and simple truth of large accomplishment, of survival. Travel this life *together*.”

Along with the prevailing anger, he detected a spark of conviction. Weary, mistrusting eyes simultaneously flashed hints of positivity. He felt a synergy of inspiration, its arousal beginning to flow from himself to the once hostile crowd, back and forth like a charged force. For a brief time -- and he knew how brief it could be -- a powerful bond of communion ignited the air, an increasing elliptical race from positive to negative to positive, feeding upon itself. Solidarity of hope enabled the most deprived individuals to renounce despair. Somewhere below perhaps there stirred a force of will -- disconsolate Nietzsche’s misused *will to power*. However flawed and vulnerable humans are, they can always be counted upon to invent methods of survival. But they must also understand that a pillaged and neglected natural environment would carry them no distance at all. The small glimmer of hope here ignited could so easily flicker and die -- short-lived, shortsighted humans were fickle. Yet, they had listened, and now they were silent.

An unshaven man made a long whistle with dirty fingers stuck in his mouth, and a few hands began to clap. Slowly, the response grew and grew, into a loud swell of concerted release. Enraged, bitter with misfortune, ready to fight and kill, they should have hissed him off the platform, if allowed, beaten him senseless for an audacity that looked like insensitive condescension; instead of what he sensed was happening: the positive effect of a few lean words of encouragement. A force majeure.

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He had experienced this outcome before, but never without a life-affirming sense of extraordinary potential, never without a profound humility.

An impish little girl with large golden-brown eyes, her lively body clothed in a hand-sewn dress of cream cotton, marched proudly forward carrying a crudely made bouquet of small mountain flowers. She flopped her unevenly bunched purple asters and orange fleabane down upon the edge of the rough platform, then, making several tries, boosted herself up. For the first time the crowd laughed. Her drooping flowers were then gleefully reclaimed; all of these bold actions done with a pert innocence, the encouragement of clapping hands. She was now at the center of gravity, an incidental prodigy of humor. Basking in the fortune of the crowd's volte-face excess, there stood his prankish little friend: the irresistible, very mischievous Isabel, five-year-old daughter of Catarina. Only a day ago she had climbed onto his lap and been cuddled there in wide-eyed fascination, while he spoke with her great-grandfather Goyo.

Rafael walked over and knelt before this smitten little mischief-maker, offering a private wink for her teasing eyes. Dimples appeared. Her dirty bare feet danced from side to side. She held the flowers to her wrinkling nose, surprised at the strong weedy odor. Then, emboldened by his delighted grin, Isabel recited in an imitative voice, “*¡Qué hombre!*” He knew at once she was mimicking her mother's words. He threw back his head with a disarmed spill of laughter, a grateful outpouring beginning deep inside, rising from an ample wellspring of the ceaseless human comedy. Such laughter was his mainstay; now spontaneously evoked, it was completely unconstrained, liberally erupting from the indifferently gambled-away frame out of which he lived and contested the world. His own voluptuous enjoyment rippled over the emotional crowd, sparking a sorely needed camaraderie of sentiment. At once there arose a flurry of joyful support. For a luxurious moment the grim present, so heavily bearing down upon every head, simply dissipated.

“Ah, Belita, *gracias, gracias.*” Here was the boon of a cherubic giggling face. Reaching for the humble token of flowers, he thought how indebted he was for the real gift: a return to earth, the relief of this precious ingenuous foil.

A rifle shot split the air.

A single bullet driving through the child and deeply abrading Rafael's arm.

A wild charge of furious soldiers scrambled over the infiltrator, shouting oaths of rage at their captive, who was dressed in the uniform of Mendoza's army. They wrenched the rifle from his hands and pinned him to the ground. A loud roar of protest rose up as grievous cries of horror and shrill female shrieking swept through the maddened crowd. They would have set upon the assassin and torn him to pieces were it not for the abeyant rifles of the soldiers.

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“No! We are not baby killers! We have not come here to kill babies,” a weeping woman screamed in a woeful voice.

“*Ay, no, no, chica,*” Rafael groaned, lifting whimpering Isabel gently up against his side. His own spilling blood mingled with the child’s, flowing over her cream dress.

Catarina, the smile barely gone from her face, was screaming. A protective huddle of soldiers quickly surrounded them: limp little Isabel, carried in Rafael’s arms, was followed by her mother grasping and stroking her small dangling foot as they rushed toward the helicopter. There, a medic swiftly took charge of the wounded child.

“No, I will stay,” Rafael insisted, tearing himself from a clinging soldier clumsily binding the bullet’s deep gash. “*Por favor, pronto, pronto,* take the child to La Ceiba...the hospital. Here is Catarina. Take Catarina!”

“But your *arm!*” Mari protested.

Briefly he focused his pained eyes on Antoine and Mari, and then agonizing Carlos, standing in front of him as if to receive another bullet himself.

“*¡Vamos!*” Rafael shouted, ordering the pilot off. But the wildly agitated members of ARC circled their vulnerable leader, pulling and pushing and coaxing him beneath the whirling blades of the readying craft to drag him inside. The blood dripped from the crude bandage on his throbbing right arm, the arm held bent against his side where a red stain was spreading over his shirt and jeans.

In a blurring side-glance he saw Jeet Grey and the press rushing forward to learn what had happened to the girl and to him. “All right, I will go. But keep them away,” he implored both Carlos and his enraged guards who had fought to reach his side. “Not in the ship.” His meaning was clear as he jerked his head toward the gaping surging news media bent on scrambling aboard. Immediately, the reporters were forced back, craning to see beyond an obstructed view.

Dry grasses whirled into the air as they were lifted into the empty blue sky. When he looked at Isabel, with her grieving mother hunched above her, the pain was not in his arm. The rose tint was gone from her cheeks, now blanched white. She lay still as a lifeless doll in a crib, a doll never hers, this innocent victim of his benevolence.

He leaned his good arm against the frame of the open door and for a few seconds surveyed the foreshortened crowd. Their heads were tilted up, their arms rising toward the deafening mechanical gun-pop of rotors, a howling whine of desire above the hope of deliverance. The sole medic aboard knelt to give him an injection. Attempting to send his mind beneath the hammering noise, weighted thought plummeted down among the amassed and neglected lives, to think as they must be thinking. By the following day they would all be gone, turning back any new arrivals

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they met, trudging over the cruel dividing hills and carrying with them all that was left to take away: the leveling words of an odd pathfinder, an acerbic mix of warning and promise from a man who would expose himself to their fury if only to have the right result. *Was this one of any use?* Should they try to hang onto the words he had spoken? Such talk as his had proved expensive. Along with indelible images of circumstance, the sorrow, the rage, the ignominy of their failed efforts, each savaged heart had been implanted with a small hot ember of truth. It might burn. In a clenched and willful silence he implored them to think what it meant. But it was not enough just to know.

“Are you having much pain?” Mendoza asked.

Rafael looked up from his considered placement in the most comfortable chair in the room. He was enjoying the hard-won procurement of this attentive hulk of a leader hovering over him. The new president, still in his familiar nondescript fatigues, resembled a great roan-backed bear risen to sniff the air for prey or threat.

“Pain? Not enough to live on it, *Señor Presidente*.”

“Have you noticed that now I am elected the noose is tightening around my neck? If I cannot do what is needed I will be the one to hang myself with my own failures.”

“You will not fail. You are going in exactly the right direction. And the people have shown they are with you.”

“Right now that does not tell me much. The man I ran against was a terrible imposter, Bellaco’s sniveling lackey. Easy to beat.”

“*Señor Presidente*, I, too, have been out there at the rough edge. I know what the people need; they need you.”

Mendoza dropped down upon the former president’s incongruous rose sofa, his loose-framed adjusting body hiding almost entirely the furniture’s delicate embrace.

“Eh, I suppose you get a lot of these wounds on those *front lines* of yours. You might as well get them as I have, *sí*, Doctor?...wear a uniform, carry a weapon. Then at least you can shoot back.”

Rafael raised an eyebrow and worked his mouth into a composed smile that did not quite overcome his disapproval. Gently palpating his aching right arm, which was slung in a black cloth draped over his black shirt, he offered a definitive response. “A weapon would not serve my purpose.”

“You, Doctor, have been invaluable to me, to Madera. While I was busy getting elected you cleaned out the border rats without a shot fired. Ah, excuse me, except the one fired at *you*...and the little *niña*?”

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Rafael at once experienced a spike of sadness that exceeded the intermittent pain of his wound. He drank a generous amount from the crystal tumbler of thick ruby port. Mendoza had poured it from a velvet-black bottle as soon as his wounded friend arrived. The sweet indulgence was rich and spicy and flamed in his belly. He preferred its quick warmth to a shot of painkiller.

"I visited Isabel this morning. She comes from strong stock, our Belita...a precocious little imp. The child will mend, but there will be some problems for her to overcome. I brought her the prettiest doll my friend Mari could find in La Ceiba. She was drowsy and whispered her mother's humorous line: "*¡Qué hombre!*" When Belita says it...the way she says it, she intends to make me laugh...and I do it gladly for her...to have her beautiful smile."

"Ah, she is right – *¡Que hombre!*...you are an uncommon man...one who did not come here to take anything."

"Lucero is a humble village of which on the whole you can be proud."

"There are many such in this poor land. My people know how to go without shoes and still smile a little, *no?*"

"*Sí, Señor Presidente*, that is so. In Lucero there is a rough old patriarch with a great deal of wisdom, *el señor* Gregorio Fierro. He tries to live with the same truth he speaks. If you are in that part of the country you could reward him with a visit...all he requires."

"I will do it.

"Higgins is rolling his equipment into the field, Doctor. I am certain you are responsible for that, too."

"I believe *he* is responsible for the shooter who slipped into your army."

"The assassin will be dealt with. Unfortunately, we cannot presently afford to deal with Higgins in the same way...unless the evidence is clear enough to hang him."

"I did find another contractor eager to come in. Probably with a little sleuthing Higgins found out I was not bluffing and decided to get to work. Maybe he heard from World Bank. So, we will see how he performs. He is not completely indispensable."

"We will see, Doctor. I intend to make him perform exactly as written.

"I have decided to bring my wife and children here now. Hell, it is just that I miss them...and my wife says she misses me. She is one of those few I trust completely.

"Why do you not go home and see your own woman, Doctor, let your arm heal? There is a rumor here, you know, that your wife can shoot like one of my crack hitters." At this Mendoza sat forward and cocked his head to deliver a remark contrived partly for his own amusement. "If you do not go home and rest, I will ask

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this female sharpshooter *la señora Semele Taylor de Arnau i Roca* to come and join my army.”

“I will tell her of your offer,” Rafael answered, and he laughed hard enough to set his arm complaining.

A single glance at Rafael, and Mendoza quickly rose to refill his friend’s glass with the fine medicinal port.

Sliding down his throat the fiery wine lifted him above pain, evanescing into a vision of *home*: a more recent anchor for his constant transit, which could only mean Semele and Miguel. Home, not a place but a longed-for condition, the necessity of which was so new as to be almost beyond his comprehension.

He tried to reach Semele in San Francisco, but Martha informed him that her tame reentry into J.D. Smith and Associates had very efficiently ended ahead of schedule and she was back in Seattle. Martha herself was worried, for Semele was not answering her phone, and Martha knew that she was settled in her house because she had called from there when she arrived. Currently: silence. When Rafael tried the Seattle house he quickly verified Martha’s concern, for try as he might he could not even get her answering machine in order to leave a message. Next he tried calling Brad Taylor but heard only Sarah’s message that Brad was temporarily away, apparently without Sarah there to answer the phone. Perhaps Sarah had gone with him or was simply out-of-doors, for surely someone was needed to care for the animals.

He decided to fly to Seattle without further attempts, and let himself in with the key Semele kept tucked into the high ledge above the front door – she, not as easily as he, usually reached to fetch it down. Aboard the second plane he winked at the stewardess who had smiled at him as she bent to help him buckle in for some needed sleep. Arriving at SEATAC, he tried calling once more from the airport, with no success, and then hailed a taxi. The car planed over sheets of water at a pressing speed on the freeway, racing through a squally summer shower and up onto saturated Queen Anne Hill. At the solid oak front door he was met with the familiar single diamond pane of rippling glass, which held only an ominous interior darkness. Again he experienced a vague anxiety, an unrest of the sort he had recently been feeling over little Isabel’s future, laying the blame upon himself for everything. The pain in his arm intensified as if by an avenging fever as he reached to replace the key.

Inside the dim house he crept slowly down the shadowy hall, and was startled to hear the heartening chatter of Miguel coming from Semele’s bedroom. Then he caught sight of her seated form silhouetted before a living room window, the dusky light outlining her dark motionless profile.

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His mystified voice was softly explorative. "Semele?"

No immediate answer. She jerked and turned around as if awakening to a startling specter, an apparition she would normally never have invented. He watched her attempt to focus on his indistinct shape. A gasp of air rushed down her silent throat. She stood fumbling at her waist, pulling together her loosely bound white robe, staring, taking a step forward, reaching out her hands to touch him.

"My God...you? Really *you*? Oh, you're alive!"

"*Jesús*, Semele! What is wrong?"

"Oh, God, Rafael...the only concise mention I could find of you...the only word written of you was in a Latin American newspaper. They said you'd been shot dead."

"*Ay, querida, lo siento, mucho, lo siento*. I have been trying to call you. Why did you not answer your phone?"

"I didn't want to talk to anyone. I didn't want...I didn't think I could...you see, you see...I haven't handled your death very well...oh, God, I feel sick."

"*Ay, querida mía*," he said reaching out to touch a ghostly porcelain face that looked about to shatter. "I am alive. I cannot hold you very well with both of my arms, but this tired body is here to assure you I am alive."

She was shaking badly, and he saw that he would have to support her as best he could until he could get her to the davenport where he eased her down and went to locate her scotch. Unfortunately, he was slow and clumsy.

He returned, handed her a half-full tumbler from a tray bearing another half-filled glass for himself, and said, "Drink a little of this. Is Miguel all right?"

"I fed him...a...I don't know...about an hour ago. I looked at him and saw you and wept. It was confusing him so I put him down." Again, she fell into a dread silence.

He sank down beside her, placing her trembling hand on his knee and taking several swallows of his watered scotch.

"This is terrible. When I ordered the press away I never imagined they would decide to make up their own stories. *Goddammit!* It is retaliation. I am repaid this way for getting out of their sight."

She took a swallow of scotch and ran her fingers along the black cloth holding his arm. "What happened to you?"

"Eh, nothing much."

"No, it isn't *nothing much!*"

He saw that she was close to hysteria and tried to explain himself in the least disturbing manner.

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“I was speaking to a crowd of border crossers and a crazy person shot at me. *La bala me dió en el brazo...*this arm. That was after it...after the bullet went through an innocent little *niña* handing me flowers.”

“Oh, God. Is she--”

“No, alive. She will need some therapy. I have seen to that. *¡Cristo!* can we talk of something else?”

“I think you have a fever.” She touched his forehead. “Yes, you’re hot.”

“I am just tired. Maybe I need to go look for an aspirin,” he contemplated, standing up.

“I’ll get it. Stay there and put your feet up.”

“I want to have Miguel,” he called after her.

“I’ll bring him.”

When he had swallowed the aspirin that Semele rather distractedly brought with water, he took Miguel from her arms, kissed him and snuggled him safely into the crook of his left arm. His son gave a shrill squeal, raised his hands and threw his head back, the beautiful dark eyes widening and dancing vividly over his father’s smiling face.

“Daaa! Da, da!” Miguel cried out.

“*Sí*, it is me, you little noisemaker. I can see that you are going to make a lot of speeches.”

He played with his lively son for several minutes and then, when Miguel showed signs of sleepiness, carried him back to his crib. Semele had disappeared. In fact, he had no idea where she had gone. He searched through the house but did not want to call out and awaken Miguel. She was nowhere to be found. Finally, he discovered her sitting halfway up the attic steps. When he opened the door she lifted her head quickly and turned her face away from him. He had caught a glimpse of her dark-circled wet eyes. Her robe slipped open; beneath it he glimpsed an old t-shirt he had thrown away.

“*Mi amor*, come down and sit with me.”

Seated back on the sofa, she was so different, so quiet he hardly recognized her. Her familiar vibrant personality had completely vanished. At last he realized that she was holding back violent anger, the anger of frustration, along with an overwhelming sadness.

He tried to alter her mood with something irrelevant, parting the top of her robe. “Why are you wearing this old t-shirt? I thought I threw it away.”

“It was the only clothing you left here. Nothing in my closet...or never there for long. It...had your scent.”

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“Ay, my love, have I brought you to this? My clothes, such as they are, scarcely hang anywhere for long. Please hang whatever you want of mine and I will leave it. *Jesús*, this is--”

“Foolish, isn’t it? So foolish.”

She caught him rubbing his sore arm, and touched three nervous fingertips to her mouth, trying to hold her dilated eyes steady with his, her eyes now a strange dark sapphire.

“I’m so very, very sorry you’re hurt again.”

He jerked his head in acknowledgment and said nothing, only waiting for more of the stilted words being coolly meted out. A chill was creeping through his veins.

“You were right when you once said, *Look what I’ve done to you*. What you did was make me yours. And as for me, I never meant to encroach upon your life as I have. I’ve come to care so much about your work...wanted to be a part of--”

“Semele--”

“--a part of it. It just happened that I’ve become so deeply...so...two hours ago I couldn’t imagine how I’d go on...my God, to go on living with you forever gone from my world...to know I’d never... Everything stopped. Now--”

“Semele--”

“Now you’re back in my world and I realize...I realize that...that maybe this is the best time for us to...to part. Then I can always imagine you alive somewhere, somewhere in the world...but I won’t be expecting you to come back to me or...I won’t begin to die myself while I’m waiting in fear. I could never...I just never envisioned what would happen suspended in this miserable state of...of having to face... Oh, I shouldn’t... No, Rafael, I didn’t mean...you can always be with Miguel...always. I know how you love him. I’d never deny you--”

“*¡Tú no me dejas hablar!* You will not let me speak! Are you going to let me speak?”

Drawing back from his explosive exasperation, she stroked her hands over her satin thighs then folded the fingers tightly together in her lap. “Yes,” she whispered.

“You know how I love Miguel, but you must know how I love *you*? Do you? What more can I do to make you know this? Have I not shown how much I want you? You are my *wife* because I love you. Semele...we will not *part* as you say. *Creo que no...no!* Not unless you no longer love me.”

“How could I have suffered like this if I didn’t?”

“It hurts me to know you have suffered believing I was killed. Some day it might be true -- *el hombre es mortal* -- but now I am here alive. In every free moment I have thought of you and Miguel. I know this was terrible, I *know*, but how can you

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“speak so easily of parting? After everything we know of this relationship, how can you--”

“Easily? Oh no, nothing’s done that way anymore.”

She slipped to the floor with her head resting on his knees in a wrenching release of emotion that had finally escaped restraint. His eyes lingered on the glinting red hair curling over his thighs. His indomitable wild fox reduced to mourning, *still* in mourning...for *him*.

In silence, his fingers slid repeatedly through the red coils, caressing her scalp beneath those cool shimmering waves, a mesmerizing act soothing for both. The moment had arrived to invoke reason, but with a tempering voice.

“All right, cry...cry it out of you. I want the one I love. *Sí*, I have made you mine, *querida mía*...as you have made me yours. We are in the lives of each other. We can never make the foolish mistake of parting. Ay, my poor *matemática*, you belong to this unyielding *alborotador*, this relentless fighter. *¡Jesús!* enough of this. Enough! Help me undress so I can lie with you. I can do it, but it will be faster if you help. Then I have to learn how to have you without the use of this arm.”

“Oh no, darling.” She lifted her head to pull a tissue from her pocket and blow her nose. “You’re tired...too tired. I’ll help you, then you should rest...just sleep.”

“I want to have you, *mi amor*. We are both very much in need of it...to mend like this. You will have me, then we will sleep and sleep...and wake up together. Think of it. You know we can never part. You know that is impossible.”

Semele had deftly sandwiched his arm between supportive pillows, then settled her slight frame over the dark-haired almond skin of his lank-sculpted body. His fatigue ebbed away as her grieving steadily diminished with his own needful actions. He let her give until she could no longer restrain low murmurings of pleasure – for him, alluring, corporeal, the uneven cries accompanied by his own urgent answer. He loved to watch her violet-tinted eyes mirror the high moment of astonishment, then glaze over with blissful satisfaction. That sated level of pleasure, and especially her jewel-like eyes, he recalled in lonely moments, with a sudden lustful jolt of euphoria. Now they lay loosely clasping each other’s hands, drowsily suspended in the luxurious aftermath of feverish excess – a silent communion of sexually rendered peace, so restorative it temporarily dispelled threatening obstacles, yet one more time shutting out the world’s miseries.

Later, when he awoke she awoke in the same instant, restorative sleep’s glacial-blue eyes held in abeyance for his recurring heat. In the hard reality of the

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separate two, so often forced upon them, he immeasurably cherished the perfect one they could achieve. He tugged at the silky tangle he had made of her flaming hair and said, "Are you back with me now? Are you better?"

"Mm...there's a saying: *the hair of the dog that bit.*"

"Ah, *sí*. For all this a crude cliché...*pero*, in some ways accurate...I, the dog, can laugh as you want...it means I have loved you enough to revive your positive self."

Repeatedly her lips touched his responding mouth. "Forgive me last night. Will you forgive me?"

"There is not much to forgive...considering what you had to bear. It was only that I could not stand to hear the part about leaving me. I cannot think of losing you either. You know when I am away from you *I* have not left *you*."

"I never meant to hurt you, my darling -- the world does enough of that. I went a little crazy...probably will again."

"Then I will have to cure you again...like this."

"Yes, like this, like this, like this!" she cried, tangling her long legs with his to roll across the bed, but suddenly remembering his arm.

