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The Unexpected Gift
by
Karlene Kubat

I

In shadow or sunlight, fear thrived in this place. Hurrying away from a visit to a family in makeshift quarters, she spotted a fluttering hawk-like bird and thought it must be a kite. Yes, a kite, settling high in the tattered fronds of a thick-trunked date palm. The sun's intense light gilded the brown feathers with a gold velvet too striking to disregard. She raised her camera, clicking twice -- something caught undamaged amid the ruins. She watched the kite rest a moment then shake itself and pull a long wing feather through its beak. It was a wary bird, making vigilant pauses between each preening. Still, it could look down upon her foreshortened body without much concern. She envied its unrivaled perspective and safety. Don't allow careless distraction she reminded herself, even as she watched the kite give a startled cry and rise into the blue Middle Eastern air.

She was caught wingless in bursts of machine gun fire. Rapid puffs of dust. Bodies scattering, falling, a random few struggling to rise.

Ahead, the protective wheels of a truck. She started forward, glancing once over her shoulder to gauge the hazard at her back. In that single glance came a vision she had always seen and would always see: a weeping child standing in the targeted street. *Here it comes, only one or the other...life or death.* Her body curled into a running crouch, not forward,

backward, the safety of the truck gone. Locking camera against chest with one arm, reaching out and pulling the child in with the other, she went down, rolled and came up beside an empty gasoline barrel. It whined with bullets. One tore through the loose cuff of her jacket, another through the bottom edge of her pants leg as she pulled in her foot. Her ears ached from the relentless sound.

Was this it, the final moment? But to go with such anger. Rising alongside the deafening salvos, an unsummoned nursery rhyme played its silent counterpoint in her head: *The monkey thought it was all in fun. Pop goes the weasel.*

The child gasped and went rigid. Dead? Paralyzed with fear? Alive. She could feel warm life straining against her. In the next menacing silence she lunged behind a low wall, held there, hunched and panting while bullets ricocheted off the other side of the crumbling dun bricks.

Sporadic gunfire. Beyond in the white glare: crumpled bodies, twitching movements of death, mostly stillness; pooling blood -- the amazing smell of it in the dry air.

The child looked up at her with startled dilated eyes, waiting with her, its sound and reaction forestalled.

She closed her eyes but the unconscious had cracked, submerged images escaping: a car slamming into a concrete wall; a plane falling from the sky. Then in slow motion: the car's front bumper touching the concrete and rippling, peeling, folding back; the plane in thousands of pieces, rising up into the air and spreading, floating, settling down upon a mountain. The images accelerated, slipping backward and backward as her wayward mind zigzagged through a maze of electric impulses: the red face of her first grade teacher, spit flying from her mouth as she shouted, "Hell is for liars, little miss." Her curly towhead shook. "I didn't lie. I didn't."; Mama throwing dinner plates at the wall. Shards flying into her cereal. Run. Through the holly hedge into the woods, among bird sounds. Small birds. Death only a vague notion then, a little exciting, dark and indistinct as a fabulous animal in moon shadow.

She would think of one more breath of life apiece. Then think of another breath and then another. Do it that way, calm her racing mind with useless entreaty as she had always done. *Let this one smooth baby die old, die sorting a few decent memories...old, old, wrinkled as a sun-dried apple.* It was far too much to ask in this place. No way to dicker here. There was nothing but evasive action, and if that failed nothing but bad luck.

The morning air was heating up in the sharp light, a blinding sugar-white light. She lifted her head for only a moment, glanced around and fell back with her eyes shut.

Her lips were moving without sound. An unvoiced wail of invective: *Is this enough? There they were, gone now. Here you*

are, no less perishable. Close enough? Damn this. Damn you. Damn it all. Luck is now an empty bladder.

Spasms of shaking. Laughter: a celebration of four lungs still filling with air -- one flaunted inchmanship of triumph over madness. Laughter as liquor, the relief of deliverance. She could feel but not hear herself laughing amidst the whine and ack-ack of death. Then silence. Laughter as the silence of guns, as the cheating of rigor mortis. She wouldn't die laughing. She wouldn't die now. She had ahold of this baby.

Looking down at the child she saw wide brown eyes of innocence glazed with terror. The mouth would neither smile nor cry.

Where have you begun, little one? What do you think of this? Will you live? Will you remember? How can you understand a deranged woman clutching at you for her own sanity? Poor beauty born to smile on mama's knee.

An explosion of dirt, bricks, and mortar. The smell of gasoline fumes and a ripping blast pounding, shaking the earth, then fading into tap, tap, tapping. Rain falling on the dry oak leaves outside her bedroom long ago. No, not so very long. All in an instant. Silence again. More silence. Silence and laughter. *I got you. I got you.*

Head down against the child's soft crown of dark hair, she crooned, "Just baby and me, we're going to be free and happy in our blue heaven."

She closed her eyes again and put her head back against the bricks. There came the unmistakable swift clicks of a camera shutter eating up film. Her eyes flew open, visualizing the caption of an A.P. photo: *Journalist and Rescued Child Take Cover*. This was not a photograph, would never be a cornered image -- the full dimension of here and now, mouth filled with the filthy dust of a war-ravaged Beirut street, clutching a child who was now very likely an orphan. She blinked with rage.

The black-bearded photographer clicked away with machine precision. Was she this, too, this indifferent invasive machine? Her own camera came into her hands, the child lying beneath it across her bent legs. Up before her face the finely honed glass eye was a rebuttal of all accusation, a shield. The moment the camera assumed purpose her self diminished, as though she sat waiting at the back of a dark theater. Once again the curtains opened. She focused and caught what was visible of the sober mouth above the beard and beneath the tan hat. Now frozen in time and place: long legs in well-worn Levis; scuffed boots; faded photographer's jacket with sleeves just beginning to fray; sweat-darkened blue shirt; a walking camera rack; a self-possessed American news junkie -- *behold an East Coast photographer*. She of comparative Northwest Coast obscurity didn't move in those circles. Go anyplace where there was a dark human-inspired hell and this strange breed would be found

scrambling for the perfect shot of death, the one that stank of it, the one that produced the supreme nausea.

She lowered her camera, tasted bile and shivered. Stupefied to the point of incomprehension, she closed her eyes. Had something burst, clotted memory? It occurred to her that she had come here just to save this one child. No other thought moved her forward or backward. Her head buzzed as a stubborn practicality set in.

"Hey, you think you got enough there?"

He let his camera swing free and shoved back his hat. "That butchery is over. Christ. More bodies."

It was Paul Carl. The processing cool blue eyes leveled her anger with surprise. She'd met him nearly ten years ago in very different circumstances, but even then with the three perennial Nikons hanging around his neck, the very best model, each with a different millimeter lens. She speculated that the weight might eventually cave his tall posture. Was there recognition? She smiled to herself. No, there was not. She, older and a little fuller in body now, had been a thin background shadow when first they met, unformed and mostly uninformed, even more confusing to herself than now. Extraordinary. She had just become a lucky chance shot, the very kind she herself sought. Nice provender for his larder -- a rich larder, she knew that about this single-minded New York prince. The memory of their early brief encounter brought a rush of irritation.

Bastard, photographing me coming unglued. So? So. So what? Who wouldn't fold when a machine gun is parting hair? My slacks torn by a bullet and, Jesus! right through my sleeve cuff. But the others...the others...warm blood gone to ground, fluid life back to dry earth...just so much dross and stench now. And we're drawing breath here. Hardly a scratch...maybe a few bruises. Numbers moving up fast, moving up to the front. But, little brown eyes, I got you.

She leaned forward, ruffling the quiet child's hair, listening. Silence; its heavy threat. But a chance to move. Unwinding her hard-flexed body too swiftly, she stumbled and hunched forward over the child. Her trembling hand pulled the soft warm flesh against her, caressing the silky cheek. The limpid brown eyes stared at her as she tried to stretch out her taut muscles. No mother or father called for this sweet baby. She glanced back at the lifeless bodies in the street, some already being carted away. Somewhere among them was a face given to this tender flesh. The child had not cried since she took it.

"Hey, little Lemur." Her voice shook. "Know you've got the midnight eyes of a gorgeous little lemur?" She picked up the child, holding it over her hip. "Have to find out where you belong."

"Come on, my friend, let's get out of here," Paul said. "Where you headed?"

"I was...away from here."

"Where to now?" his insistent voice demanded.

"In...under a rock. That's enough for today, for the rest of my life...about to leave this hell zone." The scathing anger was on her tongue, but her throat wanted to laugh the way she did as a child, with a thrill of daring: *Can't catch me.*

She set the child down a minute to brush the clinging dust off her clothes, then picked him up again.

"Don't you have someone waiting?...guard?...driver? Got a car back there." He pointed to an old station wagon.

"Where's your driver?" she asked.

"Helping with those." He jerked his head toward the street. "They don't want us out there. We're trouble. Let's get moving before we end up blindfolded."

"Have to find out where he belongs. Can't just take him away from here...but I wish...I'd like to."

There was the single crack of a rifle. He yanked her back into the shadows of a crumbling doorway.

"How'd you get here anyway?" He spoke while putting his head out to glance around.

"What?...you mean here or Beirut? I guess you mean... Caught a ferry from Cyprus. Not so comfy, but the airport's no good. Hezbollah's always hanging around...you must have noticed. Got a State Department waiver, if that's what you mean. They made it clear if I was caught I was nonexistent. Into the woodwork...of course. Said I'd been nonexistent plenty of times -- to myself I said that."

"Why here?"

"A lot of concerned refugees in L.A. An ethnic paper. Concern for families here...children...medical care."