In the same moment, they heard Miguel's piercing scream for attention. They struggled up, looking at each other with rushes of mutually taunting laughter -- culpability willingly shared for love's demanding gift.

"Where did Brad go?" he asked while sitting at the breakfast table swallowing the last of his coffee.

Semele, in her very nondomestic white satin robe, was holding Miguel on her lap and spooning mashed pear into his occasionally compliant mouth. He was trying to talk to his father, which Rafael was surreptitiously encouraging with humorous expressions.

"You're egging him on and the pear's going everywhere but into his mouth," Semele scolded. "So you want to see Brad, hmm? He flew down to San Francisco to attend that big environmental conference you dodged...and to visit with the family. But I think he may've returned yesterday."

"Please call him and find out if we can drive over tomorrow. I do want to see him."

"Why don't you call?"

"He is used to hearing from you. I do not want to seem to interfere too much."

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“Even if you are? Oh, don’t look at me like that. I’m only teasing. He needs plenty of interference.”

“*A propósito*, you should call Martha. She has been worried.”

“Yes, darling, yes, darling. I’ve been...ill.”

He studied her without saying anything, but aware of the sudden sad recollection in her crystal eyes, disturbing in this frangible version of a slender white penstemon.

“Are you not a very enthusiastic cook, *querida*? Because you are losing weight. The toast and orange juice was all right with me but... Shall I cook for you? You need regular meals with lots of calories, *no*?”

“No...no thank you.”

He shook his head with a disapproving turn of his mouth and asked, “Does Brad think I am--”

“He doesn’t know a thing about it. I haven’t spoken to him since I... Oh God, I’m not finishing anything...this subject is...I can’t even... If you knew what it--”

“Let me take Miguel, *querida*. I will clean him up while you call Martha and get dressed.”

“Why am I getting dressed?”

“You have to sometime, do you not? And besides we are going for a drive.”

“Really? This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

She was staring at neglected Catney, alternately begging at her feet and winding between her ankles. She handed over Miguel, his wide brown eyes now focused on Catney, and went to the cat-food cupboard, followed by a meowing, madly exuberant and vertical-tailed feline beggar.

“Not a very domesticated animal,” Rafael observed.

“All right, you wild thing, it’s coming.” She poured some fishy protein-loaded little brown squares into his clean blue bowl. His spare needle-sharp teeth immediately went to work with greedy but finical selection, followed by enthusiastic crunching. Poor Catney could not chew very effectively but he could bite very smartly indeed. Rafael had verified this only a short time ago when, with his imperiled and only useful hand, he had swiftly snatched up a ferocious cat, a timely retrieval after Catney’s spectacular leap into the middle of the breakfast table.

“How did you find out this friend Julio Carrera was teaching at the University of Washington?” Semele asked, her eyes on the fuel tanker just ahead of her Saab. They were driving north from Seattle on what he had been told was one of the nation’s busiest freeways. Fortunately, Dora had appeared delighted to be sitting with

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Miguel again. They were traveling to a private residence near the town of Edmonds, invited there by another cause-driven man, once a global partner now a visiting professor at the university.

“On the plane, I was reading an article in an ecology journal -- reading as I sometimes do, hastily from back to front as a subject’s worth is verified -- and I discovered it was written by my friend Julio. I sent him an e-mail.”

“Where did you find that journal?”

“Just part of the mail I was carrying in my *valija*.”

“Where in fact do you get posted mail? I can’t imagine how you keep up with any of it.”

“Most of it comes to my parents and is forwarded as I request it...sometimes to Paris, where I seem to remember you saw me reading it. Why did you change lanes?”

“I hate driving behind or beside large dangerous loads of anything. Do you know how certain truckers get their licenses? I saw a report that made my hair stand on end. Some of them can’t speak English...instead of taking a driving test they simply pay someone off.”

“I cannot believe it...not in America,” he said, his mock disbelief accompanied by sardonic laughter, which ended abruptly. “Why are you driving so close to that SUV at this high speed?”

“Oh, darling, I’m so sorry about your arm. If you were driving then I could ask you why you were doing things.”

“All right, maybe I should close my eyes.”

“*Sí, sí, mi marido*, take a little nap.”

“Your driving is so interesting that I hesitate to ever close my eyes while you are at it.”

Very soon they were reading house numbers on a green-forested hill above the water just outside the pleasant shore town of Edmonds, about fifteen miles north of Seattle.

“Oh, a brick house,” Semele said, pulling into the narrow driveway. “Cute. Cozy.”

“Julio is renting.”

“Is he alone?”

“His wife is in Murcia.”

“What on earth is she doing in *Mur-thi-a*...oh, never mind. I think your friend is coming out.”

Barrages of lively Castilian were exchanged as they entered the house, and then Julio switched to English in polite deference to Semele. They were rather

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offhandedly introduced to a pretty young blonde woman, resembling the professedly serious academic votaries he had in the past found hovering around himself -- this one quietly engrossed in background domesticity. He had determined that Semele would know at once Julio's wife was absent. In all the years he had known Julio, he had never once seen him with his mysteriously missing and presumably long-suffering wife.

A light repast of mackerel salad along with grapes and sliced apples and a decanted Spanish wine was set out on an undecorated ebony table in the austere narrow dining room.

"Ah, *el almuerzo, gracias*," Rafael said, not having expected to be eating lunch at the rapidly approaching, nominally traditional hour of siesta. "*Entonces*, you can laugh while I, *un hombre manco*, eat with the wrong hand."

"First you must use your left hand for a glass of good wine, and the rest will be made easier," Julio instructed. Thereafter, the simple but fresh and tasty meal was eaten, with minor explosions of congenial laughter throughout.

Aside from the prospect of an agreeable acquaintance, he had several well-considered motives in meeting with his old friend. Julio Garcia had mentioned that one of the organizations to which he devoted his free time was looking for one or more sharp-minded analysts -- a survey group studying economic conditions in certain neglected small countries, with the goal of promoting specifically tailored aid. Rafael wished to see Semele well away from Jefferson Davis Smith & Associates. He had rationalized that her unhappiness with presently minimally satisfying work, and her strong desire for challenges linked with humanitarian endeavors, made his undisclosed ploy perfectly acceptable. He would leave it to Semele to advertise her suitability with her own luminous nature. His second motive was to probe conditions for a secure teaching position that might effectively make use of Brad Taylor.

Perhaps Julio's straight black hair was a little thinner, his jovial mustachioed face a little plumper, but he looked essentially the same as when last encountered in Barcelona two years ago, still without the neglected and softening frame of an academic. He possessed a rough ruddy skin, imprinted with the periodic abuse of harsh foreign environments, an oversized round nose, penetrating brown eyes squinting behind black-rimmed glasses, and a stocky frame a head shorter than Rafael's. Both his upbeat and energetic professorial manner and a longstanding prominence in collecting and broadcasting socio-ecological facts from every corner of the globe must have won him the devotion of many supporters and, presently, of his rather taciturn young helper, Janice. She prepared and served their healthy lunch with the tractable orderliness of a waged aide; yet, fond eye contact with Julio at certain supposed surreptitious moments was several removes from the status of employee.

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The dining table was swiftly cleared, then coffee and puff pastry served. With only a few passing words, Janice had distanced herself in a discreetly-placed straight-backed chair. Clearly, she intended to merely listen rather than participate in their postprandial conversation. *Possibly she assumes Semele will do the same*, Rafael mused.

Semele would have no thought of withdrawal. While composed and never overbearing, she was nearly always an entertaining participant in, or very often wittily at the center of, any social gathering, and especially *la tertulia*.

He saw, with curious anticipation, that Semele was about to air a provocative opinion. She stood sipping her coffee with one long tan-slacked leg crossed over the other and a suede-jacketed elbow propped against the bricks of the empty fireplace. A sepia-russet eyebrow lifted slightly as that discerning sky of vision swept over the room and those in it, registering it all in minutest detail. A subtly flexing mouth had been silently commenting on everything heard, with delicate muscular responses only he could distinguish. He wanted her to respond apropos the fresh stimulus of a new acquaintance, to very soon reveal more of her discernment than luncheon banter had permitted. He wanted to listen. In moments much less pragmatically driven than this, he always learned a great deal more about the subject at hand as seen through her perceptive eyes. She parked her cup on the mantel and glanced sideways, about to put forth some incisive, probably thoroughly pertinent, observation.

“All through lunch we’ve been discussing modern Spain as the antipode of desperate places. Yes, I’ve always thought of it as rather self-contained and a...while earlier technologically booming on the world market, trying to mind its own domestic business. I’d really like to know how that Iberian propriety -- a sort of persistent interiority -- has managed to foster two very engaged altruists and place them right in the middle of global pestilence.”

Julio drew himself up with a responding astonishment. He pushed his glasses back on his broad nose and studied Semele, while apparently gathering his thought into weighty opinion; probably intending gentle protests of modesty combined with a relevant supply of statistics, Rafael then surmised. It was obvious that Julio now felt huge surprise to find himself in such thrall of Semele. Justified thrall.

In a curious form of homage she had outdone herself, if somewhat at his expense, for Rafael was once again swiftly inclined to acquit himself by casting off what he considered an inappropriate title (he thought himself too relentlessly expedient, or shrewdly unremitting, to be rightly termed an *altruist*, although Semele had insisted he was one, no matter how he saw himself -- *she was over-fond of tidy labels*). As for resistant Spain, which could not, unfortunately, resist modern terrorism, he would not be tempted into even a cool variety of confining chauvinism. Disregarding Semele’s controversial labeling of himself, and before Julio could grind

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out an answer, he deflated the swelling silence with one leveling tongue-in-cheek stroke.

“Even *España*, who made Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, produces all kinds.”

Julio let loose an involuntary guffaw of laughter, but appeared somewhat anxious at having been prevented from pressing forward. “Well,” he said, pulling off his glasses and wiping them with a large white handkerchief, “I was really going to give Semele a more informative explanation.”

Now Rafael sought to end a wayward subject. “We will simply enjoy her observation as a rhetorical *fineza*.”

A quiver of displeasure flashed across Semele’s face, so faint a tremor only he would be able to detect it, like a barely perceptible but dangerous tsunami crossing deep ocean. She did not want her remark dispensed with as a mere social *nicety*. But Rafael was impatient to expose some of her more employable advantages, those in *her* province not his. Unfortunately, his sudden reappearance had fired Julio’s sharp recollections. His old friend’s retro-darting conversation, fully kindled, now threatened to plunge into one of Rafael’s more perilous past endeavors; a feat Julio had good reason to hold dear.

“Let us go into my nice little *sala*,” Julio invited, with an accent much more pronounced than Rafael’s.

They all stood up and ambled over the parquet floor through a circular archway and onto the well-worn red floral carpet of the sitting room. Semele and Rafael chose a long leather davenport suggesting the dark green of avocado skin, Julio a matching wingback, and Janice its broad leather foot rest set before Julio’s chair.

“This is a tough *hombre* you have married, Semele,” Julio began. A provocative introduction to risky endeavors heretofore never revealed. Rafael knew what was coming.

“A tough *hombre*?” Semele repeated, looking at Rafael.

He turned away, staring through a broad window at an interesting prospect of mackerel sky above a lively sea; this done essentially to diminish anticipated remarks, but incidentally taking in the subtle changes of indifferent nature. Out there: an immensity of distance, impassively placing his ambitious ventures on a more realistic scale of importance; but not relative. A timeless universal scale was always the wrong scale for suffering humanity, a wounded earth. This outlook remained his own resolute perspective, while eluding Julio’s approaching subject.

“*Sí*, a tough *hombre* who, I believe, continues to receive...*ay*, to provoke these various injuries.”

Purposely not responding in any noticeable manner to Julio’s assessment, he went on staring out the convenient window. Restlessness at having to veer from his

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chosen course began to ebb away as he squinted at a far sailboat dipping and turning in agitated mauve waters. Dipping and turning, appearing and disappearing...alas, on very likely acidifying seawater. Sufficiently distracted, he was able to compare his vivid marine aspect to a certain lively Manet seascape: crude little gaff-rigged boats moiling in a watery flux of shaded amethyst and angry turquoise. Ennobling art: often the only preservation of imperiled nature.

Julio's persevering, slightly arch voice intervened.

"One thing in particular stands out in my mind...not so long ago it was. Probably he has told you."

"Probably not," Semele muttered.

He felt but did not meet her stare. Managing a side glance at the line of her jaw tightening, he then loosely calculated the times this had occurred for similar reasons.

"No? He has not told you how he arrived at a moment of disaster and threatened to burn down the house of an African chief? More than threatened, as I believe he was prepared to do it...burn it down or blow it up."

"I...a...he's never..." Semele shrugged, looking at Rafael with a silent expectation that would require from him a shrewdly sifted response.

"Eh, I was in a hurry...without many choices. My *compañeros* were in a filthy rat hole and being tortured."

"It must have worked," Semele surmised, still waiting for a more expanded explanation.

"Ah, *sí, sí*," Julio said, laughing.

"*Sí*, it worked," Rafael affirmed, launching into an abbreviated but straightforward account. "The village had its water stolen and sold back beyond its means to pay. For complaint of this, the villagers and some of my friends were penned up, beaten and exposed to...a variety of practiced barbarities. The chief's house was a veritable museum of plunder, purchased with foreign aid and the people's water. A tyrannical pestilence, he was also a hoarder, a looter, enough of a materialist not to risk a single stick of costly French furniture. Everyone was released."

"But how did you...alone...get away with that?"

"For a few brief moments I had UN soldiers somewhere at my back...implied their support. They had scarce idea what I was telling the chief."

"Bravo, bravo!" Semele exclaimed. "Did you really have explosives?"

"*Sí*, in a manner of speaking...the manual equivalent, nothing very sophisticated. I had a grenade in my hand."

"Ready to explode?"

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“Sí. I am not proud of this tactic, but you must understand that the prisoners were going to be shot.”

“The more I hear the more miraculous it seems that you’re sitting here beside me.”

“I hope this is not going to be a visitation of many more past exploits, Julio, *mi compadre*. For then we must visit yours, too.”

“Ah, not nearly so eventful, *amigo*. He has not mentioned, Semele, that I was one of those being held.”

Semele looked from Julio to him. He at once abandoned his original plan, the gradual revelation of her assets, and said simply, “*Mi esposa* is, among other things, an advanced mathematician with remarkable analytical acuity.”

“Ah, if that is so, can it be you are one of the specialists we are seeking?”

“What?”

Again he could feel her provoked and provocative eyes searching his face, but kept his own eyes on Julio, awaiting a continuation of the idea he had soundly planted.

“Economic aid can only be effectively employed by a receiving country when there is a democratic government in power, or at least a government with democratic tendencies.”

“As is the fortunate outcome in Madera,” Rafael was moved to interject.

“Sí, and you were its catalyst.”

“No, *amigo*, it was going to happen no matter what I did. Mendoza has the people.”

“But you *were* its immediate catalyst.”

“*Sin embargo*...be that as it may, you were explaining the reason for your work.”

“Ah, sí, the need for Semele.”

“I don’t--”

“Please, *querida*, let him finish,” he advised, ignoring the warning flash of her perplexed eyes.

“Grants are thoroughly wasted unless they can be tailored to the needs of each impoverished country and, of course, unless they are placed in the hoped-for honest hands of skilful socially-minded organizations and officials. Up to now, this has seldom been the case. There is corruption everywhere, and World Bank and the IMF are not immune to gross failures of judgment, gainful designs, and outright inefficiency. However promising the program of assistance devised, it simply does not work when generally applied in a sweeping bureaucratic manner. We are trying to correct this by looking at each needful country individually -- at the different regions of each country -- thereby determining the most appropriate monetary and material

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responses. This we are attempting to do by careful field study. Such work calls for a detailed analysis of statistics collected on site in order to synthesize accurate conditions. Computers speed the process, but they cannot take that pivotal initial bite of raw data. That analysis is the province of very astute human calculation. Perhaps yours, Semele.”

“It sounds quite challenging....really....and very important...undeniably useful work for someone who--”

“In light of Rafael’s work, I am sure you are well aware that right now there are people dying in high mountain villages and lowland deserts, not just from waterborne diseases when they cannot afford good water, but from rifles when they protest the theft of their water for the purposes of excessive profit...and there is sickness and death by outright neglect, of course...the lack of any water at all. Specific well-implemented aid can change this, change it irreversibly...along with so many other adversities.”

“I’m afraid you didn’t realize...that is, I’m sorry to say I already have a position...a very demanding one.”

“Ah, *sí*. Well, I am not even certain you would be suitable for our needs. But if so, at least in my opinion, there are no positions more important than those few we are intending to fill. I am sure we could not pay the handsome salary you likely now receive, but with the help of a few grants we can offer a fairly decent one. Ah, but let us say no more, as I can see you are not yet amenable to this. I think it is a new idea, *no?* *Con todo*, perhaps you will consider it. For reasons I’ve explained, we are obviously in a hurry, but we are still a little flexible.”

Without missing a beat and without looking at Semele, rather disturbed with him at the moment, Rafael asked, “Who teaches environmental ethics at the university?”

“*Mi amigo*, we all do in various contexts...but I believe no one in particular teaches it. I very much want you to deliver strong words on the subject to my classes. Of course, you will come and speak. I would be honored to have someone with the firsthand experience you possess.”

“May I bring another person along?...introduce him to your colleagues?...a multitalented philosopher with, I believe you will see, a very knowledgeable and persuasive manner when it comes to uses and abuses of the environment.”

“Ah, *sí, sí*, Rafael. In my position I have not as much influence with the department, but I do have the generous consideration of my peers,” Julio responded with caution, at once understanding Rafael’s intent.

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Janice, glancing at her watch, leaned away to whisper a reminder in Julio's ear to return a phone call, and Julio excused himself. An opportune interruption for Rafael.

Taking hold of Semele's rigid hand, he locked it against his thigh in a warming grasp. It was now possible to communicate each other's more volatile attitudes by a single glance. His look acknowledged her reproachful eyes. He offered an importuning smile, waiting at that presently disaffected cool blue entrance -- myriad shades or humors ranging from celestial fire to common sense. Her scolding head dipped over one shoulder. The tense hand relaxed, and fingers twined through his. First a long acquiescing sigh, then a more tolerant laugh, exasperation yielding to reason at some negotiable halfway point. Fully apprised of that superb willfulness, he relished the high degree of influence he could exert -- just now influence competing with another established loyalty. Agreement would still leave him with no dominance -- that, not intended anyway --; even if he had temporarily failed, she already shared his conviction. Her power of positive reasoning, her compassionate nature, and finally the role of love itself, would overcome even his own reluctance to do what he had just done: whether successful or not, he had placed her in his actual world.

"I might astonish you with a lot of foreboding facts, even you who have heard so many," Rafael said to one of Julio Carrera's first-year classes. "Does this remarkably complex earth virus, man, affect the planet adversely? Of course. There is absolutely no doubt of it. Scientific investigations, now ranging back over hundreds of millennia, have shown how the earth reacts to altered orbital motion and cataclysmic external phenomena. But now, with the comparatively recent introduction of fossil-fuel-gulping humans and our carelessly polluting technologies -- however ingenious and progressive some of these are --, directly attributable and rapidly accelerating adverse changes in environment are irrefutable. Relatively normal repetitive modifications extending far back in geologic time do not confirm the more drastic of the earth's recent changes as naturally cyclic. The atmosphere is loaded with carbon dioxide. The ice is melting as a consequence, and its reflective capacity is therefore diminishing, leaving the unlocked seas to absorb heat -- the atmosphere methane. The earth is heating up. Unfortunately, our self-absorbed life spans are far too short to absorb the encroaching heat of longer range problems...beyond the storms, extreme cold. I sometimes hear the cavalier remark that the life source in our solar system is ultimately doomed to wink out, and that will be the end of man anyway -- so forget it, give it up. That particular end game is a very long way off, a lazy and foolish rationalization for doing nothing at a critical place in time -- what we have now is

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probably irremediable. Understandably, man is a creature of the moment, and not inclined to ponder a future beyond himself, except in some vague speculation. But if we think of the reduced quality of life, the acute suffering of our children, if we possess that deep human consideration of our own biological issue, we will begin to grasp the terrible dilemma awaiting our astounding species, awaiting a magnificently diversified planet, and we will strive to effect immediate solutions. It is not at all doomsday pessimism to state that, with continued nay-saying, with continued inattention, we will reach a negative end point. Short-sighted factions of avid consumption, and their exploitive proponents, would have you believe otherwise, even as the precious counterbalance of the Amazon and other forested places is brought to an end. We are now in an accelerating stage of decline so large and unwieldy that the entire system may crash and flip over very suddenly. When that happens this problem, already global, is irreversible, globally terminal. At this moment, there is actually a scientific way to reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. But this is only an expensive stopgap measure. Over the long range, there are the devastating issues of ceaseless pollution, rising populations, the indiscriminate use of finite resources. Consider that New York City alone uses one point three billion gallons of water a day -- one city in a world teeming with billions of water users. How long can this go on?"

Brad Taylor, who had attended Rafael's lecture along with Semele, Julio Carrera, and others in the department, had invited Semele, Rafael, and Julio out to his Bear Creek house. They had eaten at a restaurant in the University District, then gone to retrieve Miguel from his doting and happily disposed caregiver, now referred to as Aunt Dora.

Sipping from glasses of port, the four were deep into a lively late-evening discussion of global situations when Brad's nervous setter, Schopenhauer, trotted in and stared into the cold fireplace. He lifted his head in a mournful howl of protest. Everyone laughed.

"Come on, Schope, you know it's already too warm," Brad scolded. Schopenhauer settled down upon the cold hearth anyway, dreaming of fire.

"Yes, unseasonably warm," Semele agreed.

"Everything is waxing and waning far too early around here. Suppose I should confer with you two about global implications," Brad said, looking at Rafael and Julio.

"I am specifically concerned about the dwindling Colorado River," Julio said, his earnest body sliding forward on the red leather davenport, where he sat beside Rafael and Semele.

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“You might devote some thought to dwindling aquifers,” Rafael remarked. “On and on it goes, polluted rivers, coral beds dissolving in acid...the seas’ increasing dead zones.”

He turned toward the end of the long room where Sarah was once again settled in her rocker and tenderly in charge of his son. Miguel had just responded to his father’s familiar voice, squealing, “Da, da, da!” and reaching out.

What will my little one’s future be? I must have been in the heat of overruling passion...in the half-mad sway of willful chromosomes, to have suggested another child.

He stood up and walked to Miguel; his son’s laughing face turned toward him, the wide brown eyes staring out from beneath curly wisps of black hair, this little flesh of his flesh so irresistible. He lifted squealing Miguel into his left arm, the right no longer resting in a sling but still irritable, and carried him back to the davenport, settling his denim and black-shirted frame between Julio and Semele.

Semele kissed Miguel and played patty-cake with his waving hands. “Yes, yes, yes, Sarah is getting your very favorite applesauce, my darling boy.”

“You both spoil him,” Brad put forth with a bemused half scolding voice. “But I can see why.”

“No, we really don’t. This is quality time...because Rafael will soon be gone again.”

He looked at her above his son’s wriggling body. She tossed her head with a rather pitiful rebuke, crimson hair flying out around that noble physiognomy and settling over shoulders covered in sapphire silk and now bravely taut. Her pained eyes flashed alluring facets of blue *topacio* -- *sí, crystal blue topaz* --, so that her silent reprimand was easily overridden. He smiled at her, a worshipful but rueful smile, because of course he would always be going away, and it was this beautiful child who must serve as her immediate deterrent. He was glad that Miguel could do this, for his son’s sake and her own. And yet he wanted her, wanted her forever at his side, with a carefully veiled and very unsettling frustration.

“Well, you’ve done more miracles. It looks as though Brad may be under consideration for a teaching position.” Semele had just hung up her den phone after talking to, or mostly listening to Brad. That was how the morning had gone: Semele on the phone, mainly conversing with her charities, some of which were hopeful of far more physical input than there were hours in a day, as well as what she herself considered a mere token monetary support.

“Brad can do some research, too...get out into the field, which he loves,” Rafael said as he tossed things into his travel bag. He was disturbed because he could

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not get Semele to look at him or concentrate for very long on anything he said. She was more distracted than he had ever seen her, but would not utter a word of dissent at his imminent departure.

“Brad’s going to marry Sarah.”

“Eh, you see.” He put his arms around her waist from behind and drew her against him. “I forced him to give up on you in that regard. You are all mine now, are you not?”

Ignoring his teasing voice, she turned away, but he pulled her back until her head rested stiffly against his shoulder.

“How is your arm?” she asked in a breaking voice.

“My arm is fine,” he answered, lifting her head to make her look into his eyes.

“Don’t...please.” She moved away. “I’m going to be all right, if I can just distance myself enough to...to--”

“*¡Jesucristo, no!* Distance yourself from *me*? Just when I myself am about to do it with such regret?”

“The *self!* The self. I wish I didn’t feel most of mine being carried off. What’s left has to try and survive here for Miguel...or...or I’ll end up staring out a window in the dark...the way you found me when you came here.”

“When I came *home*. Wherever you are is my home. You imagine you are the only one who feels pain of separation.”

“Oh, darling, I don’t want you to have any pain.”

“Then you must try to say good-bye in a way that sustains us until I can have you again. Please come here.”

When they had finished with their sudden need for violent lovemaking and she was warm and malleable in his arms, he remembered Brad and said in a soft voice against her ear, “And what miracle have I worked with *you, querida mía?* Will you take the position Julio has offered?”

“I can’t be half a person half the time. I’ve got to try, *try*, I say, to be my whole self.”

“I love you for being your whole self...*love* your whole self. What has that to do with using your valuable assets where they will do the most good?”

“I really want to do that...but not by manipulation.”

He thought of letting go, of making sudden and vehement protest but did not, instead holding her with a single intent, his hands at her temples to have her attention.

“I will never try to control you, Semele. Even if it were possible, I could not stand the result. So many of those in want could have the value of you. But you must decide. I know how you care. There is no other like you, *mi amor*. Your unusual

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childhood has made you see a world in need. And yet...your loyalty to your company is admirable.”

He had almost said *loyalty to Jeff*, but had no wish to introduce that sensitive subject into their conversation. It was understood that she harbored a strongly entrenched attachment to Jeff, even though she might never be able to countenance a similar phenomenon between himself and another woman. He thought back over his brief varied relationships and almost laughed. Available women had always turned up. Those happenstance physical attractions were experienced as casually fond arrangements of sexual gratification, at least for him. No great loves. And then one golden Parisian day, by an extraordinary serendipity which he had tipped a little toward himself, there was Semele...incandescent Semele for whom, if ever necessary, he would sacrifice his entire existence, but from whom he was about to take his leave. Always without thought of apology, always by a powerfully held motive, he reentered the earth's volatile atmosphere to fully embroil himself in another marginal place.

Seated at their late breakfast, Semele said, “You haven't said precisely where you're going in Madera and I haven't asked.”

“No, you have not.”

“Do I need to ask?”

As he finished his coffee he considered why he had not told her. Because he could not stand to see her positive and sunnily complacent face cloud over with consternation.

“When you ask I will always tell you...but you should not think too much about it.”

“Please, my darling, don't treat me like a helpless oversensitive child...dammit!”

Without waiting for the usual calmly measured response, his essential, but now unapproachable, red whirlwind spun out of the room, her robe flapping at her ankles as she mumbled something about changing into slacks and shirt.

He went into the living room, holding Miguel beside him while he tried to read the morning paper, with his long body settled over Semele's comfortable cream sofa -- impossible with a squealing child and interrupting cell phone. Where in the world was he, everyone wanted to know. He gave up, punched off his phone and played with his demanding son. When he looked up, Semele was leaning in the frame of the sliding walnut doors that led into her den. Her carefully serene mask had momentarily collapsed and there were tears. He set Miguel down in the middle of the rug and went to her.

“*Querida?*”

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“Mari called earlier this morning to remind you to bring your water canteen because they’re having a serious drought in the southeast of Madera. Where the new mine is going into production...where there has been an upsurge of fighting...killing. According to the Internet, the sparse population there doesn’t want Higgins around either.”

“Goddammit, I wish she had not called.”

“I imagine after some thought so does she.”

Mari needed to be reminded never to communicate dire information through Semele -- yet such warnings seemed to him almost conspiratorial, distasteful.

He slid his thumb across her wet cheek to rid her cool flesh for a moment of an uncharacteristic sadness, newly wrought by the same natural emanation that so often held joy, a pained transition unbearable.

“Please do not do this.”

“No, it was just that I was watching you with Miguel, and it was so sweet. I can’t believe that by the end of the day you’ll be gone.”

Stroking her hair, he held her against his t-shirt and felt the warm wetness of undiminished tears soaking in. The tears, he adjudged, were for a number of things besides his approaching absence; among them: misery at what they could do to each other, both by a clash of supreme independence and insatiable need. There was that price to be paid.

“*Mira*...I am going to Madera to try and appease angry ranchers -- even before this disturbance barely eking out a living. Some viable place must be sacrificed and *La Pampa Árida* is that place...a big open plain with the new mine at its east end, as far away from the ranchers as possible. Still, they are furious, and I cannot blame them. But they are about to be shown that we have their best interests at heart...shown a path to reason and acceptance. You know this is always done with a viable conciliatory act. At least there is something to offer: our exploring geologist plotted a useable water table. I will ask Higgins to give them a productive amount. They need water. The mine uses some water, but it will be to his advantage to pipe it away from the mine floor. On the face of it, simple enough.”

“Except that right now they’re killing each other, miners and ranchers killing each other.”

“I believe you exaggerate. I have looked at reports, too. Unfortunately, one overzealous rancher killed a mine employee. There is some shooting...which I might have prevented if I had been there. But essentially Mendoza has things under control.”

“You take too much upon yourself.”

“Sí, everything...ostensibly, as much as I am given; less obviously, everything. It is just the way it works. The entire complexity acted upon -- like a

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chess board in play. For a functional lasting result, it is necessary. This is not to say we think our minimal ad hoc forces ever approach omnipotence -- the Arnau Relief Corps, as Mendoza has gladly consigned us -- but to appear that forceful, to act that way, will often have the same effect."

"All right," Semele conceded, drawing away from him to go and pluck exploring Miguel from the impending harm of a vase about to topple. "Go, then," she said, standing up with Miguel in her arms, her heated pink face a turmoil of passionate frustration. "You've already gone anyway. You're no longer here, but there...*there* where I can't be. You...you've seen to that."

"I am very much here," he argued, staring at a scene maternally exquisite and wrenching, then striding over to encircle his cherished two, his right arm still aching a little. "You and Miguel are so much to me...a private world I could never imagine." ; *Dios!* he thought, *that piercing bullet was nothing compared to the misery of this.*

On the first leg of his flight the young woman sitting next to him recognized him and immediately said so. She was a journalist who wrote for an American Web magazine. He saw at once that her shrewd sense of a fortunate encounter was bent upon his popularization for mass consumption.

She was dark and slender and, as he soon learned, a Spaniard from Cordoba -- a noble city of massing humanity that he still thought more worthy of embracing its rich history than the incursions of modern decadence. He did not like coincidence brought to this invasive level.

"I am familiar with your route, so I know you have a layover in San Francisco. Would you concede to an interview in an airport press room?" She fingered her cell phone.

"No thank you," he replied with jaded frankness.

"Perhaps I could do you some good. Would you at least have a drink with me while you wait?"

Revisiting an old perspicacity, he made a very candid appraisal. She was a little hard and single-minded but also abrasively attractive with a suggestion of rowdy sex, enough of a challenge to have once shared a few hours of pleasure.

"*Gracias*, but I do not drink when I am flying...or in between flights. I prefer to catch up on reading. For me, alcohol is nearly always counterproductive. A habit for leisure -- or sometimes a necessity -- but this is neither."

She flipped her long dark hair over her shoulders and laughed. "Just what I would have expected of you...after reading Jeet Grey's *workups*."

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“Ah, Jeet Grey. You should interview that man as to his inclinations. He is beyond the pale of reportage.”

“He is one of the best, *Señor* Arnau i Roca...or Doctor, isn't it? He is very fixed on you. I would love to catch him out...at something he missed.”

“Do you people ever consider the human factor when you compete this way, or invade another's life? Of course not.”

“When you are as public as you are, you are fair game.”

“Ah, that is a rote and inferior excuse for hawking a hell of a lot of fallacious indecency.”

Her brown eyes widened with a consciously seductive shrug, then her sharp dark eyebrows drew together. “Good reporters are all alike in this particular sense: decency we very often equate with failure. Jeet Grey would be quite envious. It is rather like a dream, sitting next to you.”

Dream on, he thought. “Nevertheless, nonnegotiable. I would not have thought you slept long enough to dream.”

At last caught off guard and showing indications of discomfort, even with all of her impermeable worldliness, she asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“*Por favor*, take it as a compliment...or any way good for both of us...and please, *señorita*, let me read.”

“So...you think I can do nothing for you? I would not like to write anything negative...not of my countryman.”

Smiling at her threatening voice, he said, “You have no need of *me* for what you want to write. But, in my case, I believe results will have profiled intent: always my best reference; so that whatever you publish will either enhance the truth or make straying from it obvious...or both.”

“I write with accuracy.”

“The party line of the plutocrats? *Business as usual*, concerned scientists call it...as it most certainly is.”

“Not my angle...I'm interested in *you*.”

His eyes traveled over her hungry, narrow, sharp-eyed little goat face with its intended temptation of usefulness.

“You may have guessed that I have been through this before. Seldom do you people write what I tell you, very simply the facts...but instead you choose to publish silly insensitive and shallow imaginings that do little for any serious cause. Occasionally, you say something well...and many times I have used *you*, I confess...when expedient.”

“You are colder than I thought.”

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“*Lo siento*, but in my line of work niceness is also, in many quarters, a mistake made only once.”

“You must be a very lonely person.”

Settling upon personal attack had revealed her anger at failing to wrest an interview. He grinned but could not resist a rebuttal before he returned to his reading. “It could be that I have more friends, more devoted friends, than anyone with so little time deserves.”

She responded with a last bold persistence, which she had apparently decided would cost her nothing and might even rile enough to produce a useful disclosure. “I wish you would tell me what you intend doing in Madera.”

“Only wish me well and wait and see,” he said, imperturbable, and with what Mari often vocalized as a drolly inscrutable smile. He did not even look up.

Briskly touching his finger to his tongue, he turned the obdurate page of another ominous report -- *in the last ten years carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has swiftly risen by an increment that previously took ten thousand years to accrue*. The carefully made observations laid out in the report were conclusive and familiar. All too soon, on life’s narrowing scale, margins of human existence will drown, he speculated, and not even in potable water.

When he finished talking to Mendoza on his cell phone, then Antoine, and finally cheerfully engaging Martha and George, he read a little more then stared through the airport windows during the final hour of his layover in San Francisco. Standard for him was not calling Semele so soon after the agony of parting -- such indulgence only invited temporarily irreparable emotions. For a while, he thought of earthquakes, the rippling effects of sheared and shifting plastic earth. Then at last, with a warming saved-up joy, he thought of Semele standing at the door of her Tudor house, speaking her mind while he still held Miguel.

“I was going to be casual...say *bye-bye* and trot off to the back yard to show Miguel the roses. I hate good-byes, but *these*...these are worst of all. I don’t know how to be. I feel so angry. I almost want to...to hit you. I’m really ashamed. It isn’t me. It’s terrible. Why? *Why?* I love you so much I feel sick. Oh, how can I do this? Please go. Just go. Maybe we’ll see each other when--”

“*¡Qué va!* Stop it...please...please. *¡Demasiado!* Ay, my wild one, you go too far with this useless anger.”

After a moment’s hesitation, and painfully aware of the finality, he handed drowsily content Miguel over to her. Immediately his son began to scream and reach out for him.

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“Ah, you see? You thought there was none of you in him. This is you. This rage at what is unfair...this willfulness. I love it in him...and I love it in you. You are fighters. Neither of you will stand for the least unjustness. You will always make your feelings known. I love you both more than anything...*anything* in my life.”

Miguel blubbered with sputtering outrage, his face contorted and red. Semele began to laugh, her beautiful heroic face full of amending laughter as she shook her head in wonder at him and his son. She knew exactly what she was doing when she left him with that image, exactly what it meant to carry away its immutable promise.

Mendoza sat in his favorite yellow sanctum, puffing on another holiday-size cigar -- at present appearing rather stiffly magisterial positioned behind his seldom privately held leather-topped desk. Used to judging with alacrity subjects far less complex than the one now seated before him, his gray eyes steadily sought to read and draw upon compliant Rafael's politely restrained momentum. Rafael saw at once, in those scheming depths of gray, certain undesired glints of divergent strategy. Unsettling.

“Before you go to *La Pampa Árida*, we have another place you must go.”

“Where is that?” Rafael asked, not entirely with surprise but stiffening slightly in his chair.

“Ah, Doctor Arnau i Roca, I am not supposed to say. But I fear if I do not I will never get you there...and perhaps even if I do. It is *La Nava Feraz*.”

“¿*Por qué?* Everything is going well there now, *no?* The river is flowing...water will soon be easier for everyone. Of course, I would like to see my friends in the valley...but is it not more important that I go to--”

“¿*Por Dios!* how you do attend to business -- the fighting in the south is momentarily at a standoff; soldiers, construction workers, ranchers dug in. ¿*Qué hombre!* as your poor little *chica* says. You are a good example for my own self, *mi amigo*. *Sin embargo*, at this particular time there is to be a ceremony for you. At certain stages of a people's exhaustion they need the inspiration of a hero to lift them up.”

“And *you* are that hero. Let them celebrate you.”

“Ah, I am afraid I have the same aversion to public praise as you. *Mi compadre*, I must govern this place. I cannot raise my hands in *fraternidad* and then disappear into the clouds like a sacred being. For me, it is only the very beginning...only the beginning of my country's life. And anyway, this ceremony is more important than you realize.”

“But a ceremony now? With all the unrest in--”

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“Sí, a ceremony. Madera has erected on a slope of the valley’s head a fine statue for you...of you I may say.”

“What! ¡Dios mio! At last I am nearly speechless. If such a monstrosity must happen at all, is it not the sort of thing that is done after the subject is no longer alive to protest?”

“Ah, but in this case, we prefer not to wait. You see, with you, one is never certain...and the people of the valley want you to know first-hand of their gratitude.”

“But I have always known...they have always been kind, always shown their gratitude. How can I go there now and stand before a statue of myself? It is thoroughly indecent. ¡Jesucristo! this is...I never imagined anything so--”

“Your argument will be useless...and everyone knows you are a modest man in regard to praise. I have told you all this to prepare you, as I believe I was supposed to remain silent. I have also just taken the liberty of contacting *la señora Taylor de Arnau i Roca*...invited her to come here. She will be well guarded...but in Madera it is certain you have fewer enemies than I. Already, she is on her way.”

“Semele is coming here? ¡Jesucristo!”

And so it was, as Mendoza and the people of *La Nava Feraz* had made it, a ceremony that not only amassed all the peasants of the valley but cleared out the city of La Ceiba and drew Maderans from the distant borders of the country. All this Rafael agreeably countenanced, but only after he reflected upon what Mendoza had meant. Indeed, the people needed a celebration, and if it brought them together in a jubilant and peaceful manner, brought them a communal sense of accomplishment and fraternity, he would have to sacrifice his private self as a very necessary excuse, have to accept this incongruous material encomium with all the grace and diplomacy he could summon. For the first time in all his voluble, aggressive, purposefully motivating capture of crowds, he would have to stand before a massive gathering as a man to be honored, but with a vivid sense of unworthiness. For his objective and persevering nature, it was little more than a mitigating hindrance. Yet here existed an impetus for solidarity, and therefore the need to suppress aversion, to climb over embarrassment and make some good of it. Very quickly he seized upon the appropriate attitude; his subject would be Mendoza: the worthiness of their president, their elected leader’s newly instituted reforms and the success of his long-awaited governance, with his peoples’ vigilance.

Rafael did worry continually about Mendoza, not of the president’s possible inadequacies or corruptibility but of adverse repercussions of his moral worth, his

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unflinching resignation to act for social good. Such magnanimous intent invited usurpation -- verifiable by any number of historical illustrations --, assuring interference by powerful nations and consortiums seeking large commercial gain with their usual reckless schemes for profit. Coercing freewheelers like these did not cozy up to the Good: it would not connive to supply a foreign elite with coveted resources; fostered no despoiling excess; suffered no hands in the till.

Semele had arrived with a planeload of family: his parents and her mother and father and cousin Brad (Sarah was at home caring for Miguel); she had even managed to bring along Julio Carrera, happy, he said, to celebrate the *hombre* responsible for his last birthday. Marion Brown had also been available for the trip, and had come along of her own volition, motivated by an investigative desire to study the man who had won Semele. The recruited plane was at once recognizable as J.D. Smith and Associates' commodious BBJ. Jeff -- along with some of his associates -- was on his way to another of his undisclosed flashpoints, promising to retrieve his passengers in a short number of days. How these dovetailing logistics were so facilely enacted Rafael had decided not to ask. Smith himself, pressed for time, did not even deplane. Semele was still working for the company, and had apparently communicated her immediate need for swift transit, a necessity as suddenly answered. The arrival was unceremoniously facilitated by rapid dispersal into government cars, for, at Mendoza's order, no one was discommoded by Customs.

On this same night, before the next day's celebratory unveiling, Mendoza hosted a pleasantly restrained dinner in the palace, for the visiting families, government officials, and those local personages deemed sufficiently well-disposed to have earned inclusion. Not one of Rafael's loyal valley friends was present; Rafael deemed this a wise consideration from Mendoza; his friends would have been far more ill at ease than, by his required endurance, Rafael anticipated for himself. He would have preferred to be in the same place Antoine and Mari, given a choice, took themselves: during these evening hours happily celebrating at *La Vid*, laughing and drinking with the peasants of *La Nava Feraz*.

When Mendoza toasted his honored guest with French champagne, Rafael, having already drunk a certain amount of scotch, winked at Semele but extended his bubbling flute slightly in the direction of his beaming parents; a glimmer of deferment offered to their smiling, nodding faces, their unexpected presence withstood and reconciled as an overdue premium to be paid -- here at least was one positive aspect of their astonishing son's troubling existence. He could not look at any of his family in

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this extraordinary venue without a strange feeling of displacement. ; *Cristo! I am strung up without recourse*, he thought, *strung up far too high but swinging very prettily, thanks to flowing spirits. Muchas gracias to the vine on this noche pública. And for myself: far sounder rescue by way of smoky distilleries in Scotland's fair green hills.* Doubtless, he was *borracho*.

A few members of the press did manage to squeeze through the tall ornate double doors of the hall where post dinner guests were socializing, among them Rafael's Boswell, Jeet Grey, who made every attempt to monopolize his subject, but with only fleeting success. Somehow the insistent dark-haired reporter from Cordoba had materialized, haughty with her achievement and incongruously clinging to Jeet Grey's white-sleeved, flaccidly insubstantial arm. The luck of admission apparently left her quite willing to present herself as merely an adjunct to this panting little English hound of the Fourth Estate.

Mendoza undertook to flirt with Semele. He teased her in a humorously decorous manner revealing his innate skill at successfully handling the full social spectrum, whatever the uncustomary occasion. A contrived measure of polish shone doubly bright from this battle-scarred, terse-speaking militarist, a man impatient with frivolous niceties, but aware of them. Semele was prime, scintillating, her lankily supple frame handsomely wrapped in an apricot shot-silk dress. Quick and brave and hilariously retaliatory, her spirited tongue, her crimson halo shimmering beneath the converted ballroom's chandeliers, held Mendoza spellbound. Very soon she found herself touted as a rare species of Wonder Woman. But Mendoza's slightly alcohol-emboldened praise was too soon overtaken by the sugary attentions of well-meaning Maderan admirers paying him homage.