"Stringer? Freelance?"

"Uncontracted; paid on delivery. I like it that way."

"But not this way."

She thought he was smirking beneath his elitist black beard and then wondered if it was just her old paranoia riding high on shock. He was staring at her free hand which was shaking. The aftershock surprised her with its ungovernable insistence.

"Want a drink? There's a little dive where you can--"

"No thanks. Think I need a hot and cold bath...maybe shock me out of...of insanity...like to stop...shaking."

They set off, she letting him lead.

"Still can't believe you did that. Jesus, I really can't. I'll have to look at the prints before I believe it. I thought you were a goner."

"That would have made some picture."

He stopped, planted his arms akimbo and tried to look at her but she kept walking, letting him catch up.

"You didn't come in here alone, did you?"

"No...I had someone." She looked around, remembering her

so-called bodyguard for the first time. "He's probably in the Shouf by now...up there in those nice clean hills, having tea with the Druse. Well, just so he's not dead."

"Sorry about the pictures. It's what I do."

A laugh, almost a sneer, escaped her. "What else would you be doing here? You sure's hell aren't a tourist. Tourism is a little off this decade."

He grinned. "Well, it's...a...actually a little more involved than that. But you...you've certainly got a right to let off steam. Looks like you're one of us crazies. I'm Paul Carl...and you're?..."

"Yes, I know who you are. You probably don't need my name for stuff like this."

She alerted herself that she was overenjoying her bitchiness, but knew it wasn't going to stop.

Again, he focused on her with annoying scrutiny, some kind of faint recognition taking shape, all because of her inordinate behavior for which she faulted herself but which, in her present condition, she didn't bother to control.

He slung his cameras behind him. "Let me take him."

She handed over the small body with reluctance, wanting to hold on but sore and tired and clumsy.

The child's eyes remained fastened on her, and Paul said, "That's right, little fellow, she's your good angel."

The word summoned a face and a voice which made her step falter, but she regained her balance and looked away from Paul Carl's quick glance. No meanderings into the past now. She was here in this damnable reality. The child's parents were dead, certainly. How easily she knew this. She felt more and more amazed. Death had been close in war zones before but not quite like this, innocent noncombatants on their way for bread or tea hellishly cut down and lying heaped in the street.

"Maybe you dislike competitors?" he said, clearly fishing for something to explain her inflammatory mood.

"Not always...not all of them."

They had picked their way around a collapsed building and were now walking down a rough street cluttered with rubble, as if they were a family out for a Sunday stroll. She stopped, shading eyes schooled in caution, eyes which moved over the rooftops and down along blasted window ledges. Cavernous dark hiding places.

"We're okay here I think."

"I don't feel okay anywhere in this place," she answered, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

"Better get used to it...or quit."

He stopped, pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped Lemur's running nose.

"If I ever got used to it I'd consider myself a...a subspecies. I wanted to come here," she offered.

"The old love-hate snare."

"Not you, of course."

"No, but nobody who does this gets out from under or the stuff's no good. I'm careful and I accept what I have to...unhappily."

"Accept the unnecessary?"

"I'm forced to. We are forced to."

"I haven't come to that. Oh, once in a while, but not here...today. This is...is totally absurd."

"You took yourself here...to this absurd hell...real and raw, a picture hunter's aim...*coup de chance*. "Never succeed if you let it stop you down to one frame. We--"

"I know what I'm doing as well as the next fringe case out here. I get by. Success...God." She had muttered the last two words to herself, clicking her tongue in anger and spreading out her arms. "You call this a stroke of luck?"

"No. The luck is in being here. Don't often hit on your kind of input: heroism...maybe some craziness."

She rubbed her sweaty forehead again, unwilling to respond. "Guess I'm finally thirsty."

Both quiet, they walked on for a quarter of an hour and came at last to a doorless bar, a dusty green-walled darkness with scarred red tables and worn benches. The ubiquitous flies were circling. A portly bald German gave them smudged glasses of slopping beer, warm. She took the child who clung to her as she drank.

"I sound strange to this little lemur." She patted the boy with gentle fingers, caressing his back, and asked if there were water and bread. "*Wasser, Brot, bitte?*"

The German brought water and an uneven bubble of thin, half-charred dough dipped in olive oil. The boy reached for it with both hands, tearing it with a few fragile new teeth.

"Good?" She smiled. A weak answering smile emerged for the first time, then the eating went on with drooling mouth.

Waving flies off the child's face, she asked, "Why aren't you in Nicaragua or Honduras...snapping airfields? Isn't that where all of you big guys are supposed to be?"

"Big guys?" He chuckled, leaning on his hand and stroking his beard.

"Well, from one point of view."

He looked at her until she caught a shifting click of recognition. He was seeing her, she decided, seeing her for the first time as something outside his lens.

"We've met before...haven't we?"