The new president had a clever method of dealing with simpering effusiveness. He smoothly turned any high-flown praise back upon its flustered originator, very often as cozening jest. A businessman who had, under Bellaco, made a sweet deal by selling an empowering percentage of his soy processing company to a German national--who then laid off most of the local workers--shook Mendoza's hand, trumpeting: "Our wise leader, how lucky we are to at last have one who understands us." "And one who also understands that your more venal understanding now lives in Sierra Leone," Mendoza snappily replied, looking at the man as if to say, *who let you in?* Rafael grinned as he leaned against a gold-turned Venetian pillar, a half-full whiskey glass in hand, enjoying much more than he had anticipated, especially Mendoza's ironic dispersals. They elicited from him a savoring interior laughter, just now overt. A brisk turning of the table was a method they shared -- he occasionally employed it against either benighted criticism or too-thick praise. But when the thick

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praise next flowed in his own direction, his rather short-lived enjoyment as quickly dissipated.

From among the suffered extollers, the pointed little teeth of dogging Jeet Grey emerged yet again. His mouth hung open in the familiar gape of authentic astonishment, which Rafael unwittingly induced. The magnified unteamed eyes now appeared only slightly sardonic. His pony-tailed head was thrown back as he moved forward, in unswerving pursuit of the only prey who had ever captured him.

“Suzanne Castillo told me she sat with you on a leg of your flight. She said you refused to drink with her...talk with her. I advised her to have a quick look at...well, also a bit of a listen to your rather amazing wife.”

“Am I now to thank you for this out-of-bounds praise?” Rafael chided, swallowing the last of his scotch.

“Well, doctor...be that as it may...*la señora Taylor de Arnau i Roca* is the whole business...yes, rather choice.”

“At last we agree completely,” Rafael rewarded.

So Jeet Grey had curtailed his unprofitable dislike of Semele. A late ploy. It would have been more useful from the beginning to have befriended her. That was something nearly every reasonable person exposed to Semele attempted, something she would not allow in Grey’s case, as warily supportive of her hounded mate as a protective wolf bitch.

Rapidly excusing himself, he moved away to see if his father might be in need of a rest. At that moment, he was halted by a richly endowed female tongue, the assured and mellow enunciation of a woman used to marshaling and captivating large audiences, with convincing eloquence.

“Hello, hello, the mother of your beautiful son has failed to introduce us. I’m Marion Brown...and you’re the prominence who captured our unpredictable radiance, Semele.”

“Ah, I have heard of you...Aunt Marion.” Rafael’s grin was generous and sincere, his extended hand warmly grasped. “You are one of the influences of that radiance, *verdad?*”

“You’ve said just the right thing.” Her fingers still clasped his hand, and her forthright amber eyes roved blatantly over his face, a self-evident seer at work.

He stared at this refined woman, at her neat waves of short auburn hair framing an alert oval face -- a trenchant no-nonsense countenance intensely focused on himself -- at her well-toned mature figure, subtly rose-perfumed and clothed in a classic-style cream suit, at the gleam of her unusually large gold watch on a supple tendinous wrist, and at her expressive satin-skinned hands, the short manicured nails coated with a discreetly pale peach enamel.

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“We prize the uncommon creature so...her beauty, inside and out, her intelligence and, of course, her independence.”

“Am I under attack...trespassing on that independence?” Rafael asked as his captive hand was finally released.

“Absolutely not. What else could you do? You had to have her, didn’t you? You’re to be congratulated for your superb taste. By now you must know that Semele is fully right-and-left brain...a very advantageous condition.”

“I have never considered her in that way, but of course you are right. I forgive her even that.”

“Ah, a wry sense of humor. Her good judgment obtains.”

“I am humbled by any favor.”

“My God, our girl knew what she was doing, didn’t she? Come,” she urged, taking his arm and motioning toward a waiting row of gilded white side chairs with red damask seats. “Will you sit with me a minute and hear a few of my fondest memories of her?...revealing little anecdotes.”

“Everything you can say I want to hear.”

Near midnight, the fatigued family members were shown to their rooms. Rafael’s people, who included Semele’s family, were all staying in the capacious and lonely spaces of the yawning echoing palace; Semele, stopping off at her parents’ and Marion’s rooms, eventually made her way to Rafael’s comfortably appointed space.

“Your parents are bursting with admiration,” she called above the splashing bathroom faucet.

“*Querida*, you appear not to have had the difficult relationship of child to parent -- ay, first escape from the relentless training process...then the burden of unending childhood. How was it managed...such noninterference alongside that relaxed independence of yours?”

He thought of Marion’s humorous, very defining but hardly surprising tale of Semele’s rather unrestrained and stubborn ascent into a dauntless womanhood: *Of course each of us was wrapped around a tender little finger, but she did it with such ingenuous enthusiasm.* He strained to catch Semele’s answer above the running faucet. First there was a chortle of comprehending laughter.

“Ah, you see it was a very different situation. This wild little animal was tamed en route. I couldn’t assert my independence by allying with disobedient peers the way most children do. I had to rely on my parents, who themselves asserted my independence. They were my initial source of knowledge and guidance in each new worldly encounter. They viewed the strangeness of other places as perfectly natural,

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communal. They made me examine for myself...occasionally correcting my course in a Socratic way. They taught me to question. They were exceptional...so liberal with me."

"You are *sui generis*. No other comes near you."

A modest silence was her only response. The faucet was then turned off, and he heard the sound of a glass jar settling on the tile counter.

"*¡Dios!* what a useless night. *Sin embargo*, your Aunt Marion and I had a dazzling encounter."

"Oh, I'm so glad. I'm sure you dazzled as much as she. Isn't she something?"

"*Sí*, she is that...and she knows you very well."

"I suppose so."

"Rafael, where was Carlos? I thought somehow he would fit himself in...close by his master...oh, probably not."

"Carlos is in Barcelona, studying...where he belongs. I think we must anticipate him as a promising musician."

"He wants to do what you do."

"That is impressionable youth. It will change."

"Where's his girl?"

"With him...growing a baby...keeping up his rooms."

"You wish I could be like that."

"*¡Dios, no!* A terrible waste. Elena is happy to do what she does. As that pretty thing, you would never be found in my life. I only want you safe...unlike Mendoza, who wants to put you in his army," he added with a laugh.

"Enrique Mendoza is wonderful...sweetly gruff...really sincerely focused -- *very* -- and easy to like," she called.

Barefoot, she stepped from the steamy bathroom into the alabaster-paneled ivory bedroom, and onto the deep white fleeces strewn over its polished pink marble floor. The drapes of the high windows were not drawn. Outside, a tall palm caught beams of light as it rasped in a weeping wind.

Rafael had not removed his clothes and was sitting in a large cream leather wing-back, leaning on his right elbow with pondering fingers stroking his chin. "*Sí*, that is so...Mendoza *is* focused...and so much the right man for this difficult governance that it becomes alarming." His vaguely depressed voice lapsed into an alcohol-wearied taciturnity.

"You're very aloof tonight. Are you tired?"

"Not altogether...a little *borracho*...and stupid."

"You really don't like...*didn't want* any of this."

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“Of course not -- easily the reason I drank a little too much...my way of getting through something unnecessary. Something I find indecent. The only good thing about this night and tomorrow is that for a little while I have you. I have *you*...but I wish you had not come. Dammit, why did you not ask me first?” Inebrious anger asserted itself, at once assailed by conscience, for there sat Rossetti’s flawless *Lady Lillith*, seductively tending her astonishing red hair. The voluptuous nature of the act...the hair...the woman, *bis*. He did not want her here. But to ravish her, yes.

Semele stopped brushing the glossy snapping waves and came to kneel before him, placing her hands on his knees.

“What is it? Not *me*? You don’t have to worry about me. Everyone wants to guard my life. It’s only amusing. For some reason I’ve got no fear of anything at all in regard to myself...none whatever...only for you.”

“Jeff left you security?”

“An embarrassing sacrifice...but, my God, *Mendoza’s* security!...all over the place...and for you, too?”

“Sí, for me, too.” *If it will speed your departure to say so*, he thought.

“Where was Brad? I never said a word to him.”

“He’ll get to you. He’s really grateful for what you’ve done. He pigeonholed your incredible president’s minister of health and social services...a smart Columbia graduate with great big ideas. How does Mendoza do it?”

“Ah, Catalina Blanco. She is someone I recommended.”

“I should have guessed. You know all the right women.”

“I know *you*...to some astonishing degree.”

He sighed and grasped her hair, pulling her head back to let the soft rose light from the damask lampshade fall over her withholding face; a cool determination in play there. Her eyes were violet, full of an intent he knew precisely.

“After the ceremony you must leave. ¡*Jesús!* you have brought everyone here...like a circus.”

“It’s good for them...good for all of us...even for *you*, my surly *agitador*. I’d like to stay a little longer. Just a few more days...go with you to *La Pampa*--”

“No! Absolutely not. You will *not* come with me. And where have you left Miguel?” He knew where but he meant *why*. He felt the prickling anger rising again, spreading, rendering him argumentative, heavy with unreasonableness. Some of this fierce choler was the alcohol, but only some.

“You know our darling *Miguelito* is safe with Sarah, the most dotting loving girl I’d ever wish to find him. I do have another person...a day sitter...very good.”

“So you can run off to...to your work.”

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“I’m sorry you’ve drunk too much,” she said, standing up and turning toward the bed. She flung back the satin counterpane and plumped a pillow. The scant lacy peach gauze provocatively covering her body, and the gracile body itself, could not be merely visually appreciated for very long. He swore softly as desire overtook him.

In the bathroom he removed his black silk shirt and threw cold water on his face, then peed while standing in a heavy scowl of sullen thought. He meant to let a digressive hot shower open his sweat-clogged pores and calm his sodden brain. When he returned from this soothing drenching, reconstituted into primal lethargy and comfortably naked, Semele was lying without covers and perhaps even sleeping, but more likely skillfully disallowing the appearance of a conscious state in his presence.

He drew the drapes to shut out the artificial light. The night was sweltering and the room intolerably humid. They had forgotten to switch on the ceiling fan, and he did so with some relief, then lowered himself atop the bed.

For a long moment he lay in silence.

“*Lo siento, mi amor.*” His gently probing voice drifted into heavy darkness diminished only by a faint gold-shielded bulb by the entrance door. After a moment he went on in a coaxing voice, softly acquiescent. “*Belleza*, you were so beautiful tonight...I loved to look at you...to listen to your clever words...wherever you are everything is yours. And you are mine...always...*siempre.*” He closed his eyes, inhaling the subtle tropical fragrance of her lotion, something like frangipani...coconut...something of both.

Restive fingers slid along his arm, a needful response as enlivening as pain. His waiting hand was taken away, possessed, held against her warm damp mouth, then cradled at her breast. He removed the filmy gauze covering none too gently, up over her head, and drew her against him. Burying his mouth in her hair, his thirsty hands claimed the firmly entwining faintly damp soft flesh. All his, *all*, to the sum of that willful nature. Here was mutual desire flaring into gratification, total release, but too soon given up.

“Ah! Ah! ;*Cristo, querida m ía!* Only in this way will you come with me.” Harsh resolve necessarily wrenched from his joy at precisely the moment she could resist nothing.

Beneath the hammering sun were the amassed upturned faces: first, the families, friends, and officials, then, countless others poised below and beyond the improvised stage placed beside the recently undraped gleaming bronze image of himself. It had been cast as he was presumed to have looked whilst setting the river free – for him, a startlingly mysterious, dense and limiting fixture of supposed action,

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completely foreign to the real act, and to the fluid and flawed impermanence of his unconventional, variable self. When his bones were dust it might still be there, representative of he knew not what -- unhesitatingly, he would have disclaimed heroism as some questionable end in itself. With repulsed head back and heated eyelids lowered, so that he glanced at it sideways through long lashes, he silently avowed the eerie kinetic effigy of himself as a pitiful answer to human desire, his and theirs: those now gathered before him, their inured native blood tintured with Spanish insolence. The dusky faces were avid, raised in concerted affirmation of what was still to come, as if he possessed, now and always -- alas, so very unsustainable --, a full heraldry of endowments to guide them through these critical moments and on toward positive achievement. Would that it were so, that like a shot in the arm this effort would *take* universally; would, when and if sufficiently publicized and acted upon, banish death-dealing complacency, the convenient blindness of the planet's users; those who did not even bother to rationalize continuous desecration.

Initially delivering a few amenities, he was moved to add, "This is not as much me as it is you," giving a swift side jerk of his head toward the kneeling likeness cast in such constraining perpetuity. His amplified voice of now more familiar Castilian bound the sea of hopeful faces in a solemn oneness of anticipation. "I can only praise you for faith in your own future...for the will to act.

"But now I have favorable news from your president. It is a decision really very forward-thinking, at least in today's climate of selfishness, yet something long overdue: a just innovation coming from this formidable servant, this fair-minded leader you have elected...an act that will serve as an example for the entire world. For many generations you have nurtured and tended land for which you bear no legal title. Land that, if it belongs to anyone, belongs to you as your birthright, familiar property which is the very reward and sustainment of all your hard striving. For those without such legitimate recordings of ownership, your new president has undertaken to furnish you with written title to all your family-tenured lands. You will quickly recognize the permanent benefits of this. With clear title as a valid asset, you acquire not only the dignity of long deserved recorded private ownership but, so important, the irrevocable rights of improvements, loans, and endowment -- you can legally pass the land on to your children. This is really a positive act, a standard now set, an unbreakable legality -- one your labor and devotion will continue to prove. *Landowners*, sooner than you think you will be able to pay a little for your new water system. We must honor the man whose efforts have made it all possible."

As he rose to receive deafening cheers and exuberant applause, President Mendoza held up his broad hand to shield a pugnacious twist of implicating mouth, which then rasped out a double-edged acknowledgment in Rafael's ear, "*Sí*, and

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¡Jesucristo! you are the one who first made this amazing and most inflammatory suggestion... *¡Provocador!* For this, it is barely possible we will not be assassinated.”

Mendoza turned to the crowd, smiling broadly and raising both arms high above his head. Then, pointing a thick finger at Rafael, his hand flattened, dipping and soaring up over his cheering people, like the spread wings of a rising dove. Rafael’s gleaming eyes narrowed; once again he was made champion of a birthright still in the womb.

“So now, my devious fox, you have managed to get yourself where I swore, *swore* you would not be...you shamelessly wooed Mendoza...added him to your list of the conquered.”

Semele laughed as she lifted her shirt and slid her hand over the pistol in her belt. “He was delighted to hear I’d brought my trusty old SIG-Sauer...had no idea how I’d get it through customs...then he made it so easy...for all of us – your gloating family. For him, there was never a question of my not coming with you to this big emptiness.”

“When *you* were finished with him, *sí*. The man wants to see you shoot. There is a lot of devil in him, *no?*” Rafael clicked his tongue in disgust.

“My darling, you’re exaggerating again.”

What I have exaggerated is the invulnerability of love in aeternum, he thought; something he could never argue, for he was *in* it and *of* it and now must carry it.

He watched her, with another grievous stab of that endlessly enveloping emotion: his possible nemesis, his necessity, down on one knee on the dry-crusted earth, hat removed, wayward hair now being gathered up and tied back.

“You do not realize the myth you have made.”

“Then I’ll have to try and live up to it, won’t I?”

“Eh, you like sleeping under the sky on this bruising ground...no sewage...only a little water in your *cantina?*”

“I like sleeping wherever you are. *La Pampa Árida*, what an accurate name for this barren plain.”

“Both of our families are angry at me for letting you come here.”

“And at me for coming. Once again my rather precarious profession hangs in the balance...J.D. Smith and Associates has suddenly gone ballistic.”

“Why do you not say what you mean? It is *Jeff*. For once I completely agree with him. I am a fool...a *reckless* fool for letting you come out here.”

“No you’re not. You know it’s the only way you’ll keep me. If I can’t be with you I might as well already be--”

The Water Bearer

“¡Chito! ¡Jesús! You will have to do exactly as I say or I will pack you off. Do you understand?”

“I understand. Just tell me that you want me here.”

“Ah, to you a simple admission.”

He stared at this beguiling scheming presence: those incandescent blue eyes glowing beneath a jauntily tilted, curtly abbreviated sombrero, the bunched red tangle of hair at her nape, the scuffed mountain boots below lanky fitted jeans already dusty, and the shirt-hidden torso, so slender, only moments ago ravished to incapacity on the hard ground and now swimming in one of his blue cotton shirts.

“Please do not look at me like that. I withhold my respect because you have temporarily abandoned your good reason...mother of Miguel. Is it not enough that you are here? *Sí*, you know I want you with me. You like to use this to have your way. I will hear nothing more of it. On this subject, *silence*...you wild little *vagabunda!*”

“Oh, darling, if you’ll just calm down and let me breathe your rarefied air you’ll see what I can do.”

“I *know* what you can do. I have to fear it.”

He had little free time to ponder how Mendoza, in the spurious role of gleeful warlord, had outmaneuvered him into letting Semele come along. It was now a fact, and his mind was necessarily elsewhere. The morning sun was heating up their encampment at the edge of this lower desert, where the rough dirt road leading here had ended. The singeing wind carried and forced into their dry nostrils the sharp smell of sun-cooked earth. Very soon they would have to cross this cloudless, glaring hot immensity, in order to reach the higher plain. Antoine and Mari had just departed for the most conspicuous of La Ceiba’s ramshackle, disease-ridden barrios, to take part in distributing more food and medical supplies that had recently arrived. The two had wanted to stay and accompany Rafael, but he asked them to oversee the work in the city. As usual, they followed his directive with obedient silence. Jordi, his efficient and dutiful aide, had brought in the mounts the two would ride. They were heading east into a rising expanse of sparsely-grassed plain north of the desert barrenness, and not far beyond the stony and cavernous dark hills of the proposed mine; only he and Semele. This altered plan was largely her idea. A man and woman riding out to meet with angry herders would be less threatening she had suggested. To that inarguable input, Rafael, having already given up on traveling alone, wisely gave swift accommodation. She was eager and quick and very much attuned to the present

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course. Her pistol was still hidden beneath her loose shirt, and, making clear his disapproval, he warned her to keep it out of sight.

“I wish you did not have it, but I would guess that by now it is expected of you...and if it gives you comfort...”

“But where’s *your* defense?”

“In my tongue. If I carried a weapon it would entirely defeat my purpose...possibly with a terrible result. I want only to kill ignorance, not life.”

“Then where are Mendoza’s guards?”

“I have told him no. I want no visible threat.”

“All right, then it’s up to me.”

She set off in such a fearless and optimistic frame of mind that Rafael was momentarily critical.

“Overconfidence diminishes range of possibility...may leave you with fewer choices.”

“I’m not *over*confident, merely confident...of course keeping in mind the worst...it’s the way I work.”

“You seem, what?...*je ne sais quoi*...as though you have no idea of the worst.” He felt a considerable degree of exasperation in the ascendant.

She reined her agitated black mount nearer his larger sorrel gelding and replied in a moderate forbearing voice, “Appearances can be deceiving. Speaking of which, I’m still pondering that incredible sculpture’s effects: so immediate, so disfavored by you -- explosives per se are now part of your myth. It makes me think too much about the future. I prefer you as a Michelangelo...or maybe...yes, possibly even Bernini’s *David*: all of that baroque sensuality...but so audaciously formidable...his sling in hand, his fiercely determined knit brow.”

“The baggage of the storied past, instead of a rapidly disintegrating future,” he responded; always ready to assert the actual, admittedly sometimes a little too forcefully, but that was to make a point. Still, Semele, even with all of her choice comparisons, had often shown appreciation for his sharp assessment of reality.

Now fluently chatty and back to the present moment, she teased, “I’ve never seen you in anything as personifying as this rolled Western hat...and you ride so comfortably, with very little consideration. To the onlooker, a born-in-the-saddle cowboy...a hellbent *vaquero*. Or, no...wait a minute. Hmm, you look like...*un caballero andante*.”

“Ah, *sí*, your knight-errant.” His laughter was for her enjoyment. “I hope you are still like this on the return trip -- I do not mean quixotic, I mean light of heart.”

“Just alive will do.”

The Water Bearer

“You will be that...and not lovelorn either.”

Quietly rubbing the back of her neck, perhaps pondering his promise, formed with gentle sarcasm, she rolled her head to relax an initial tension as they moved along in silence. She turned to her side and for a while looked hard at him, until he briefly offered his full gaze. He saw what was forthcoming and dropped his head back, staring down at the sere horizon floating an undulating mirage of the mine-earmarked hills. As each could do of the other, he had sensed a mood that foretold a serious accounting, much more intense than he wished to tackle. Provoked by his innuendo?

“What, *querida*?”

“Don’t worry, I don’t ever expect to be rescued from a pitiful state of romantic longing. I know you can’t cure separateness – that first childish shock of dissociation. None of man’s invoked gods could do it, how could you?”

“You are speaking of two kinds of separateness: the physical separateness that the passion of love craves to end – always a temporary remedy –, and the other: the childish angst in discovering that others cannot inhabit your mind. You are right: our poor discrete lives, with their unique personal experiences of space and time, their narcissism, make the separateness in passionate love incurable. The other separateness is somewhat curable with recognition of similarities. The way we unite, the way we live inside each other is through compassion. I love myself in you and you in myself, which is to say that I feel you in myself. When I have you in that way, I will love unconditionally and try to save you – as you save me – from your harmful mistakes, and from the extreme selfishness and cruelty of others.”

“That last condition is altruism...which not enough understand or employ. It’s what you *live*...what incites passion and inspires compassion in me for you. Way out here...in this immensity where we’ve been knocked down to actual size, is a good place to attempt the right words.”