She shrugged, turning away from his scrutiny. Her low voice was just audible in the buzzing silence. "We're not the same as then...back then...whoever we are...were."

The raised glass in his hand was returning untouched to the table. She glanced at the doorway, thinking someone threatening had entered the room. He leaned back and his eyes traveled over

her in a way that tempted her to begin shouting invective. She pressed her lips together and looked away at a bony cat rubbing against the doorjamb, marking its vanishing territory. How could a cat live here?

"That's a backhanded way of letting me know. Where was it? Not one of my classes?...maybe one of my larger seminars. No, I don't think so. But I know your face."

She grinned at his presumption that she had been his student. He *did* teach her something. "You had no classes. You were sort of...on the move."

"You remembered my name."

"Yes...well, it's known. I can't afford the gear you're hauling around...although what I've got is pretty good."

"This is a little strange. Did I...?" He was silent a moment. "We couldn't have..."

"If we did, I don't think I remember that either," she said, feeling a little triumphant because that part was true. "This beer tastes wonderful and yet I know it's terrible. My nerves are shot but the rest of me is intact. Amazing. One minute you're alive and the next you're dead. Life is a cheap nuisance for warmongers. If they don't get you the uncertainty will." She had almost laughed with a wild kind of joy, knew she was babbling, and clenched her teeth.

He appeared to be considering her remarks but then passed over them all without comment. There followed a long silence, and when she glanced at him she knew that he was beginning to remember. He reached out and took the cuff of her jacket between his index and middle finger, the cuff torn by a bullet. "That didn't touch your wrist did it?"

"No," she answered, bending to examine the other hole in the hem of her slacks.

"And your foot is okay?"

"Not a scratch."

"Where are you staying?"

"The Commodore. So far it hasn't taken a direct hit. Anyway, I'm checking out soon. Did what I came to do."

"Well, I'm hanging out at a friend's in Rabiya. You could come--"

"Oh...nice up there. No thanks. I've got one more appointment with some people."

She slid off the bench, rehung her camera and took the child's hand. "Come on, Lemur. I'm with you and you're with me and it's off to some kind of billet we go. All this makes us pals forever. Right?" She picked up the child, and tossed a comment over her shoulder, "Interesting seeing you." She had almost said *again*, but then she was already preoccupied with Lemur, puzzling a little over the direction she needed to head, and didn't look back.

"Just a minute. Hey! Know where you're going? Wait!

What's the...just a minute. It's...a...Mathilda, isn't it? I remember you. Somehow that name didn't fit because you were so damned naïve. Now you show up tough as bear claws, and it still doesn't. You cut your hair and--"

"Cut my hair?" It was just what someone from New York would say after nearly ten years. "Oh God," her low voice was almost a lament as he moved in close to push the dust-filled hair away from her eyes. Some of it stuck to her forehead but she had her hands full of the child.

"Mathilda something...something short. Help me out. I remember those eyes. Yes." His rising laughter stalled, checked by deeper reflection. "Those sad amber eyes."

"Sad? I don't think so...that's bombast. And my friends say *Mahta* -- it's good enough."

"Can't believe it...you here. You were working for the arts commission, a kind of girl Friday, doing a little scrub photography, press conferences...trouble shooting. Out in the northern hinterlands of the West Coast. I was using up a hell of a lot of film on a promo job for the commission; couldn't afford it, either. You took pity on me...shared some of your film from the filing cabinet where those petty grudgers kept it locked up. That was okay." He laughed, rubbing his beard, obviously enjoying the recollection because things were easy now. "They didn't pay me what my work was worth. How's my memory doing, Mahta? Mahta Lind, that's it, isn't it? Pretty good, huh? Let's see...you were in charge of getting City Ballet to do a short outdoor promo at the fountain. You kept handing me film...stood there watching me shoot. Whenever I ran out, a handful of film appeared under my nose. Every damned lens popper in town was climbing all over the place...fouling up my space."

"Your space?"

"God, that night we ended up walking into the ballet's premiere...I and a long-haired little girl. How's that?"

"Uh-huh, great," she muttered, rolling her eyes.

"And in the lobby -- I was mightily surprised -- I ran into my old next-door neighbor in New York, Francis La Breeve. Incredible. Francis K. La Breeve, musical genius, strolling through the lobby of--"

"Boondock Center, right? You introduced me -- at the time, for a few hours, you even knew my name --, and Mr. La Breeve looked at me as if I'd just come in to change the linen. You laughed and said, 'This is my assistant. She points and I shoot.' Then you both laughed with...with the instinctual effusion of hyenas. Oh, it was jolly."

"My God, you remember all that? Is that why you're so defensive...all this hostility? Apparently, I was pretty bad, a jerk. It's happened. You should've let me have it."

I did, she thought, then said aloud, "I was gaga green with envy and sickeningly polite in those days."

"Yes, it seems to me you were very polite...but I don't think...no, it didn't end there." His voice was amused.

"Oh, yes it did. The rest was just a little shimmer on the pond. Excuse me, I've really got to talk to some people." She noticed that her watch had stopped. "They'll think I'm dead. Around here it's a definite consideration. It was rather interesting...or something like that...running into you again...and thanks for the...the stale beer."

There. Regrettable that she had revealed her annoying embarrassment, her discomfort. It would pass. A person ran into everyone in the business sooner or later. She might never have thought of him again, a brief minor incident stuck somewhere in between her badly ended marriage and... Brehnt. *Not now, for God's sake. Don't think about that now.* Sometimes the sudden image could steal all her breath away. In the beginning, the memory had precipitated manic acts of severe recklessness, time and again propelling her to the edge of hazard until going there became a habit.

She turned around and carried the child through the doorway into the bright sunlight, a glorious afternoon of intense white light in a dark world of bombed-out buildings and violent human dust.

Riding on her hip, the child looked up at her, and she smiled into its beautiful brown eyes, thinking for an instant that she had raised it to this point, that for all of its short life it had been only with her.

II

In less than two weeks, she had delivered her story and photographs to the editor of the Lebanese newspaper in Los Angeles, picked up her remittance and gone north, far north to her temperate home beneath the fir green hills of Seattle. There, layered gray skies, often rainless sham, made the inconstant sun's appearance a celebrated event.

At first her slate clapboard houseboat smelled damp and musty inside, but with the windows open and sea squalls blowing in it quickly assumed a salty freshness. From time to time when the winds shifted, the smell of early fall wood smoke drifted in on breezes sliding off the foothills of the white-dusted North Cascades. Memories of autumn in the country. Perhaps she should go there. She made no attempt to move from her slouched, half-curved position in a favorite overstuffed chair. Now and then her tired eyes moved to the pile of unopened mail she had carried in and dumped on a corner of her scarred oak desk.

"Lemur, little fellow," she whispered into the filtered evening light. "Tried to take you with me...did take you but you're still there. Damn it. Damn." What would become of the child? Parents dead. No relations to be found. The Maronite mother and father having wandered in from some godforsaken place

-- desert, mountains, empty space only fought over -- to start a new life. Life in a hell zone. The child all that was left of a dream, a striving instinct. "Who'll care for you? You should have your chance. Not like those in the street. God, don't come to that." *Oh, was I talking out loud? Never used to.*

The favored bottle of Glenlivet beckoned from the bar shelf. Her eyes fastened on it but in moving toward it she paused a moment, biting her fingers, then went for her jacket. An evening out. Not to be alone was the thing. Alone, the black mood could stalk and make its kill.

#

The Portage Bay Bar & Grill on Lake Union never changed. The steadfast could check in there every two days or two years and find it the same. That unvarying familiarity, Billy the proprietor, and the fact that it was a short walking distance from her houseboat were its salient attractions. It was, to say the most, unpretentious in a comfortable way: stone fire pit, scuffed black leather and scarred walnut, soft lighting, and musty with liquor fumes and stale smoke. Altogether quite worn down but kept clean.

"Hope you don't ever change this place, Billy," she said as he poured her a double Scotch and soda. "I'd get all mixed up if you did."

"Hell, I'm doin' just fine the way it is," Billy said, dropping a lemon twist into her glass.

Billy was a night person, a pale stocky man with short-cropped hair of sandy gray that always looked as if he'd just stepped out of a shower and forgotten to comb it. His sympathetic hands were the cause, worrying his hair with tipsy patrons' complaints: a constant bemoaning of aimless muddles. Through comedy and pathos, he leaned on his elbow with his chin in his palm, his free hand sweeping up his hair in little tilted shocks. Every nonviolent oddity who came along was tended to as a duty, but not without salty comment or a roll of the colorless eyes which only seemed careless. Billy had his favorites; it showed in the way his sleepy gaze narrowed to a fine concentration.

"So where ya been this time?"

"Don't ask. Well, Beirut." She took a long swallow of her Scotch.

"Oh, yeah?" Billy said as he drew beer for an eager customer, then gave it a deft push down the shiny black bar top and refocused on Mahta. "That's a killer."

"An apt expression. It has its detractions. The constant fear of being a target. Once I was afraid I'd get used to it. That would make you careless."

"Hey, the Army was enough for me. Careless is dead...and I know what scared is."

"This time I had it bad. I've never been so scared. You go

a little crazy when you manage to live."

"Why take a chance? Jesus, if you want thrills why not just ski off a glacier or rock climb or something?"

"No, it isn't thrills...God, no, it isn't. That's just a collateral effect when you're left still breathing." Thirsty, she was already half finished with her drink. "It's the kind of thing I do. It happens sometimes."

"But why, kid? Why do that stuff?"