“Probably more difficult to do right now, *querida mía*.”

“Oh, I know your mind is elsewhere, but I’d never get exactly the right moment to mention it anyway. In this huge swallowing void, for me, you’re still very large. It’s the whole spectrum of what you think and do...refined reason behind everything...engendering what *we* do together; something we might never have shared...probably that few *do* share: an intuitive awareness...ongoing purpose. Well, for us like...like oscillating electricity. Yes, the energy of it playing back and forth makes a startling...a...ignition, whether in anger, love...no matter. I thought...I *feared* it might end: the unequivocal attention – either present or anticipated...like a drug –, the understanding, *empathy* – *God*, you give it...always with razor-sharp clarity, and with complete honesty...while life’s work goes on undeterred.”

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“You are always very generous, Semele.” His voice had broken at his shallow response to a depth of vulnerable spillage, its forthright revelation, even as he wrestled with his irritation at the inopportune moment. Disturbed, as if having received a presentiment of imminent disaster, or having endured an unavoidable but inspiriting funeral oration, his heart made a resounding pulse in his chest. Ultimately, that surge of blood was for her gift of self, for what her exposing words offered and for how he could not entirely own them with his chosen life.

“And, of course, the awe...pride...sometimes painful reverence I have for...this indefatigable man who belongs to so many. I’m continually astonished, Rafael, at the ways you charge my life...without ever letting go of—”

“And you mine, *amada*...as now. *Sí*, these *azul* eyes wide open...yet your trust lies in the unseen, *querida*.”

“That’s what trust is. I *do* see...and I feel...and I know enough of you for what isn’t known. I did once think that what we have...that it wouldn’t...couldn’t go on.”

“You thought the heat would burn it...or familiarity kill it. We have not that kind of tiresome familiarity or...the quotidian, the banal. We never will.”

“I don’t want a mundane life any more than you do.”

“Even if either of us did want it we would not have it, Semele.”

“Maybe if one of us did we couldn’t have this.”

“*Creo que sí, querida. Gracias, mi amor.* I will not forget this generosity...even when you are angry with me.”

His elevated mood had at last turned wistful at the implication of something ominous, her necessary outpouring delivered unaware of its foreboding. But finally the importance of their present mission reasserted itself.

“*Por favor*, let me think now about what I will say in less than an hour. I need to put their hot arguments before my own.”

“Thought you’d already done that.”

“Rehearsal,” he said and winked at her.

It was far too abrupt, an irksome transition made all the more painful by their immutable condition – love and requited love – which constantly reclaimed him...how it could shimmer into consciousness and tantalize like the illusory mauve-hued mirage presently before them. And yet how tangible it was, continually reemerging in their desired treatment of each other or, when so frequently apart, in the sudden eidetic reverie of those indelible moments shared.

As soon as they were on the sloping dried-grass range, which was the overgrazed province of the herders, swarthy sun-beaten figures appeared on horseback.

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The rough band had materialized out of some invisible declivity of the plains, dirty, unshaven, armed and overtly hostile men; bony horses and gaunt hungry riders. *Desperate* was the word Rafael mentally employed, as they were widely circled in a cloud of dust, the men pointing and waving their fists while shouting loud Spanish imprecations of threatened violence.

“What is this? You bring a woman?” one faceless herdsman jeered, slapping his chest as he cantered forth; a vehemently accusing mustachioed mouth all that was visible below the dark shadow of his drooping old sombrero.

“*Buenas tardes*. We have come to meet with all of you, my wife and I. We have good news. Is there not some shaded place where we can sit and talk?” Rafael called in a calm, firmly polite voice.

He saw Semele’s hand sliding beneath the hem of her shirt, and muttered, “No, do not. This is *un fanfarrón*. No problem, only swagger.”

“*Hombre*, what is it you call yourself, besides a fool?”

“I am Rafael Arnau i Roca, and this is my wife, Semele. I see you are the leader here. What is your name?”

Harshly throwing back his broad sombrero to reveal a deeply lined face, the weathered herder’s raspy cigarette voice crackled with bitterness. “I am Felipe Lopez...if it matters to you, fool.”

“It does matter, *amigo*. *Pero*, the fool will be the man who refuses what is offered by your new president, Enrique Mendoza, for your cooperation.”

“What cooperation? This is only lies, thievery, the shedding of blood. We know what you bastards want. You believe we are helpless. Ay, find out how well we shoot.”

“Tell me where we can sit together and talk, *Señor* Lopez, and I will tell you how mistaken you are and how much good fortune is coming your way.”

He watched as a young rider separated his snorting little mustang from the grim-faced posse of waiting herders, and trotted up to their silver-haired leader.

“What is it, Castelar?” Felipe Lopez demanded, spitting over his shoulder with a burst of impatience.

“Excuse me, *Don* Felipe, but I have heard of this man. He is the one who gives back to the farmers the river of *La Nava Feraz*. And his woman, she is the red angel who shoots into the eye of the devil.”

Rafael turned his face away to smile, and felt Semele’s eyes on him. He was confident she would not laugh out loud, as she might surely have done at another time and place.

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Upon leading their two visitors into a precipitous ravine of dry, rock-strewn ground, the riders, perhaps twenty of them, had consented to tie their horses and squat in abeyance. Rafael stood in their midst, his hat removed, his blue shirt and jeans spangled with sunlight falling through the branches of a few drying willows. Semele chose an elevated and partially shaded position of surveillance, leaning her back against the trunk of a gnarled old mazzard hung with a few shriveling black cherries. The still air sweltered with sharp smells of fresh dung, thick dust, and parching sun-cooked leaves.

“We have sworn to kill any man who tries to fuck up our land...any miner who sets foot on it,” Lopez threatened.

“In the east they are making a simple metal road to the new mine...not over your grazing fields but around the side of them,” Rafael explained. Foregoing ingratiating words, which would surely have been spurned, he went directly to the point. “The mine is on a slope, and water flows easily downhill, does it not?”

“What is this? What water?”

“A professional man who has studied the earth...studied *this* earth – the geologist employed by Mendoza, mainly in your interest –, this man has found a water table that must be penetrated to have the easiest access to the nickel ore. That buried water will be piped and sent down to your fields, your gardens, your homes. You know your fields are overgrazed. Presently, your seasonal water supply is spare and dwindling. With this new system you can make your empty desert bloom, and when it blooms your cattle will be fat. Perhaps you will decide to have orchards...vineyards. But if you choose only to run cattle, they will feed on well-irrigated green grass and not have to run very far...run the meat from their bones.”

“This is a dream...a cruel lie to make us into sheep.”

“No, *Señor* Lopez. I swear the truth of it as I stand before you. I promise it will be done. Where do your cattle drink now, *señor*?”

“Ay, too far from here...unless carried by *el camión*.”

“That will change...no more water trucks.”

“These *presidentes*, what do they give a damn if our cattle drink? They come and go, stealing what they can for themselves.” Felipe Lopez extracted a cigarette from a crumpled package and lit it as it dangled from the corner of a descending sneer. “They mean nothing to us. This Mendoza wants only to take away our rifles.”

“Keep your rifles. But if you decide to fire on your own country’s soldiers, as you will have to do, you will lose not only your men but Mendoza’s new freedom...and what honor any of you have left. Already you have killed one mine employee; a useless death. We must make that innocent life count for something, *no*? You will have your water.”

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“Why does *un gran hombre* bother to come here and say these things in this unknown place?” Lopez inquired with considerable suspicion, but also with genuine interest.

“This is an important place to be...where the truth shows its face. Here, I listen more than I speak. I listen to the troubled earth’s neglected people.”

“Eh, *pero* you like to deal with *los estercoleros*? All of their shit? Why do you do this, *hombre*?”

“Why not? I can do it. It is one way to live a life, *no*? For something positive at least. When I stop working at ground level, either my life will be used up or my work useless. I choose the first of these.”

“So, we are to believe you...believe what you tell us?”

“*Sí, amigo*, you can believe what I say.”

“You, *Señor Rafael Arnau i Roca*, let us see then, if you are a man of truth...; *Dios mío!* when there is hardly such a one in any place...let us see if it can be.”

The wily rancher’s scarred and bent-fingered hand was at last extended, and Rafael grasped it quickly, firmly. He understood that he was looking into the mistrustful eyes of a weary man nearing a hard life’s end, an angry man used to near fatal skirmishes and few rewards, but also a man half persuaded to take one last chance – as rare as it was to be offered something that might actually happen, why not? Albeit inopportune, Rafael knew that he must now spur the tired old rider upon one last very important journey.

“*Por favor*, I would remind you of something, *Señor Lopez*, something I have no doubt you already know. When you have your water, remember that without *conservación* this miracle of life, this absolute necessity will not be here for your children’s children. You, with your wisdom, can see to it that this is known, can pass your understanding on to the careless young ones, those who have not been taught to respect the sacredness of limited pure water.”

Felipe Lopez lifted his head and squinted hard at Rafael. The sliding sun fell over his shriveled dark face, harshly marking hundreds of creases incised in skin seldom unexposed. Rafael saw that for a moment the prideful man heard only arrogant condescension coming from an outsider with a curious accent; but then he nodded and his eyes shone with a wary acceptance: this strange interloper’s gratuitous warning was no less than truth...practical truth.

A rusty Jeep drove up to the rim and careened down the sloping side of the ravine. Clanking to a halt, the driver jumped from the dusty vehicle’s torn seat and reached behind it for a chest of chilled beer. This obviously anticipated offering was loudly welcomed, signaling that the riders’ work was essentially finished for the day. A transported barrel of water was first hoisted over to an old wooden trough and

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poured for the horses, then the beer was offered around and shared with Semele and Rafael.

Semele finished her bottle and whispered to Rafael that she needed to pee. He pointed to a large boulder and stood before it with casually folded arms, facing the *vaqueros* as she slipped behind its covering mass. She emerged smiling with relief and said in a low voice, "*Gracias, mi marido.*"

"Does *la hermosura* have with her the famous pistol?" Lopez brusquely asked, his mouth in a taunting grin as he eyed the woman he so clearly enjoyed looking upon.

"Eh, she does," Rafael said with forthright voice and a cautious laugh. "*Sí*, the pistol of *mi esposa* is known to be very obedient in her hand."

"So my young *vaquero* says," Lopez remarked, scratching his head and pondering in silence. About to ask something further, he restrained himself and merely stared at Semele, wiping his thirsty, beer-splashed mouth with the back of the hand holding his tilted bottle.

A few more assurances of commitment were exchanged, one or two of these expressions self-indulgently caustic on the part of the hard-nosed old herder: "If you are lying, perhaps we will meet again." He appeared to find his threatening words amusing. Rafael laughed and shook his head, offering the fierce old leader a thumbs-up. Then he and Semele mounted their horses and prepared to ride out.

When they had gone only a short distance, Semele was surprised to see the young rider, Castelar, who had first identified her with such amazement, racing toward her while calling out, "*¡Momentito, señora!* Now see what I have done with the bottles. *Por favor* show us how you can shoot. Or is it only a story?"

Semele twisted in her saddle and looked back at six slender bottles placed unevenly across several odd-sized boulders.

Rafael swore silently, for he saw that each bottle was at a different level and Semele was hot and tired, and most certainly her gun hand was sweating. He was thinking how to end this regrettable situation with a convincing excuse, even as Semele was in the process of dismounting.

"I wouldn't want to frighten my horse," she called, duly presenting a meager but complaisant smile. To Rafael she muttered, "So, it's to be a dog-and-pony show."

"You do not have to do this, *querida*," he said softly.

"Never mind. I'll do my best. I aim to please."

She threw back her sombrero, took out her pistol and stood a moment looking at the bottles, then walked away a few steps, turned and fired. Her successive shots echoed through the ravine as each tall brown bottle exploded into glittering amber shards and smaller flying fragments.

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The men cheered and whistled with noisy enthusiasm as their nervous horses danced. But the cunning Felipe Lopez dismounted and walked up to shake her hand. “Ay, Red Angel, now you have no more bullets to protect your *marido*.”

“Then you must protect him,” she quickly answered, with devastating aplomb, “because he is your *buenaventura*.”

“Ah, this reminds me to warn you to watch out. Last week some of my men ran into a little band of Bellaco’s soldiers. Those fools, with their uniforms *harapiento* and falling off, are still fighting some loco war of their own...*sí*, running around out here with their heads in the wrong place. Are you really out of bullets, *señora*?”

“No, I have more in the saddlebag on my horse,” Semele revealed, to Rafael’s surprise.

“Then you better reload that magic pistol of yours and hit the target if it comes around... *¡Cuidado, compañeros!*” he called with a wave of his hand.

“What else is in that saddlebag, *mi famosa*?” Rafael playfully inquired as they rode off.

“Not much...a few crackers...first aid things...mostly just the bullets...and birth control pills.”

“Ah, what can be said of that lethal combination?”

Semele bent forward and giggled with such abandon that her nervous horse rolled its ears. “We could say it might have a *bang-up* effect.”

“I shouldn’t have drunk any beer,” Semele complained when they had been riding for half an hour. “Alcohol and this heat...I’m so sleepy I’m about to slide right off this poor nameless beast...curl up wherever I fall...maybe atop a venomous serpent...won’t even care where I am.”

Rafael chuckled a little at her weary attempt at light-heartedness. “Then let us stop in the lee of that mound of rocks over there. We can drink from our *cantinas* and rest a while. Not too long. We should return before dark.”

A hundred meters more and they dismounted, carefully winding their reins around a knobby spire of rock. They knelt down to drink their tepid water in the spare shade made by the pitted black stack of old lava formations.

He threw back her floppy old hat, pulled out his shirttail and gently blotted her perspiring face.

“I hope you are right,” he pondered, letting his shirt hang loose and kissing the tip of her nose.

“About what?”

“That I am their *buenaventura*, their good luck.”

The Water Bearer

“But you are. It’s an important thing for them to remember. You were so positive there, why doubt it now?”

“Eh, I am just careful. I can be very positive when I have to make a necessary point...try to prevent more death.”

“Will they have their water, then?”

“Sí, they will have it. I do not trust Higgins, but I trust Mendoza. I only wish there were more like him.”

“And like you.”

She unbuttoned his shirt and fanned its edge against his sweat-glossed chest. Then, balancing her left hand on his shoulder, she tipped back his hat to fix his attention. Her stare was a little opaque but familiar in its attempt. She sought in his eyes a message that another would not have understood, an assurance that could often induce in her an answering strength, slightly competitive but with a positive effect. He knew this, that responding to her with his own confidence could assuage difficult moments, as now the temporary estrangement of mental and physical fatigue.

He tossed his hat aside and swept his fingers through dampened black waves of unruly hair, grown somewhat longer by its length’s order of importance. He was in her eyes.

“Ah, *ojiazul*...hard to believe these cool blue eyes can be as fast as your pistol’s bullets...these sleepy eyes. Even so, they miss little, do they, *bienamada*? Kiss me.”

He lifted her with his fingers firmly at her waist, holding her drowsy body against him while she offered her opened mouth in a languid hunger. “Ah...sí...what I have wanted...this soft giving mouth. I am glad you are here with me...*estoy alegre*.” He could feel her sultry indolence stirring with his own desire. “*Querida mía*, please open your shirt...undue your jeans...and then my belt, *sí*?”

She rose in slowly revived deliberation – he knew her to rise like that in the morning, half in dream, but this was the predominant heat. She unbuttoned her shirt and bent forward with a simple grace, to tug the rest of her damp clothes down over her long limbs. Kneeling before him, she grasped his belt buckle, while the delicious pain of need coursed through his body. A force swift and aggressive swallowed the past, dissolved the future, ripely imposed an unrestrained immediacy. He had temporarily decommissioned himself, as only he could. His firing nerves, his self-deposed mind and body were given over to her. Here, no others would hear the murmured utterances of pleasure. The enveloping wilderness, a sweeping plain of hard gold light and dusty purple shadow, softened in love’s play. Time evanesced.

“*Semele, vida mía*, are you awake?” His tongue slowly encircled a taut nipple. “Salty...my little pillar of salt. Are you still with me? *Querida*...ah, you want more.”

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“Yes...oh, yes.”

“Help yourself...and me.” He leaned gingerly back against the sharp rock, reaching out to stroke her hair.

She placed her hands on his shoulders and settled herself with a toss of glinting red hair. For a while, with an intense absorption, he watched her move, her head thrown back, until with gripping hands he held her down upon his irruptive muscular thrust and let her cry out against his chest. He remained silent until his wordless groan and her satisfaction had marked their pleasure. He held her in that position a few more minutes, then, frowning at the beads of sweat on her exhausted face, reached for his canteen and fed her measured swallows of water.

When she had drunk, he took a few swallows and said, “Can you ride now?”

“I’d rather curl up with my head on your shoulder like this...stay right here...sleep and sleep.”

“No, get dressed, bacchante.” He grasped her hair and tugged her head back to offer a swift, chiding kiss, then began buttoning his shirt. “*¡Vamos!* One of our men will be waiting to meet us there...at the end of the road. It could be tonight we will love in a real bed.”

When they reached the place where they were to meet the van with horse trailer, quite another scene awaited them. The driver, a gangly young Maderan barely an adult, lay face up on the ground, blue-black flies crawling over a mortal hole torn in his forehead, more flies buzzing at the pool of drying blood beneath his pierced skull. Broken initially by a savage beating, he had fought hard. The juvenile black mustache above his blood-encrusted lip still portrayed an innocent vanity hopeful of favor. There remained a few visible areas of unmarred skin. Almost all the blood of his scarcely lived life had already seeped into powdery sand.

“Oh no! Oh God, oh my God,” Semele moaned.

Rafael lifted the body up and placed it in the back of the van, sliding his fingers over the lids of the staring blank eyes as he withdrew his hand. He had immediately set about very deliberate actions, with the driven urgency of a single-minded instinct for their own preservation.

Inside the trailer was a modest amount of water in a barrel brought for the horses. After he had filled their canteens from this crucial water supply and placed them and the driver’s canteen on the backs of their horses, he allowed the two tired animals to drink the remaining water.

Lathered with sweat, they dipped their noses into the water and blew air out through dry dust-filled nostrils. Sucking in the precious liquid with chittering sounds of intense thirst, they shoved each other’s heads out of the way and plunged again and

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again into the opened top of the emptying barrel. Rafael blinked away recurring visions of the cruelly wasted young driver, and continued to stare at the drinking animals while his thought narrowed to a sharper and sharper concentration, summoning possibilities for their immediate future.

Meanwhile, Semele had searched the van for any useful supplies, and found a book of matches in the glove box and a bag of tortilla chips and six granola bars on the floor beneath the front seat, probably intended for them to eat on the ride out -- perhaps even put there by Mari, who often thought of such details. These discoveries she added to their saddle bags. He glanced at her tucking away the spare morsels. Without a word from him, she had understood at once what they must do.

"It is growing dark. We have to get away from here pronto," he said, gazing around them and then off toward the western black horizon. There, the sinking ball of fire was already spreading into a horizontal stream of molten light.

"Do you think they've been waiting for us...that they're watching us right now?"

"There is not much to hide behind," he said, once again surveying the dimming surround. "If they want us, they will come after us...probably they are waiting to stop us on the road. They assume we will drive the van out that way, the only road out -- why else would they have left the keys? But we will not do that. We will ride east toward the high ground that runs up to the cordillera. I think we must bypass the mine site -- I do not know who has committed this brutality. It could be Bellaco's soldiers or..." Rafael's voice tapered off into a moment of silence as he looked at Semele's stricken face. "*Vamos, querida mía*, we are still very much alive. We can do what many others before us have done...survive by our own ingenuity."

"But they're the ones with rifles," Semele said. "We don't know how many."

He nodded forthright agreement -- no point pretending anything else -- and mounted his big gelding, the exhausted animal irritable now and slow to respond. Semele checked her loaded pistol and tucked in her shirt, thus making her firearm more accessible, then climbed aboard her sweating black mount. Coaxing their stubborn horses into an angry gallop, they hastened toward the east, away from the setting sun and into the violet edge of darkness.

XVI

The only Human Prototype accurately named Homo sapiens:

The Water Bearer

Humanitarian earthborn mortal employing reason, thereby effectively linked to and considerate of every place and every people; a being intolerant only of ignorance and its devastating effects; a being admittedly imperfect, still evolving, yet engaged in redress of curable universal flaws -- theory of perfection wisely consigned to transient joy. This one not an idealist, but with feet planted soundly on the weeping blue planet, watchful, commiserative, willful and swift in remedy -- benefactor of the golden mean.

..... KMK

Nota bene: sapient - possessing or exhibiting great wisdom or sound judgment.

Jeff Smith was in the moil of Venezuela when the call from Semele's worried father was relayed to him. Semele and Rafael had been missing for three days. He flew at once to Madera and met with Mendoza. The President gave immediate indications of familiarity -- the company plane had been parked on the La Ceiba Tarmac on several previous occasions, and nothing that conspicuous would escape the upper reaches: Mendoza's watchful aides. At the onset of newly shaping governments, Jeff, as a matter of course, made it his business to cultivate useful officials: here, the recently appointed head of security, another way he knew that Mendoza was familiar with Jefferson Davis Smith & Associates -- such carefully maintained liaisons were SOP. Mendoza was showing deep regret at allowing his advocates to travel alone, but it was the way Doctor Arnau i Roca liked to work, he tersely informed Jeff.

Soldiers had begun their search leading away from the abandoned van. There was a vast wilderness to cover, a wild country interspersed with strapped ranchers who had recently joined forces, forming bands of hostile gunslingers.

He intended to make good use of one of Bellaco's newer helicopters, one he had sweet-talked Mendoza out of with hardly any resistance. He wanted Spence to pilot while he glassed the possibilities sectorized from unmarked wilderness.

They were walking toward the fueled aircraft waiting on Madera's military airfield just outside La Ceiba, when Jeff, almost never this remiss in timing, got around to a brief private interrogation concerning loyalty and frame of mind.