"I have to...have to...at least that much. Sometimes it puts you right where they are...the innocent victims. You don't have to exaggerate or lie about anything. You're a witness. You know. Except maybe for a few seconds, they didn't and for them it's over. But you've got them and in a way you're keeping them alive. Then you just leave. That's the hard part because it's so easy."

"So why the hell go to *that* damn place? Freelance -- don't that mean free to go where ya want?"

"Not entirely. Sometimes I go where I think I need to be. More often, I go where *they* want. Go to talk to the living...end up reporting on the dead."

"Always plenty of those," Billy said with a headshake.

She took another long swallow and felt the Scotch burn its way to her stomach. "I don't know...somebody needs...I need to be in those wastelands, but I always come away feeling so bad...a lot worse than when I'm in the middle of it. I don't have to stay."

"So ya wanna share in everybody's friggin' misery."

"No. Until I get there, I can never really believe it's going on. I can't do much but I can go there. I can make others see it. But the relief at leaving...God, it scuttles so much anxiety it's like a...like a hemorrhage. And like committing a crime. Leaving *is* a crime. Frozen in the middle of it's better. You haven't done anything wrong yet by walking away. Time dies."

She handed Billy her empty glass and knew what he was doing when he turned his back and married the Scotch with a little too much soda -- for her own good. He tossed in a lemon twist, and said, "Somethin' really got ya this time."

"There was a little boy, a baby of only two or three, an instant orphan left in the street where his parents were machine-gunned. I tried to take him with me. Impossible. I sent him food and clothes and toys. I sent him my picture and a tape recorder...with tapes of my voice talking to him and reading children's stories. I guess that seems pointless. He doesn't know what I'm saying, but children should be read stories...hear lullabies...so many wonderful ones."

"Christ, why don't ya have a kid."

"Oh God, Billy, that's such a wrong answer."

"You ain't gettin' any younger."

"Another shot, please, Billy. You put in too much soda."

He shrugged and tipped the bottle into her glass. She gulped it down and felt it burn a little more than usual. Her stomach was beginning to rebel against strange diets, both the richness of the impulse food she ate at home and the paucity and poor quality of the food she often ate on the run in remote places.

"No, I'm not getting any younger, and in a way I'm not getting any older. Anyway, that doesn't have a lot to do with what I'm saying."

"I ain't as dumb as I look. If you keep this up you won't get old at all. You're droppin' one good apple into a whole rotten barrel. You'll loose that shine, kid."

She sighed. "I'm not such a perfect apple, Billy dear. Am I talking too much? Let me know if I am."

"Hell no, you ain't talkin' too much. Haven't seen ya in a whole long time. So, you gonna try and get that kid?"

"I haven't given up yet. I've got a few contacts and some people in children's organizations." She felt herself on a maniacal rise with the bite of the Scotch. "Huge brown eyes...sweet. Damn it, I tried to put him in the care of a decent shelter but I can't stand the thought of what might be happening to him. I know it's futile. I've tried calling there...like trying to reach Pluto on the phone."

"Hell, it seems like the damn barbarians oughta let one skinny little two-year-old kid outta there. Must be they want dough. Yeah sure, that's it."

"They're no more barbarian than a lot of us right here. They're mostly innocent people caught up in destructive emotions: fear, greed...rabid anger. We animals all have this at the base of our skulls, Billy. Throw in a few evil fanatics with power and you've got another hell zone. But money, I'm sure you're right. It's the conclusion everyone comes to in the end...pretty easily actually, because if you have enough of it you can get anything."

"Well, damn near...pretty damn near."

"You know what, Billy? I'm losing it. The world is full of them...thousands and thousands of little hands tugging at me while I try to sleep. On and on it goes, masses of feeble and hungry treated like so much dross. In my dreams, always a sea of hands...reaching out...reaching. God, those beautiful eyes, pleading for a chance they'll never get. Why do there have to be so damned many of them?"

"Well, have another shot of this, kid. Sometimes it's better to see things that ain't there."

#

A motor launch putted by and Mahta raised her head, studying her flowered sheets. Of all the paradisiacal, galvanizing, or utterly foul places she had awakened. She could hit the deck

with both feet, bound across a freezing floor or a humid hole of stench without hesitation or a trace of dizziness. But this was one of the other times. She sank back as the room gave a shuddering twist.

Where am I? Red lily tulips with dark green leaves on a field of white. Think I got these sheets on sale downtown. Must be home. Lift the head and see what happens. Ugh. God, what a headache. Aspirin...aspirin.

She stood up at a tilt and wrapped the loose top sheet around her shivering body, dragging one end behind her to the bathroom sink. Her hand shook as the aspirin spilled into her palm and over the counter, bouncing on the floor.