"How do you feel about this? I want you because you're exactly what's needed...but I know your attitude hasn't been that positive. Do you still hate him...resent Semele? I expect total commitment...no laxness, thought of giving up."

Spence kicked a small pebble off the Tarmac, his booted foot swinging up, his leg hovering midair a second, as if contemplating where his opinion would come down.

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“Well, you brought me here, so you must have psyched me out. I know I’m a shit sometimes...but goddammit I have to respect some qualities in the man. He was damned raw to me...but I wasn’t a sweetheart either. He always comes off fearless...but probably isn’t...been around too long for that. And a...any a...competition with Semele has nothing to do with letting her die out there...a beautiful piece of work like that. Jesus, how could a brain generating that fast... Ah, *hell*. In their case I figure it’s got to be something more than all the sex.” He tapped his heart with a fist in surprising, if somewhat grudging, concession.

“You’ve got one of these, too?” Jeff pointed at his own heart with a fleeting grin ruefully sarcastic. “Could your sensitivity level be rising?”

“I can’t figure out how that guy has managed to stay alive this long, I’ll tell you that...out there where it hits the fan. I’ve listened to some of that inflammatory talk he delivers...a couple of times I actually found myself hooked in. Hey, maybe I’m a little jealous. Right now, you know I’ll give it all I’ve got. Why don’t we just get on with it? As the *boss* says, *time is of the essence*.”

When they reached the chopper, Spence straightened up and started back in surprise. A shadowy figure was hunched over inside the ship.

“What the hell?” he shouted, jumping aboard ready for defensive action.

“Carlos Garcia,” Jeff said, close behind. “Arnau i Roca’s would-be killer.” He almost smiled, but he had to restrain Spence who already had Carlos by his collar and was reaching for the Glock slung on his own hip.

“You won’t have to shoot this one. He’s been well converted, or he wouldn’t be here like this.

“*Buenos días*, Carlos. I’m Jeff Smith. I know about you...interesting story. Looking for the boss, *sí*?”

“Who the hell let this sneaky little bastard on our ship, dammit?”

Carlos struggled, yanking his tearing threadbare jacket from Spence’s rough grasp.

“*¡Débeme en paz!* I can help. I know things.”

“What things?” Jeff asked, pushing Spence aside.

“*Mi tío* is in that *campo*...that country.”

“Your uncle?”

“*Sí*. He is riding on cattle by the mine *el señor* Arnau i Roca is getting to save the *pueblo*. Sometimes I am living in this place.”

“Let him alone and fire this beast up, Spence. At least he’s an improvement on our worthless map.”

He searched through their equipment and tossed Carlos a headset, then connected and donned his own.

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When they were aloft and racing over hilly terrain and then above high plateau, Jeff said, "I thought you were in Barcelona, Carlos. Isn't that where you're supposed to be right now...plucking guitar strings?"

"*Siempre* I am talking to *mi amo*. Then he does not talk to me," Carlos said, holding his hand up to his muffled ear to imitate phone conversation. "The important ones know why this is so: *perdido*...I am coming to find him. How do you know of me, *señor*?"

"Certain folks know about you, too...anyone who knows your boss. You're a good story, Carlos. You help make your *amo* the real thing...maybe a legend...*leyenda*. ¿*Comprende*?"

"*Claro*. ¡*Vamos!*" Carlos answered with urging voice. He waved his thumb over his shoulder. "*Señor* Smith, we fly *sudeste, pronto*."

Beyond the mine site they were flying a grid that included a rugged escarpment full of various camouflages and declivities large enough to hole up or fend off or finish life in. His eyes strained through binoculars, his arms and wrists and fingers growing heavy and sore locked in their taut uncomfortable position.

They spotted another whirlybird that must be searching, too. It was headed north. He couldn't explain the powerful feeling he had, even without the advice of Carlos, that the other ship was flying in the wrong direction. Was she down below now? Could they both hear this ship overhead? Sweat poured off his body. While his eyes searched, his thoughts continued to travel in another direction.

Damn you, Semele. And I'm the fool who flew you to Madera...then you wouldn't get back on the plane. What's the matter with him, letting you do this? What kind of love is that? Jesus, what about Miguel? The boy could have been ours. Damn your red-headed soul. Don't you die. Don't either one of you dare do anything as final as that. Goddammit, you're the last exemplary beings well-known to me...the last benevolence to touch my life in this crazy existence. This life...damned if I'll stand still...just keep moving to fend off the inevitable. Locked in forward motion with time hard at my heels until it shuts this body down...captured en passant...but I need you along now...I need both of you along...because now I know...now I see more clearly than ever what is merit...and what is meretricious.

He saw something slide over a sharp angle of rock and moved his glasses after it. Carlos had his forehead against the Plexiglas, his eyes fixed on escaping terrain. Jeff focused on the glimpsed object and thought it was a young puma or, no, it was a soft-brown, pale-bellied jaguarundi, slinking away into shadow. The wildness down there, still the wildness. Was there any accessible water nearby? There were sparse patches

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of green, the frugal green of deserts. There were undoubtedly a few more wild animals on the hunt. Water would be somewhere around. Higher up, maybe.

Back and forth they flew, on and on, silent, searching and growing ever more anxiously fixed upon their elusive objective. He felt leveled, flattened by raging frustration at the actual scope of such an unyielding mission. They would soon be at the halfway point of fuel consumption and have to turn around.

From his side, Carlos saw it first and shouted, “ ¡Oiga! ¡Mira!” He was pointing at a ragged little band of bodies leaning in, trying to remain undetected among the rocks.

Jeff glassed on the irregular group and saw nine, no, ten men in tattered clothes. However bedraggled, they still had their government-issue rifles in hand. Those older M-16s that half the time jammed.

“Jesus, Bellaco’s ragtag leftover soldiers. What the hell have they to gain running around down there? How are they keeping themselves alive? For Christ sake, don’t they know the fight is over?...this particular battle, anyway.”

“Maybe they don’t give a damn...they’re just in a hand-to-mouth kill mode...or they’re after a special kind of prey,” Spence suggested above the muffled thwack of the rotors.

His remark seriously bothered Jeff, because the soldiers weren’t looking up at the noise of the helicopter, as they should have been. They were out of cover now and staring down the ravine toward something else. Then he spotted the two horses tied in among thick, mostly dead brush, a black and a sorrel with saddles on their backs, empty saddles. *But why are those soldiers standing there staring now, doing nothing, why now just when we arrive? Or were they planning an ambush that our arrival foiled? Maybe they even think we’re here to help them pull it off...and that’s why they’ve shown themselves.* The last idea he would ever entertain was that they were intending to help out his two refugees. Could the soldiers have already instigated something? First they would try to steal the horses, but they probably couldn’t see the horses from where they were. *Wherever you are, I hope to God you’ve got your pistol, Semele.* He blinked hard and stared and focused, with and without the use of binoculars, but there was no life in sight near the saddled animals. Neither of them would have left a horse saddled, except in an emergency.

Back where the soldiers were standing, he spotted something else and focused carefully on a chilling brown heap, legs protruding in all directions from big dark bodies with bones coming through the skin. Dead horses, starving to death and probably shot where they had stood in an abandoned cluster of grisly suffering.

“Christ! Carlos, grab Spence’s rifle, his pack, and here, you take my revolver. We’ve got to put down right now. As near as you can get to the two saddled horses,

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Spence...if you can wedge in there where it's safe to haul out fast. Jesus, I wish this damned bird was loaded for bear. At least we could have scared them off."

"Yeah, but armed was more than Mendoza was up for. That big guy is a shrewd militarist. He figured if this ship got in the wrong hands it'd be used against him."

"Get us down, Spence. Now!"

"I'm going for that incline over by the canted rock wall...dark places, maybe caves. Here we go."

They were down and making their way through the rough, indented gray rock formations, in and out of the deeper shadowy caves. Within only minutes, Rafael materialized from a narrow cleft overhung with thick basalt. For a few seconds he stood motionless. The searchers froze in silent disbelief, as if he had dropped from a cloud.

"*¡Hola!* We heard you coming. I am not surprised to see that it is you...by now expected," Rafael said. "*¡Oiga!* Even you, Carlos. You are supposed to be in Barcelona."

"*Amo*, you are here, I am here, *siempre*."

"*Gracias*, Carlos." Rafael nodded but offered no further words. He looked gaunt and tired, his chin blackened by a beard, but he was grinning a little.

Spence stood with folded arms, waiting in silence while Jeff rushed into a swift interrogation.

"What the hell has been going on here? Where's Semele? Have those die-hards back there kept you pinned down? What were you--"

"Let me get Semele first," Rafael interposed, turning back to the sheltering cleft without further words.

They clustered and waited, staring, then watched him walk carefully over the rocky path with Semele in his arms.

"Hello," Semele greeted them with a thin tired smile. "Nice of you boys to drop in."

"Semele, what's happened to you? Why can't you walk? Are you all right?" Jeff asked. He was furious at this entire precarious episode, trying to hold down his wrath.

"Please give her water, if you have any," Rafael requested.

"God, yes. Here, Semele." With hurried actions he pulled a canteen from his backpack and held it to her lips. Merely to see her alive and drinking by his own hand left him nearly speechless with relief. She took the canteen and continued to drink.

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He wanted to lift her sweat-darkened hair away from her forehead and test her brow for fever. He restrained himself for only a few seconds and then gently pushed her hair back and held his palm to her forehead, glancing at Rafael's impenetrable dark eyes as he did so.

"*Agua, amo,*" Carlos said, offering his canteen to Rafael who was still holding Semele and unable to take it.

"Put me down, my darling, you're tired and thirsty. I sort of twisted my ankle, folks." Her perspiring face broke into a wan smile and her apologetic voice only further infuriated Jeff.

"Let me have her," he said, lifting her from Rafael. "Let's take you to the ship and get the hell out of here."

"Just wait a minute. We're not in any danger at the moment. Let Rafael drink," Semele demanded.

She watched in silence as Rafael winked at her and drank from the canteen. He lifted the cord of her dangling hat from her neck, slowly turning the sombrero in his hands as she began a cursory account of their experience.

"Three days ago the soldiers you spotted from up there were shooting at us, and we took cover. But I'd had a good look at their horses, and I knew why they wanted ours. I was beyond furious. Skin and bones, riddled with disease and suffering hideously. They were being kicked and whipped into their last clumsy steps before collapse. I knew I had to get close enough to shoot them, so we waited...staying hidden until those scruffy soldiers were about to bed down. Just at dusk, Rafael and I crawled as near as we could and I shot all ten horses. The poor, poor things...liberated. What a relief. Of course, I was bawling."

He glared at Rafael. "You let her do that? She could have been killed or seriously injured."

"Stop it, Jeff. I insisted. You are going to have to give up this attitude. I can't always be fighting both of you for my independence."

Rafael smiled and touched the back of his hand to Semele's livid cheek. He appeared calm, even distracted, and amazingly grateful to have Semele in another's caring arms. Jeff wasn't certain he would have been as receptive or agreeable, even in these needful circumstances.

Rafael's tired voice was energized with pride as he spoke. "When our pursuers saw that Semele could kill each horse instantly and with only one bullet apiece, they were not in such a hurry to come after us. They fired a few shots -- probably their last ammunition -- but we scrambled away. And that is how Semele twisted her ankle on a loose rock. We have since been at a stand-off. Today, we

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decided we had rested enough, and at nightfall I would have put Semele on her horse and we would have ridden out of here.”

“Well, now you won’t have to.”

“I am glad you came. Very glad for Semele -- not that you are not a very capable and self-sufficient partner, *mi querida*, but you should have your ankle tended.

“If you will just leave me enough water and whatever food you probably have with you, I can now talk to the soldiers. They might die here...better to offer them a future, and so turn them around. They are not so fanatical as to make the wrong choice for their own livelihood...and they are ripe for conversion. I will give the ablest man Semele’s horse, and the two of us can ride out of here and go for help. We will--”

“No!” Semele cried. “Please, Rafael...they may have killed our driver.”

“*¡No, amo!*” Carlos shouted.

“Has the sun cooked your brain, Arnau i Roca?”

“Not at all. It will not take me very long.”

“Let him do it,” Spence said, speaking at last.

“*Gracias*, Spence -- I do not care what your motive is. After that last air lift, now I have another reason to thank you. And certainly I thank you for flying here and for taking Semele back with you. All a part of your present job description, *no?* Still you deserve praise for it.”

Spence stood in silence, but with a curious rather baffled expression escaping his stolid countenance. Noting this with interest, Jeff was nevertheless caught up in the more immediate dilemma of Rafael’s stated intention to remain behind.

“Jesus, just head for the ship and get aboard, Rafael.”

“Ah, *Rafael* at last. *Gracias*. You have said it in the past, Jeff. Think of this, *amigo*: those men could have been shot, but of course they were not. Instead, their pitifully dying horses were mercifully killed. I told them this. I shouted that their suffering animals must be shot, but that we would not harm any man. It is likely they are out, or nearly out, of ammunition. They are still alive. They have learned a powerful lesson. Such men can have a positive effect if persuaded. They might be useful, good for this country. And I will have done away with a few more of Mendoza’s foolish enemies. If any man among them killed our driver, he can be justly tried. Although, I really doubt their wasted horses could have traveled that far and back. Now leave me some food and water, *por favor*.”

“You’re assuming even-handedness from a savage pack of desperate renegades,” Jeff argued with heated voice.

“I assume only the desperation...it can be removed.

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“*Querida*, Carlos can meet me at the end of the road. If either of you are worried, Carlos, you might be able to bring a few of Mendoza’s soldiers along,” Rafael continued, directing his words to Semele and Carlos in a calm voice.

“We can force you to leave,” Jeff warned, gently laying Semele down and lifting his rifle off the ground.

“No, stop! This is ridiculous,” Semele intervened, her anguished face firmly set. “You can force Rafael to do very little. He’ll always do the right thing.”

Jeff saw that she would not contravene her lover -- and truly, Rafael was only nominally her *husband*, in the usual manner of conventional trappings, and primarily her *lover* by a remarkable mutual autonomy, an extraordinary abnegation of rights, a willful subordination to undeviating mission. The phenomenon mimicked an ancient mythic form, undiscoverable heretofore in the real world, or at least rarely encountered in this age of narcissism; beyond this, the condition was nearly tragic by its consequent torment -- still, it was profoundly enviable for the level of sensibility shared. Imbued with these considerations, Semele knew what took precedence, this made obvious by her assertion that Rafael would *always do the right thing*.

“*The right thing* is a rather lengthy philosophical discussion,” Jeff reminded her with expedient impatience.

“A long history of the wrong thing rather swiftly proves *the right thing*...if one can reason at all,” Semele curtly responded.

“Eh, you are a *librepensador*, a freethinker like me, *amor*...my fiery *compañera*, *sí*, like this hair: *color de fuego*.”

Joyful relief at the sudden assurance of her well-being shone forth in Rafael’s even disposition. He seemed not to care who else might hear his attentive voice, his placating manner intimately focused upon Semele. These few palliative actions were meant to soften a swiftly approaching farewell, his subtly inflected words thoroughly understood by Semele. He ruffled her hair with playful tenderness and lifted her into his arms.

“I will carry you to the ship, *querida*. The water was all I needed. I can eat later.”

Jeff said nothing more, only picked up his backpack and rifle and started toward the helicopter, following behind Spence who was already striding in that direction.

“Let me *aquí*...here with you, *amo*,” Carlos begged.

“No, Carlos, you must meet me at the end of the road. I am counting on you to be there.”

“At least take my rifle,” Jeff said when they reached the helicopter.

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“No, *gracias*,” Rafael replied with a polite grin. “I have no place for it on my horse.”

“Will your horse make it?”

“Sí. I saw a limited fall of water in the rocks not far from the soldiers. When they are pacified we can water the two horses.”

“My God, you’re optimistic,” Jeff said, shaking his head. He had wanted to say foolish.

Spence emptied out his backpack, leaving his canteen and a small pile of various packaged foods and supplies on the ground for Rafael. To this Jeff added his own canteen, half of which Semele had drunk.

When he had lifted Semele onto the ship and settled her down, Rafael drew her into his arms one last time. Jeff turned away, thwarted and guilt-ridden. Should they try to restrain him and take off? What should they do? It seemed madness to leave him here in this wilderness with a band of possibly still armed and half-crazed men, and no rifle of his own. Spence was at the controls, firing up. Carlos, still in disbelief, gaped grief-stricken after his *amo* as Rafael leapt down and waved them off.

They lifted into the sky and stared down at Rafael, standing alone, smiling and waving, growing smaller and smaller, as alone as he had previously been accustomed to being, Jeff surmised. There below was Rafael Arnau i Roca before the advent of Semele. *He does it better than I*, Jeff thought, but then he at once owned up to a ridiculously belittling simplification of something very complex.

They darted over the escarpment’s pale green foothills and out across tawny barren terrain, for a while maintaining a shocked uncomfortable silence. As he knew himself to be glad of the disabling injury which had allowed him to take Semele away, an injury now not at all life-threatening, he felt another brief moment of base selfishness. All of this finished with sharp unease at having left Rafael alone down there. When he could bring himself to look at Semele she was brushing away tears.

He knelt beside her, tearing open a packet of soapy towelettes, then dabbed at her dusty face and lifted each listless hand in his to cleanse it while she rested propped against his and Spence’s diminished backpacks.

“Thanks...all this emotion...because I’m tired.”

She smelled of horses’ sweat, summoning that soaked-leather, fermented-fruit, salty-acrid smell of his horse-filled childhood. He wanted to take her in his arms and stay that way for a long, long time. He leaned close and spoke into her ear. “What should I have done? Have I done the wrong thing?”

“No. There was nothing else to do. He wanted to talk to them before we left, but I knew he was concerned about involving me. I think they’re in bad shape. Maybe none of them killed our driver – they were some distance from that road. You

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see, Rafael views them as misguided...as...as reparable. And of course he's right. It's just that not many of us will go to that extent to change things. With Rafael, once you're in that mode you go straight ahead. You do whatever you believe yourself capable of doing. He can do a lot. Please don't think him foolhardy, Jeff. He just isn't...not at all. He's very, very discerning...and really amazingly effective. You have only to see him in a really difficult situation, as I have, to know how persuasive he can be. So we have to imagine the best result. That's all we can do at the moment. Mendoza loves him, and I know he'll send soldiers."

"You've been stoic. I wanted to take you both out. Please don't cry now, darling. It makes me feel useless."

"But how could you, Jeff? I'm astonished that you're here...that you've interrupted your work and come after us."

"Why? Dammit, you think me heartless. You're *both* a part of my life now. You must know I would always try to find you...couldn't do otherwise. Let me get you some aspirin and something to eat."

He dipped into his backpack and found a tin of aspirin, which he handed her along with a small bottle of water. When she had finished with this, he dug out a granola bar. Finally his groping fingers closed over an orange, but a jolt of memory prevented its luminous renaissance. His wince became a self-deprecating frown as he let the evocative citrus fall back into the canvas folds and searched until he found an apple. Polishing it against his shirt, his face softened with encouragement as it was handed over.

He looked up to find Carlos Garcia glaring at him. Easy to interpret. The brash young Maderan's unstinting effort had been stymied, for which he now appeared to blame Jeff. Of course, in Garcia's frame of reference, returning without Rafael was tantamount to failure, and here was the leader of their repulsed mission, so lacking in proper respect as to be blatantly, shamelessly in love with his *amo's* beautiful and worthy consort.

When her ankle was treated and bound by a La Ceiba doctor, Mendoza's doctor, Jeff carried Semele onto his plane and flew her back to Seattle. She had wanted to go with Carlos, but Carlos, Jeff, and Mendoza managed to convince her of the foolishness of that notion. "You can't even walk," Jeff argued. She had even tried to reach Rafael's cell phone, to no avail. On the flight home he left her alone to escape her anxiety in undisturbed sleep.

Jeff then painstakingly, and amidst other demands, became the most successful monitor of Rafael's progress. For three days they heard nothing, but on the fourth

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day Jeff found, with great surprise and equal relief, that Rafael had reached the end of the road with nine of the soldiers. Some time after Rafael's initial confrontation, one soldier's neck had been broken falling from high rocks while on sentry duty. His fellow soldiers buried him near the accident. Their subdued and weary sergeant rode out on Semele's horse; the others soon followed on horses borrowed from the same *vaqueros* who had cheered Semele's prowess with her famous pistol -- a story Jeff had been delighted to hear from Semele in a brief and modest rendition. The disabused soldiers had been rendered as submissive as rounded up and broken wild horses; weary, misguided loyalists, nervously responding to the mildly restrictive measures of Rafael's assurances, and now ready to receive the less constricting bridle of a new government. Rafael's comparatively minor logistical coup -- when viewed on a large military compass minimally displaying a few broken men -- was nevertheless major in its boldness, and thought monumental by Mendoza in symbolizing a great deal more; all of which, Jeff assumed, would be considered unremarkable by Rafael. Arnau i Roca presupposed the outcome, and that was that. His return was very good news, and Jeff called Semele to convey it.

He felt in some measure redeemed. He had offered to fly Rafael to Seattle on a flight bringing associates from Caracas. With no immediate urgencies to prevent him, Rafael accepted and left as soon as he had set someone to searching for the perpetrators of his driver's death.

Jeff needed to see the two together with Miguel; the stunning reality of that infrequent event, he hoped, might help him come to terms with the bereft nature of his misery. Another part of him, newly surfaced and loosely defined, merely wanted, for the joy of it, to see that fortuitous family reunited. Fascinating to contemplate, especially because unlikely to reveal a Norman Rockwell domesticity.

He continued to analyze and ponder the extraordinary components of this ever more complex leader, Rafael Arnau i Roca. Again and again he returned to clear indications of genetic imperative, of the life force, *élan vital*, far more strongly manifest in a few receptive individuals with high reasoning power, which took the form of altruism. It was a condition, within some narrow span of time and to a much lesser degree, present in every reasonably normal human. Letting all of this pass briefly through his mind, while sitting at his volatile desk in New York, he smiled when he speculated on how Rafael might react to his conjecture. Perhaps with an impatient shrug at simply more uselessly prodding curiosity. Perhaps with a philosophical lesson, a gratis tutorial -- on effect not cause -- arising from Arnau i Roca's somewhat incongruous, often forgotten but far from disengaged professorial past.

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Rafael would be with Semele in Seattle by now, and Jeff planned to fly out there on some unrelated business and look in on them. Momentarily, they had alighted at Semele's house, and with their irregular itinerary one never knew how soon they would depart. When he called to make his plans known, Semele at once set aside a special evening for his visit, and mentioned that her cousin Brad Taylor and his new wife Sarah would also be in attendance. He would have preferred to have the others left out, so that he could concentrate solely on the family...or at least on Semele. Possibly her perceptiveness had sensed his desire for a confrontation with Rafael, a desire he had nearly convinced himself did not exist; yes, perhaps she anticipated his persistently contentious nature on this point; she could do that with expertise. Perhaps his imagination was running wild, a circumstance which either of those two could easily precipitate.

A few days before his departure he was locked into a lengthy phone conversation when his secretary informed him by note that a woman named Augustina Ribeiro was waiting in a meeting room. With a pleasurable jolt of surprise, he brought to an end his conversation and went to find her. Only staff were allowed inside his private nerve center.

Smoothly coiffured, dark-haired Augustina greeted him with the familiar Brazilian habit of vivacious bussing. Although familiar to him, it was an act that seemed to run counter to her generally restrained manner, yet in this instance it conveyed an obvious heartfelt gladness. She wore a handsome tweed suit, recalling that austere surface beauty which had promised something deeper and richer.

"I am so sorry I did not call first but it was a last minute decision, as I had some extra time before leaving."

"No problem at all," he assured as he inhaled her spicy autumnal perfume. He pulled back his cuff, glanced at his Tourbillon, and said, "Just in time for lunch." For a protracted moment he hesitated and then said, "You know, let's take a cab to my place. I've got a very efficient housekeeper who makes wonderful salads. That and a glass of wine, yes?" He was as soon on his cell phone and making lunch suggestions to Maggie, the adroitly responsive, white-haired matron of his upkeep. For a temporarily scarcely-defined reason, he wanted this intriguing and self-possessed businesswoman to make an appearance in his private world. But it was certainly not, he swore with an interior laugh, to discover how well she went with his furniture.

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While Augustina strolled about exclaiming over his eclectic paintings and the handsomely appointed arrangements of his Upper East Side condominium, he followed along with a few pertinent remarks. Finally they sat facing each other on the wine couch of his comfortable burgundy-and-gold-accented living room, which he called the parlor.

“It’s a habit from my Kentucky childhood. Guests in my house were always shown into the parlor.”

“Ah, *sim*, Jeff, I remember that you are a horseman,” Augustina remarked, leaning forward and introducing this recalled subject with steeple-fingered palms pressed beneath her extended oval chin.

“Horseman? Well, you might say that. I’m a man who owns horses. Still have quite a few...and the farm...my parents’ farm. I must have told you this.”

“As I told you I, too, was raised with horses, such beautiful horses. You do not remember our conversation?”

“Some of it I remember very well...but then there were those drinks...those blinding *caipirinhas*.”

“I was thinking of our talk at breakfast. But the night before...ah, *sim*...still, how marvelously you danced the tango with that beautiful woman, la señora Taylor de Arnau i Roca.”

For a moment he was taken aback at hearing Semele’s married name. He then realized that while he may have spoken of the *Arnau i Rocas*, he never actually thought of Semele individually as anyone but Semele Taylor, *his* Semele Taylor, placed by him in a supernal compartment only he could access. It was perverse stubbornness; a holdout for the impossible, something like the way investors dream of owning part of a phantom stock market that always and only pays superlative dividends.

Well, I won't be returning to my office. We'll eat our lunch, talk a while, drink a while, and then I'll take this tempting gold sphinx into my sleepless bedroom and melt her into liquid-hot ore...while she returns the favor by making me into her idea of an inveterate horseman...all of which is why we're both sitting here. Semele has never been in my New York digs. How can that be? How on earth can that be? Am I rationalizing? Smoothing the way for further betrayal? My God, why should I think that, or that I have to punish myself? Get on with life, Smith. Time awaits no fool.

Everything came to pass just as he had forecast: good food and drink, a little laughter and inebriation followed by very satisfying moments of physical exhaustion performed upon high-count linen. The following night, after a cozily smitten Augustina had postponed her departure, he invited her to a sold-out Renée Fleming

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recital, the performance an addendum to his regular symphony season, and to which he had really intended inviting another casual acquaintance -- in his frequent absences, his secretary was instructed to give his unused season tickets to a list of deserving friends.

Unaware of the program, he had no idea that this mellifluous soprano artist would very soon perform, at his excruciating sufferance, a magnificent vocalization from Handel's oratorio of *Semele*:

*Oh sleep, why dost thou leave me?
why thy visionary joys remove?
O sleep, again deceive me,
to my arms restore my wand'ring love! . . .*

*Endless pleasure, endless love
Semele enjoys above?
On her bosom Jove reclining,
useless now his thunder lies;
to her arms his bolts resigning,
and his lightning to her eyes. . . .*

They had intended to eat late, but, without admitting it, he was not very hungry and only intent upon satisfying Augustina. She had proposed sushi. Conveniently, he took her to the Atlantic Grill, in a rather solemn attempt at curing basic hunger. Later, over coffee and brandy in the soft shadows of his velvet-wine parlor, he remained quiet and reflective. Augustina was equally so, which made for an increasing awkwardness that she, after an accommodating restraint, decided to displace with precise candor.

"You would not have suggested this evening, if you could have known."

"What?" he asked with feigned vacuity and politeness, but with growing displeasure. He had really wanted to hotly exclaim, *Please don't say any more!*

"It is very sad for me to see you like this. I--"

"If you mean overworked," he interposed with such obvious sidestepping he felt foolish, "Augustina, please don't think you haven't been a very welcome interruption."

Now he saw responding anger as her dark brows drew sharply together.

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“Jeff...do not speak down to me. I do not so easily give myself to any man. You are quite different...really worth knowing...so very... Oh, I have made a bad mistake and it is partly my own fault.”

“No, don’t think that. I’ve enjoyed you very much, Augustina...and it seems you’ve enjoyed me.”

Her long black hair, which he had tangled in his fist during the previous night, was now flawlessly coiled in a gleaming French roll, striking above her peacock blue dress. Remorse from such a sensible, orderly nature was troubling. He strove to offer comfort without promising anything -- their present enjoyment must not end in a lie. “We have a lot of things in common. I’m really glad you--”

“What an *insult*, all this *niceness*. Yet I like you enough to have kept a little space for compassion. I did watch you that night in Brasilia, as everyone else present watched...and especially her husband. The love you have for her...what terrible pain it must be for you. Do you know, even now...in this short time, I myself have some pain.”

“Augustina...” He sighed. “I’m sorry. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life...the last huge one at far too great a cost. But it changes nothing external; I can’t let it -- I’m running around the world busy as hell. Amazingly, I’m loved. I know that. But of course it only makes the situation...why the hell am I telling you this? I can’t discuss this. *Jesus*, Augustina, you and I...we’re--”

“We are nothing, of course...no, nothing at all, my dear. I really expected you to be somewhere else on the planet when I came to your office.” She laughed softly. “And you *are* somewhere else. Now I wish I had waited for another time. I am going to call a taxi. If you ever come to São Paulo, and you are your whole self, I will be so pleased to show you around my poor stressed, bursting-with-life...well, both ugly and beautiful old city.”

“Augustina...Augustina, it could be...one day very nearly my whole self might actually arrive in São Paulo.”

When she was gone he poured himself ample scotch and sat for a time in morose self-castigation. But soon his dejection dissolved into fanciful ponderings that the opera had summoned, thoughts of Semele: Semele the myth, Semele of the Handel oratorio and the opera of John Eccles; and then suddenly one day in his barren office, crimson-haired Semele the mathematical muse, eventually more mysterious to him than any truncated myth. How could he have callously left unopened all the doors down the winding labyrinth to the actual mystery? For initially encountering the myth, merely titillating, he had to credit his late mother, she who was so fond of myth she named her horses after Greek gods. He might otherwise have hardly paid attention to the original Semele -- an exquisite mortal led by a jealously deceiving wife,

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Hera, to a flaming incineration while inescapably locked in her paramour Zeus's deadly blinding heavenly trappings -- or listened idly as his mother's account of the ancient story revealed the unborn love-child, Dionysus, whom Zeus saved and birthed. Poor Semele had been banished to the dark underworld, followed by resurrection and placement on Olympus, lovingly rescued and immortalized by her wine-touting son, this sanctioned by her irresistible nemesis, lustful Zeus. At tale's end the beautiful moon-goddess reigned, but ever so remotely. Flushed in a haze of alcohol, he now set about attaching Rafael and Miguel to the ancient Mycenaean tale. A facile exercise, the ending of which left him cold with foreboding and irreconcilable longing. He shambled off to his empty bed.

"Daddy, we're at the farm, riding the stuffing out of your nervous horses. Aren't you coming?" his daughter Betina's teasing voice pleaded.

He stared out his tall office window. A hard grayness unified all the wet buildings, severely banishing any depth of perspective and creating a sinister Gotham backdrop to accompany his wintry disposition. Still, at the sound of his dark-eyed offspring's impetuous voice, his own voice had softened, along with his mood.

"I'm sorry, honey, but momentarily I'll be headed over Kentucky at thirty thousand feet. Natalie's there, too?"

"Yes, I am," Natalie said, speaking from another phone. You see, daddy, we're ganging up on you. Mama's here."

"Joanna? What's going on there? You two playing hooky and Joanna just showing up and allowing it?"

"Dearest absent progenitor, in case you hadn't noticed we're quite advanced in years...just having a holiday. That old school is a damned heavy load...and Betina's creative hardware is temporarily down. Are you coming?"

"Is Joanna alone?"

"Mama's still getting over her nasty divorce...Robert was such bad news...a sponger, a wastrel."

"A *wastrel*? What century are you living in, Natty?"

"Well, it's a perfect description. Mama's just too easy. I was hoping she'd relax. I think she'd really like to see you...I mean...after all this time."

"Good God, you silly imp, you know that ploy isn't going to work. We finished during the last Ice Age. The only thing Joanna and I have in common is you, my sweet...so let's not do anything to ruin that terrific record. You heading off the continent soon, Betina?"

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“Yes, daddy, back to grotty old Rome. Lately, too much of it looks like it was built in a day.”

“I thought you loved it there.”

“I do, I do, I do, but it’s terrible to live in...full of tourists Will you please come? We hardly ever see you.”

“Not quite true. Don’t harp at me. I’ve already got a damned near insupportable schedule.”

“We want you,” they chorused.

“And what is it that you do when we’re together on the farm? You run around teasing the exercise boys, rolling in the hay and barely acknowledging your sire’s presence.”

“Oh, we’re far beyond such childishness.”

“You’ll never convince me of that. Just get on with your reward of laziness and leave me to all this bad stuff. Both of you call me when you leave, you hear? Be sure to try and catch me in on your way out. If I’m locatable, we’ll have a nice leisurely dinner and a serious talk.”

“About the birds and bees?” Betina giggled with a high degree of self-satisfaction, Natalie as soon joining in.

“All right, you little harpies. I’ve seen you serious, and I’m glad you’re kicking up your heels. Have as much fun as you can. You know I love you both...in spite of the regrettable traits inherited from me. And now good-bye.”

They were good girls, and while he hadn’t always been present for them, the guilt of his absence had been. True enough, they were nearly grown up and didn’t really need him, at least not at the moment, except to be indulged; and their extravagant mothers would always do enough of that.

As he rapped the brass knocker he could smell sweet alder smoke drifting down from the fuming chimney. A few crisp leaves swirled up the walk, tumbling against his casual brown loafers.

The door opened and Semele stood before him, holding Miguel against her hip. Backlit crimson-lined hair floated over the slender shoulders of a long, stunningly availed white woolen dress, its hem almost touching the pale arch of an extended foot encased in a white leather flat. Her ivory face offered a luminous welcome, smiling beneath the soft yellow carriage light. Those steady crystal eyes caught and held the stirring cast of the chilly October twilight’s fleeting violet-blue air.

“Semele. Hello, Semele...how is your ankle?”

“All better...almost.”

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His arms reached out to her, lifting away Miguel with sublimated intent. “He may cry.”

“No, he won’t. You won’t, will you, perfect little Catalan?”

Miguel stared in amazed silence while he tickled the child’s soft chin and laughed with coaxing gentleness, until Miguel was compelled to smile.

“You see? He knows that I’m a father. His disposition is so very much yours,” he offered, stepping past her with Miguel raised high in his arms.

“You’ve said the right thing...I love you for it.”

“Then I have said the right thing.”

They went into the living room where the fire blazed below the fanned redwood mantel, and Rafael was sitting forward on the cream sofa earnestly conversing with Brad.

Settling into a beige-patterned white wing chair, with Miguel held on his lap, Jeff greeted Rafael, then quickly extended his hand as Brad stood up and bent his gangly frame toward the introduction. Rafael was generous with encomiums of heroic usefulness, at which Jeff shrugged and turned the praise back upon Semele and Rafael. “They regularly inspire that sort of treatment, yes?” Brad offered a weighted nod.

Jeff was next introduced to reticent Sarah, stepping from a softly lit corner of the dark-wooded, lower-leveled white room. She wore a narrow long gray skirt with an untucked and slightly rumpled white shirt, and appeared eagerly expectant, ready to carry Miguel back to her rocker.

He was not ready to give up Miguel. “You ought to get one of these for yourself,” he teased her, “then you’d never have to compete for the pleasure.”

“Silence that man,” Brad shot over his shoulder as he settled back into a matching wing chair, the one nearest Rafael.

For a few minutes he merely listened, rocking the keenly focused child on his knee and searching for more similarities to its mother.

Brad had just finished lamenting the melting permafrost in Greenland, and now they were discussing the importance of genetic polymorphism within each species of an ecosystem. These newly discovered differences of a single gene within a species were now known to promote constant adaptation to changing environment. But with destruction of the ecosystem in which they flourished they could adapt to nothing. He sat pondering unsuitableness slowly correcting itself, and then thought of the vanishing rain forest and the reasons Kiera had felt such urgency.

“Where are you headed next? Or do you prefer leaving your itinerary in the dark?” Brad asked.

“Hmm? What?” he responded, having in his musings missed how the conversation had switched to himself. “My next project? No, I don’t mind saying

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where that is. A few people do know where I've been spending some time...heading back to Venezuela. Fortunately, I've maintained an amicable relationship with that hot regime. And now it's time to cash in a few chips for the good of the forces that be. Nothing more specific than that to say. A new wife and a new job must be big transitions in your life, Brad." And thus he had segued into someone else's affairs.

"Not very big. I'm living with the same person I was before the official stamp, and my lectures in impoverished academia aren't anything new in style. But the subject is a damn sight more satisfying...and useful. And Sarah is a damn sight happier. Just what the doctors ordered...Rafael and Semele being the doctors, of course."

When Semele came into the room to hand Jeff a scotch and water, he offered over Miguel to hovering Sarah, dipping his mouth into silky black curls as the boy was given away.

Semele sat beside Rafael on the sofa, but remained very slightly apart and somewhat aloof. He could pretend it was in deference to him. But it was not so; no, it wouldn't be. He thought it more likely a careful attempt at restraint, the containment of elation; done to sustain the incredible energy that flowed between them. They were happy. He noted that Rafael had unobtrusively slipped reinforcement of their condition into a conversation lamenting sorrowful times – soft Castilian, perhaps only for Semele: "*Estamos alegre.*"

Rafael suddenly got up to collect Miguel – the child shrilly calling for his father – and brought him back to the sofa. "Da, da, da," the boy chortled in contentment at his choice proximity. His fingers explored Rafael's face.

"*Sí, sí, sí, Miguelito chiquitín.*" He drew his head back and kissed the tiny hand.

"You see how that child is spoiled?" Brad said, but in his voice was nothing if not warm approval.

Semele had come alive with spilling laughter. She was holding Miguel's foot and looking at Rafael. The exchange between them, precise, unmistakable, illustrated the rare natural resource most desired, most cherished, most elusive.

He sipped his scotch and stared at the three of them with grievous delight, the cruelest joy. It was why he had come. He felt no need to discuss anything, although always ready with facile or recondite opinions.

"What is that incredible aroma?" he asked.

"That's pot roast Kentucky-style, a wonderfully rich concoction with, I think, celery, onions, potatoes, carrots, and freshly shelled peas," Semele answered. "I take no credit. I have a resourceful acquaintance who happens to be a culinary whiz:

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Amanda. Mandy takes over my lucky kitchen sometimes when I entertain. That way I can enjoy the guests and keep them happy at the same time.”

He arose from his chair and went into the kitchen. A robust matronly body was leaning over Semele’s steaming stainless steel stove.

“Hello, Amanda. I think it’s you who are going to win my heart. What is Kentucky-style pot roast?”

White-aproned Amanda turned her plump, gray-clothed body around, set down her rosewood ladle, and pulled back a loose white streak of hair, winding it into a wispy black bun at her nape. Her round ruddy face was moist and hot, and her crinkling black eyes sparkled with ethnic humor.

“Kentucky-style pot roast is a label Semele dreamed up...I think to impress a man from Kentucky, who is probably you. Am I right?”

“It must be me. The smell is sending me straight back to my boyhood in a Kentucky dining room.”

“Well, there’s nothing gives me more pleasure than feeding a deserving, appreciative, hungry man.”

“I wish I’d said that.” Semele had just come through the swinging door of her modern provincial kitchen.

He was half finished with his second scotch, and said, “I wish you had said it...but Amanda stood in for you with real soul.” He winked at Amanda.

“Oh, yes...she cooks with that delicious Italian soul.”

“My God, it’s hot in here. Does this Tudor treasure have a deck or something attached outside?”

“Come this way,” Semele instructed, opening an opaque, diamond-windowed door that led from the kitchen out onto her leisurely-appointed patio. The latticed side wall was laced with the fading summer vines of climbing white roses.

“Don’t let up on that Kentucky surprise, Amanda,” he called as he stepped through the door.

“Alcohol makes you hot...much better...that familiar dry-leaf spice of autumn...air’s cold, smoky-sweet...salty too...from your Sound. Look at that full Hunter’s Moon...a big orange lantern. Ah, you even have a covered swing seat. The good old days revived. My father had an oft sought-after striped one on his veranda.”

“Please set yourself down, Mr. Smith.”

“Will you sit with me?”

She sat down and set them gently swinging with her anchored foot. After a little of this, he stopped the creaking motion and set his emptied glass on a side table. He turned to her and grasped her cool hand, which had lain inertly in her cashmere-clothed lap and now trembled.

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“Are you cold? Here, take my jacket.”

“No, I’m fine.” She stroked her fingers over the wool lapel of his jacket.

“Mmm, this handsome Harris tweed is warming *you* very well indeed. I’m fine, really...all nicely wrapped in these soft Kashmir-goat threads.”

“I can hold my liquor fairly well, and that was only my second drink, but don’t let me say anything I’ll regret.”

“Well, well, so circumspect. What would you regret?”

“You’re teasing me. Have we reached the sadly tame point where you can do that with impunity? I’ll tell you what I wouldn’t regret.”

“No, don’t. It’s so nice like this, my darling friend.”

“You’re very beautiful tonight...in your white wool dress – but when aren’t you...beautiful? And with your beautiful son...and that – My God! – unassailable alliance with your firebrand husband; which, of course, only makes you more beautiful. It’s damned hard not to--”

“Jeff...excuse me but...you know, you’re always rather intimidating...it’s that explosive, dominant, proprietary brawniness that just--”

“Wait a minute. I don’t like any of that.”

“There, you see?”

“I think I’m a little more sophisticated than that. But if I have to say it maybe I...why are you laughing?”

“Because I love you just the way you are.”

“Do you realize what that does to me? Then I get to say the same thing to you.”

“We should go in fairly soon.”

“Why? Is Rafael going to come out here and attempt to punch my lights out?”

“No, he wouldn’t dream of coming out here.”

“I would.”

“You’re not Rafael.”

“At this moment I almost wish I were.”

“Rafael’s very natural *amour-propre*...and his trusting heart, won’t allow him to come out here.”

“Don’t try to convince me he’s incapable of jealousy.”

“Oh, no, but I’m sure he knows I’m only trying to straighten something out...as I know you’re trying to...to work something out.”

“You know that, do you?”

“Yes. Once I tried to leave him...because I couldn’t stand the pain of not knowing what would happen next...but that’s all of life, isn’t it? Unpredictability. He

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made me see that it was impossible -- you can't run away from such massive emotion. You deal with it...one way or another. That was one thing...and this is another." She took his hand in both of hers. "I think you'll always be in our lives, won't you?"

"In one way...perhaps not another."

"Oh Jeff, I can't ask you to give up on us. You'll decide if being that kind of friend is worth it. You certainly know...how I feel...but Rafael is my light, and light is the only constant in the universe. You know what I'll do...what I *am* doing."

"Knowing you -- strangely enough, both of you -- has almost made it...made it worth the punishment. Shall I have you taken off the payroll?"

She uttered a confused sound, not quite a laugh. "God, in a literary sense that sounds terminally symbolic of...I didn't know I was still on the payroll."

"Oh, yes. And that *is* symbolic of something...or at least a way of holding on."

"You've been amazing. I must know -- must *love* -- two of the most amazing men alive."

Standing up as if suddenly stung, he drew her up against him, holding her as he had held her in his hotel suite in Brasilia, in a long chaste moment of silence.