Bitter. Hard to swallow. Lie down on your bed of tulips, tulips, tulips. It will pass, my dear old thing. It will pass - - oh, let it pass. Take a deep breath. Dizzy. Shouldn't have drunk all that damn booze and rattled on to poor Billy. Ahh! Awful. Swallow. Should have stayed home and nursed my Glenlivet...never gives me a headache. Swallow. Good thing I don't do this often...like mother. Oh God, she's gone...gone. Mother, I'm sorry...so sorry... No, don't start that. Dad's waiting. Got to go over there. If only he hadn't sold the old place so early in his life...gave him something to do. Guess he remembered too much. Mother gardening, waiting for the sun to angle around for liquor in the lilacs. Dad tending his Jerusalem artichokes and carrying her to bed. Have to go see him. Sad...sad. Damned Scotch. I'd almost rather go back to Beirut. But not quite...not quite...except for Lemur. Can't think now. Sleep. Then put something harmless in the abused little tummy. Sad. Liquor-sad...and then some.

#

Scrambled eggs with freeze-dried chives mixed in, half an English muffin with peach jam, and a cup of Irish Breakfast tea with milk. She sat in her little kitchen nook, making a quick evaluation of her breakfast. This precipitated thoughts of Lemur. *I wonder if he has anything decent to eat. Of course they'll feed him, but not the way I could. Well, there goes my stomach.*

III

Her father opened the door and stood squinting for a moment with a puzzled look, even though she had called to say she was coming. Assessing the damage, she thought. He stepped back in silence, making way for her to enter.

She, too, was quiet, making assessments, those of his current state, their influence upon one another, effects of the past: *Still self-contained, a little stooped; dark amber eyes clear and boyish in that bland, unrevealing face; worn leathery*

skin; silver hair, beautiful in moonlight; as usual smelling of Roger Gallet cologne and your one Jamaican cigar a week. But a plaid flannel shirt and corduroy pants? Lovely blasphemy. So you do have an opinion about clothes. I like it. At first when we left the old house to come here and be urbanites it was still mother's way: a cashmere v-neck sweater, a white shirt, and always-pressed, sailcloth slacks. In time, a few subtle changes. Now the reprieve of plaid and corduroy, dear old thing. Good for you.

She held out a white carton. "Here, dad, pickled herring. I know how you like it with a little rye whiskey."

With a sweeping corner view, the eighteenth floor condominium looked out over Puget Sound, Queen Anne Hill, and Lake Union. It was kept up by a housekeeping service and smelled of a tidy old man's nest: cigars, after shave, newspapers, worn leather, lemon furniture polish, and cooking fumes. Like Billy's place, it had hardly changed since she and her father moved here seventeen years ago: the tufted black leather sofa and his big, studded black leather wing chair with ottoman; the familiar ticking of the two-weight wall clock -- German movement, French mahogany case; the mahogany-framed, beveled mirror, reflecting the cloud-filled sky and at night the lights of Queen Anne Hill; the worn but still richly colored Tabriz stuck over the beige wall-to-wall carpet; a few of Mahta's framed photographs, his favorites, markers along a restless, carved-out path.

Her perspective of these photographs was quite unlike his; it included herself seeking the right position and thinking about what each captured image would mean: the Serengeti in Tanzania, where roamed amazing fauna losing a battle with the virus *Homo sapiens*; the Mayan ruins of Tikal, cryptic remnants of brilliant, numerating stargazers with internecine habits; and Ching Kangshan Mountain, Well Ridge Mountain, in China's Kiangsi Province where Mao Tsetung hid out with his small band in 1927, the early, poetic, still unruined man. Had she really stood in those places, taken those? Yes and thousands more. Before long it would be possible to shrink the plundered world to a luncheon engagement anywhere at all with sleep in one's own bed the same night. New Guinea's remote cataracts had only a moment more to break and splash unheard.

"So you're back alive, Mathilda," Frank Lind said in a crackling voice. "Didn't know if you'd make it."

"Oh, dad." She threw up a casual hand, pretending his remark was a gross exaggeration, while her thoughts swelled and divided and spread. *This time I didn't know if I'd make it either, but I won't tell you that. You think I'm an odd one, don't you, poor darling? If I'd made it home bagged for a coffin, you'd have buried me without much emotion showing on your face, holding it all in, another deep unlocatable wound.*