"You left me speechless...but I think you're just being kind." He rocked her in a slow dance, which only in thought recalled their tango. "I also think that...we'd better go back in right now, so I can...ah, yes, my former associate, Semele, my forfeited Semele...so I can...Christ, beautiful mathematician, how can I let you...my inescapable...better go back in so I can -- *Jesus*, Semele -- acquaint my famished body with Kentucky pot roast?"

He was sated on Amanda's richly sauced roast enhanced with glossy, expertly herbed vegetables, crisp and fresh. There had been the welcome dispensation of a friendly burgundy. Resettled in the wing chair before the fire, he nevertheless felt sadness creeping back into his slack brain. As a needed distraction, he had snatched velvety Catney away from a surreptitious prow. At first startled, ultimately passive, the thick-furred feline settled down with its paws dangling over his knee; Catney had met his superior in artifice, but now exploited subjugation, calmly tolerant of stroking fingers, even purring.

He spoke with Brad and Rafael, giving concise opinions about interlinked political and economic conditions around the world, then got up to relieve himself of so much wine. Freed Catney sped away with flattened ears. Returning down the hall, he glanced into Semele's study and saw a picture hanging on the wall nearest her oak desk -- a waist-high black and white photograph of Semele in a long-sleeved thin white

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shirt, with one hand on the muzzle of a satiny black Arabian. Her laughing mouth was open, as if she had just mildly scolded someone, and her eyes were clear as crystal.

Semele stepped into the room, and he said, "Intelligent looking animal."

"Which one? You must mean Chancey." Her low voice and laughter, seductively teasing, at once induced a warm flush that spread out from his chest down into his groin and up into his throat. He grinned and rubbed his heated neck, feeling completely transparent, like a brightly flashing neon invitation.

"I want you to visit my farm and ride my horses one day soon. Will you do that?"

She straightened a blotter on her desk, looked up doubtfully and said, "Of course. Certainly. Absolutely."

"No, damn it, that's a little too glib for any kind of promise. Just say you will and mean it."

"I will. May I bring my husband?"

"Of course. Certainly. Absolutely."

"Oh Jeff, your sense of humor is destructive."

"You make everything I do sound like a train wreck."

"No...no, that can't be true. I'm so glad you came. I'm so glad you're here. Excuse me...sorry, I've got to go thank Amanda and say good-bye."

When she was gone, he studied the photograph with his hands behind his back, implacably deliberating on which of his spirited Thoroughbreds he would have her ride.

Finding Semele still in the kitchen with Amanda, and Sarah there, too, feeding Miguel, he returned to the living room. An interval of silence arose, and he said, "Is Higgins behaving himself?"

Rafael focused those bruising chestnut eyes on him. Feeling it, he still looked back without blinking, without any other message but one of concerned curiosity.

"Higgins has been reassigned; it was that or a firing squad. He enlisted a destitute old soldier living at the edge of *los barrios bajos* to kill our driver...and then me. Money exchanged hands during one of Higgins' heavy drinking binges. The shooter, a hungry dupe, *will* be shot -- so Mendoza says -- the end of the fellow's misery, the reward of his misguided service to Bellaco. I may yet intervene -- the near-death beating was not done by the old soldier but by two accompanying thugs. Mendoza badly wants the company to finish the water system. For this reason, around the world I will continue to be reviled by Higgins...by Higgins and his ilk. I hope it fosters something positive."

"Then my ferreting associate was right about Higgins."

"Sí, Jeff, your associate was right."

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“Some satisfaction in knowing how well my men and women do their work...however Pyrrhic your own victory -- that is in finding the culprit. Sorry.”

“I believe that you *are* sorry,” Rafael said -- and it seemed to Jeff without innuendo. “But from the standpoint of advantage for Madera’s people, victory, your word, has sacrificed nothing that concerns me personally...except that I am sickened by the loss of any life for any good cause.”

“I wonder, Rafael,” Brad observed, “why you had to so laboriously pursue a degree in economics to do what you do. Earth sciences I can well understand, but aren’t economic theories constructed mainly to facilitate commerce, and isn’t it commerce that gobbles up resources and makes people slaves to materialism?...slaves directly proportional to foreign container-load’s of mounting trash.”

“You have answered your own question as to why. To turn a negative into a positive, one must thoroughly understand the negative...in order to intelligently employ it in a positive manner. To turn swords into plowshares one must understand the nature of metal. Or, to put it in a more modern context: to fight your enemy you must use the same level of equipment -- tragically, impoverished mankind, impoverished in every way, craves nuclear fission for the same reason. The bomb is insanely simple. To live without it a challenge not simple at all. Reason and war seldom meet. As you well know, *mi amigo*, we live in a very complicated world too often run by simpletons.”

“Yes, that I do know and lament. I can only admire your persevering method.”

“Perseverance is the word of choice.”

“And you never become discouraged?” Jeff wondered.

Rafael laughed. “Perseverance and discouragement are mutually exclusive terms.”

Brad coughed and got up to wrap his fingers around the neck of the port bottle standing on an old mahogany side table. “Anyone for a little of this?” he asked, holding up a gold-edged liqueur glass as he filled it.

“Why not,” Jeff answered, suddenly remembering why Brad was probably here: to prevent the sort of thing that was likely to occur anyway. His own project in this household was an honest assessment accompanying a proclamation that would never be acceptable to all present. How the hell could that be done? What if he were to state unequivocally here and now: *Even though Semele is completely given over to you and the mother of your son, I think you are bad for her. I think you are going to ruin her life, or worse yet, get her killed. I love her too much, too much to let it go on, but I haven’t found a way to stop it. Why the hell did you ever allow this to happen? Why are you so damned selfish?*

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Then he saw her. She had slipped away from the kitchen to stand in the unlit hallway, a mirrored light falling just over her spectral visage, so that she appeared to float there encircled in shadow. She had listened and in her perceptive way knew it all; perhaps even an approximation of what he wanted to say. It was as if she had struck a match in the middle of an unbearable darkness. Although relieved to have her face locked in his vision, he realized he might never be able to penetrate that unassailable mask of firm resolve – an illuminated oracle in a dark hallowed place, a secretive life force before which he could only stand in awe. She tossed back her magnificent murrey hair and glided into the room over the pale blooming carpet, her long white dress rippling above silent white flats.

“Has Rafael told you we’re going to Sudan?”

It was like a bullet to his chest. For a moment so great was his fear, he, having also withstood some of the world’s severity, couldn’t breathe before the gossamery vision of this pale white sacrifice. He threw down his port in one swallow, stood up and felt the heat in his clenched fist.

“Yes, take her to a place where women are disposable chattel, where the men will respect her even less than you do. You fool! You will both die there..and so goddammed unpleasantly that--”

“Jeff, please calm down,” Rafael said in a serious but surprisingly level voice. “I did not realize how great was your misreading of me. But of your feeling for Semele there is no mistake. *Sí*, I have been asked to look at some of the raided villages, to look at water conditions in Sudan. But it is the first I have heard of Semele’s coming along. She is up to her old tricks again. Saying it does not make it so, *mi querida*.”

“Your parents should have spanked you regularly and soundly,” Brad suddenly offered, glaring at Semele. He had yanked off his despised tie and slapped it over the back of his ferociously vacated chair.

Semele began to laugh. “Why? Why should they have spanked me? Because I was – I am – a naughty little independent girl? There are women in Sudan – yes, as we speak there are the desperate mothers searching for firewood and being raped, cruelly, wretchedly abused, *killed!* But at the moment I’m talking about doctors and, more specifically, female reporters, one especially. You really ought to read her accounts...very sharp, effective, bold reportage. Maybe it’s doing some good. My God, someone must.”

He could hardly contain the laceration still in his voice. “Semele, reporters don’t necessarily affect the despotic Arab regime in that country. Interfering water monitors do. The western Sudan is a living hell.”

“Oh, you think a world-wide exposé isn’t a threat to their hideous genocide? Well then, all the more reason I’m going. I’m going to see that it becomes a threat.

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With or without Rafael, I'm going there, and I'm going to come back here and noise it around with all the commotion I can muster. Dammit, I'm just as capable and resourceful and tough as anyone else on two legs."

"Then, *mi querida*, you will go with me," Rafael said, acquiescing with a cool smile that for a second Jeff hoped was disaffected. But clearly, Rafael's love and pride of Semele were undiminished. There was nothing less than admiration in his ardent voice. "Now you see how she does it, Jeff. I am the one who must have your pity."

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed. "How will I ever find you? How the hell will I get either of you out of there this time? I might as well go with you."

"You understand, Jeff, that Semele is bluffing? She would not go there alone, because she knows such a thing is foolish. When she turns her generic exclusion into gender abuse, it is only that she wants to make me concede."

"Oh, but it's really because I'm a woman that you--"

"No. As you once said to me, it is because you are *my* woman...and all that it means to me. Despite this, *mi querida*, if I must have someone that close out there, there is no one I would rather have. If you cannot realize your self without coming, then you will come."

"Jeff, please apologize to Rafael. I can't stand what you've said. It's completely untrue."

"Semele...he does not have to--"

"Yes, I do. I was going to anyway. I apologize," he said, reaching out to shake Rafael's quickly offered hand. "She's driving us both crazy."

"Let's all apologize profusely and start over," Brad suggested, his reedy voice displaying its customary satire but infused with a good measure of sincerity.

Sarah came in with Miguel in her arms, and Rafael said, "At least these two do not have to apologize to anyone."

"Apologize for what?" Sarah asked.

"For overtaking the medulla oblongata," Brad suggested.

"Hmm. Well, that explains everything," Sarah replied.

"Quite a lot, actually," Semele affirmed.

Still exercised over the volatile subject and its fiery result, Jeff drifted away in search of a cooler atmosphere, ambling back into Semele's study. He began reading the titles of numerous neatly arranged books. A wide-ranging collection resting on recessed floor-to-ceiling walnut shelves covering two walls. Mathematics, tidily beginning with its earliest masters. Statistics. Philosophy and Psychology. Science. Flora and fauna. History. Poetry. Mythology. Fiction classics and weighty contemporary works. Art. The tempting library of a true omnivore.

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He sensed another's presence, and turned around to find Rafael standing in the doorway. He looked hesitant, as if it had not been his idea to come. Semele must have sent him. He now understood that Rafael was necessarily and effectively authoritarian in almost any situation but the domestic one, in which, from time to time, he unexpectedly found himself. In this circumstance, he was magnanimously accommodating, although still self-contained.

"It is a good collection," Rafael said.

"How does your reading compare to Semele's?"

"You do not mean my choice of reading, but if I have read enough, *sí*?"

"Yes, was that impertinent?"

"It is a question her father might have asked me and has not. Both Semele and I were raised with books in our hands. I cannot remember when it happened that I learned to read in several languages, but I was always reading."

Jeff thought of the implications intended and decided the main implication was that of his own imperception. He sat at Semele's desk and leaned his chin on his hands.

"My father's library was...always one of my favorite places."

Rafael folded his arms and leaned back against the doorframe. "Your father was...?"

"My father was a classy stockman in good horse country, a young rogue, an old reprobate...an adulterous lover of his faithful wife. When my mother died, a very good horsewoman, he rapidly drank himself to death."

"And you chose not to follow in his...his profession."

"Horses? That's right. Even before I graduated from Princeton, I had wanderlust...it turned into risks in hard places...taking chances, but usually for some defensible reason. I knew I could always have horses...play around with horses...hang onto the farm...grow it a little."

"You know yourself very well."

"Not *too* well...well enough...my limitations at least."

"And you are honest."

"It's easier that way in private affairs...and so are you honest...where it counts. I imagine if you can't tell the truth you keep silent."

"I have been known to lie...for expediency...for the necessary result."

"I guess that doesn't enter into it -- in the matter of a useful life -- end justifying means."

"That can be a vicious practice; I hope it is not blindly mine."

Rafael uncrossed his arms and with a smooth one-handed athleticism swung a side chair up to the desk, straddling it not at all as a docile interviewee. The elegant

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oak Tudor chair was turned backwards and his arms linked over the back's central curve, a heedless position so naturally assumed it left propriety itself in question. Still, the position suggested impermanence, implying a short exchange. Jeff thought his smile taunting, enigmatic, a little too serious.

"Do you ever cut loose?"

Rafael laughed. "If you had seen me growing up you would not have to ask. When I told Semele I once owned a Harley Davidson, she understood at once and playfully brought up Marlon Brando. But Brando was a tame actor."

"Compared to you. Jesus, the image is changing."

"I was never that self-absorbed, but far too idealistic in those days...impatient, *colérico*...angry."

"A hot-blooded young rebel."

"Perhaps."

"And now you are practical."

"A good word...I believe so...the heat is still there."

"You're an endangered species, Rafael."

"Man...mankind is endangered by systematic short-sightedness....categorical self-destruction."

"Yes, inevitable, I suppose."

Rafael's expressive long fingers extended and clenched to accompany his assertion. "No. It does not have to be that way. If some of us can see a better way, that means there *is* one."

He thought how quickly they had gotten away from the personal, how Rafael could do that. An extraordinarily unusual trait that deserved consideration, especially from a man whose consecrated blood surprisingly pounded with a distracting love. This sacrifice was a part of what had captured Semele. And how could Rafael not himself have been caught? Would this increasingly preoccupied leader ever neglect his prize long enough to set her free? Of course it would happen unintentionally, unwillingly.

Rafael overtly studied the luscious black and white photograph of Semele, thereby bringing her into the room, then turned back in quiet examination of Jeff. His observed subject sat in growing surprise, while those dark flames of intuition burned into his consciousness with a flagrantly unsettling perception. Rafael's added voice was level, almost hypnotic, softened and genuinely sincere but with a relentless exposure of the evening's predominant business. Jeff then found himself interpreting unmistakable Castilian words utterly unexpected, but why so unexpected?

"*Lo siento, amigo. Elle es mía...siempre.* She is mine, and that is forever." The avowal was given in both of their languages, clearly to express the depth of meaning,

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to make unequivocal what might have been construed in only English as frivolous or transitory. "It is not a matter of selfish possession, but of *mutual* possession...authentic. I am grateful for your devotion; it is good for her...probably for *you*. There are many kinds of relationships, and I could never deny you one of the others...they, too, are immensely valuable, are they not? We can all share a great deal. For whatever reason, I am in your debt. Jeff, I am not saying anything I would not say if Semele were standing here. I am sorry there are not two of her."

For an emotion-ruled moment he was thoroughly stung, and his answer was unrestrained, "You're right, Rafael, there could never be two of Semele...and anyone even slightly reminding me of her would be a mistake."

Semele wanted them to be friends; she might be as astonished as he was now to hear the very forthright pronouncement of her circumspect mate. He felt a little like an out-of-bounds juvenile who had been called in to receive the principal's final admonition. Rising from the desk, he started to leave, but then turned back, sounder judgment having at last come into play, subduing adrenalin. He could not discount such an honest declaration of profound love, nor belittle gratitude, or a difficult generosity.

"However I deal with the rest, I'd be a fool not to appreciate a fair amount of what you've said, Rafael."

In the middle of the French apple pie and coffee, the door knocker was rapped, and Rafael said, "Ah, that is Julio Carrera."

"What? I didn't know he was coming," Semele said.

"Neither did I until an hour ago. He called to talk about Sudan. I thought it would be an opportunity for Jeff to learn about the trip."

"He's the one who asked Rafael to join a sort of fact-finding mission," Semele explained. "But you might have told me, Rafael."

"What would you then have done?" he asked on his way to answer the door.

"Hmm...well, maybe fixed another table setting for our dessert course," Semele called after him.

"That's hardly beyond us," Brad said, but Sarah was already headed out to the kitchen for more pie and coffee. Amanda had gone home.

"Sarah's just wonderful. I'm so glad she loves Miguel as much as she does," Semele praised.

"So am I. My new infant relative does remove some of the heat," Brad remarked, smiling at Semele as if daring her to say he was an ungenerous husband.

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Finished with their dessert, back in the living room and now somewhat adjusted to the intensely voluble Carrera, they had ranged over the Darfur agenda when Carrera suddenly said, “My students are still talking about you, Rafael.”

“I hope not profanely,” Rafael responded with a grin.

Standing up and pointing at Rafael with a clownish side-to-side dance of exuberance, Julio Carrera exclaimed, “When comes the question period of his lecture, do you know, can you *believe* what he said to one of my students?”

“We’ll probably believe it when we hear it,” Brad said.

“One inspired naïf was moved to remark: ‘I guess we’ll have to hope for a miracle, Doctor Arnau i Roca.’ Rafael answered... Tell them, tell them what you said, Rafael.”

Rafael appeared a little nonplussed, as though Julio Carrera were talking about something highly imagined. In an attempt to recall the precise situation, he had leaned back on the sofa and shrugged at awaiting Semele, on his mouth a lingering curl of smile for his former cohort’s presently amusing bombast. The black corduroy shirt, black slacks, and gleaming sorrel boots – probably never less considered than whenever donned – enhanced, but always only as purely unaffected practicality, the smoldering Catalan darkness, the privately quiet, involved nature. His *presence*, for all those who entered the peripheral dimension of his life, Jeff thought, was as a desired, perhaps gravely necessary icon, a striking, eloquently persuasive authentic warrior; but here, cast in the light of the hearthstone, not as much an icon as a felicitously responding helpmate, made briefly accessible by the softening proximity of his nonpareil mate. Yes, anything of the personal here revealed would be the result of Semele’s proximate emollience, that unpremeditated softness so powerfully persuasive. And the child’s.

Hovering with crossed arms, an impatient Julio Carrera leaned toward Rafael and prompted: “Like my student, I am still waiting for a miracle.”

“Ah, *sí*, but do not *wait* for a miracle, do not look out *there* hoping for a miracle. Look at yourself. *You*, you are the miracle. What greater instrument has anyone than his or her own miraculous self, *mi amigo*? Act upon that.”

“*¡Exactamente!* That was it entirely. You see? You see why they are still talking about this *hombre!*”

From Rafael an amused and disavowing shake of his head. His right hand rubbed at dilated eyes that still retained his reverberating message. The flexed hand then paused against his forehead, eyes closed in constraint; somewhere within, Jeff surmised, a devaluing adjustment of Carrera’s vigorous praise must be in progress. Narrative fingers absently moved on through tousled black waves, then halted. The

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hand dropped and settled lightly over Semele's raised knee, as if passing inutile self-reflection on to a worthier subject. Nothing relevant was further divulged in these few seconds, only chiding words for overexcited Carrera.

"For the second time this evening I am asking someone to calm himself. *Amigo*, please sit down...relax, have a little port."

There was another rapping at the door, and Semele looked at Rafael with primed suspicion. "Who on earth can that be?"

"Probably Jeet Grey," Rafael said, winking at her. The two laughed in the instant delight of shared understanding, Rafael's laughter trailing after him as he went to the door. It was Dora returning a discomposd Catney. She had found him sitting in her chrysanthemum box staring at the moon.

"Sorry...he's an aesthete with very good taste," Semele apologized, tucking him beneath her arm.

"What else could he be, living here?" Jeff called out.

This night had been chaos and comfort, sweet desire and that same emotion transcendently thwarted; foreordained opacities and transparencies, ecstasies and miseries that could only have been stirred together by the two alchemists temporarily alighted in this Tudor house. Everyone else had gone, and Miguel was peacefully sleeping in his crib. Jeff did not want to leave them, but he *was* leaving.

Rafael had not been exposed or diminished in any light. On the contrary, he had passed every latent test with his remarkably influential precepts continuously in service; these were affirmed as never a capricious addendum but the man himself. And what was there to disparage of an altruist deeply in love with his wife and child? Except that along his rigorous path he might have denied himself those two. No, it was beyond human capacity, and on that score he, Jeff, if critical, would become a most culpable hypocrite.

He continued on in light-veined conversation all the way to the door, but the fear of their dangerous journey into the hostile western Sudan hung above like a dark star. He knew a little more now, how many they would be and generally where they would go. He would watch carefully and find a reason to go there himself. That he could do. They would become, or perhaps had already become, his profoundest project, one that would, he rationalized with unanswerable longing, give his persevering life a regenerate purpose, a meaning beyond his own existence. *My God*, he thought, *the same world that so badly needs them is the world bound to destroy them in their prime.*

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He kissed Semele's glowing cheek and shook Rafael's firm hand. The Hunter's Moon had swung high above but now appeared to stoop and briefly commiserate. For a moment he paused beside the taxi and looked back at them bathed in the luminous gold of the carriage light. In the surreal autumn night, his mildly bilious condition dipped into fantasy. He saw a prominent black sculpture of Catalan origin supporting a radiant moon goddess: dark-metaleed Rafael standing behind the opalescent glow of Semele; he was holding her against him, those vulnerable wounded arms in full possession, Myth and Legend now eternally fixed. Overarching Rafael, the ubiquitous amender of past and future wrongs, beyond his predilection, but not his province, forever the legendary restorer of *La Nava Feraz*. Water and man synonymous. *There* was the permanence, the entitlement to immortality. He could not be forgotten and so would live beyond himself.

A sad voyeur with a covetous ache, he stood in a final moment of forbearance, while that prophetic Catalan mouth nudged aside red waves and settled on the barely explored nape of his beloved associate's surrendered neck. Her flaming head lay over her left shoulder, her mouth softly smiling, closed eyes dreaming of the unfinished night's erotic promise. The best for last. A lush revival he could only imagine but, in his wine-enhanced state, rather easily desire for himself. Still in all, life had its affirmation, for, barring unthinkable incident, they three would meet again and know each other. Surely with no cruel display of mockery intended and merely by an innately ruling influence, Rafael, stolen himself, had once more stolen Semele away; wholly away into the ultimately forgiving myth of venially insatiable Zeus. Like the ineluctable moon, she remained above, coolly out of reach but so bright; alas, thoroughly caught in Rafael's encircling firmament. So high her earth-bound cavalier could win no last good-bye.