In the early years, you and mother made love and fought with

equal zeal, you always trying to get out from under her pettiness. She couldn't stop herself. Then you fought over her drinking. She couldn't stop that either, the grand periodic binges. Even sober she could be coy and playful, with a droll, offbeat kind of humor, as if everything were ridiculous, as it surely was. She had never meant to grow up or face anything, would sing humorous songs to me while I tried to fix your breakfast, or wake us up playing the piano fortissimo in the middle of the night. We allowed ourselves to be duped, hopeful, desirous of believing, duped again and again. She would take us in, seductive, tease us until we were laughing with her, the bliss of eating something she had baked -- our favorite maraschino cherry cake. Suddenly plates would fly. We couldn't believe it, but in time we learned to believe it. At last, in her sober periods, she used anger to keep everyone away, then hated herself for it, hated her inability to fit anywhere, to be part of an ever intimidating society. Back to the drinking. She would lock herself in her room, pretending to rest, and drink until she couldn't stand. Once you sawed the lock off her door. Poor old dear, kneeling there patiently sawing. It stayed that way for months, her symbolic door missing a chunk. Whenever she came out, either in stealth or reeling, often tripping on a few stairs, watchful little Mahta was there; the aging adolescent with a terrible family secret, reaching for mama's hand. When she was tucked back in bed, off I would go, searching out her hidden bottles and pouring them into the sink, hoping, hoping she would believe she had drunk them all. My hands shook I was so afraid for, so afraid of, so angry at her. What an old, tired, oft-repeated play it was. All that good whiskey down mother and down the drain, until the day...oh, God, the day--

"What was it like there in Beirut?"

The merciful words carried her from a ruinous place she hadn't meant to go. She thought about the question a minute. "Not good. Unreal...or too real. Too real if we in this land of surfeit are really anesthetized."

"Once it was a great port and banking center for the Middle East," he said, sinking into his wing chair.

"Ah yes, a jewel on the Mediterranean, shimmering beneath the eastern Lebanon Mountains. I love its history. Nearly two thousand years ago the Phoenicians built ships from the cedars of Lebanon...the romantic past." Even some of the present age would become a romantic past, she reminded herself. It would take awhile, and everything would have to get a whole lot worse than it already was.

"The Romans were there," he offered.

"Yes...a palm bedecked shore of learning and culture after they colonized it in 14 B.C. Maybe its conquerors weren't so welcome...but now it's rubble."

"Lunacy."

"Pretty much...but humans with so-called higher intelligence have done this," she said, walking to the windows. "It'll have to rise again...again and again. Population, economics demand it." She placed her hand on the casement and leaned her chin against it.

"Oh, dad, look at that dazzle coming out of the clouds. The water's all stippled with such a blinding light. I love this view. Wind's uncapping the Olympics...coming out blue and mysterious...already a dusting of snow. Everything in flux...always changing."

"Yes...entertaining. Should have brought your camera."

"I did...but just for a picture of you."

"Why do you want so many pictures of this old carcass?"

"Dad, you're very photogenic," she reminded him one more time and turned back to her favorite panorama.

"I've taken a lot of pictures of this view: the islands in morning mist...noon's drowning blue with white chop...a fiery peachblow sunset behind the Olympics...and the Canada geese...always gagging past these windows in their goosey conversations, crossing to Lake Union. I love the icy moon beside the Space Needle in winter...ferries coming and going. There's one now...always coming and going with those faceless windows...friendly little squares of yellow at night. Sometimes, far away, I dream of them...alive and grinning in the dark like sea dragons."

"When I go, move out of that floating shack and live here. It won't be much longer."

"Dad? You look terrific."

"Doesn't mean a thing. It's the stuff inside going haywire."

"What's wrong?" She tried to keep her voice light, glancing at him and back at her view.

"Just age...wearing out."

He sat and she continued to stand, evaluating more the tenor of his voice than the information it conveyed.

"By the way, you have enough security over at that sea level tub you're never in? I remember the time you came home and found it trashed. Lots of burglaries lately."

"Everything's fine," she assured him, remembering the depressing scene she had encountered. It was not long after she lost Brehnt. She had crawled in half alive from some enervating horror -- yes, it was Ethiopia --, shivering from the cold heavy fog outside and the grisly fog in her mind, so tired, just longing for her old easy chair. Everything had been searched, drawers pulled out, files strewn, cabinets turned upside down and her desk dismantled -- curiously enough, she later found nothing missing. She was so tired she had stood in the middle of the room and wept.

Silence again, and she felt certain her father was staring

at the back of her head.

"Do you have any kind of a...well, a mate, Mathilda?"

"No." She laughed. "And the feeling is mutual."

Mahta turned from the window and saw that her father looked a little surprised at his own forwardness, provoked she now realized by the urgency of a worn body.

She walked to the corner window and looked out at Lake Union, her silent thoughts gathering critical momentum. *As if that were the answer to everything. At your age do you really believe that? I was married once. Maybe you've forgotten Kenneth. I certainly won't remind you. Lucky no child came from it to be torn between us. A man to demand that I subordinate myself to his needs? It's too late. I'm wise now. You have to do that without thinking. There was someone...someone you didn't know about. If I'd let you meet Brehnt... Why does it matter? To help me verify his having existed? No, of course to keep him alive. How many heads is he in? That would take some research. Stop this, this dream or memory? Stop it now. A mate, you ask. Something like that...some time back, not of late. I'm spoiled by ideals...or saved. They can't live up to my expectations and I can't live up to theirs. You and Billy: a mate and babies, the answer to everything. And there's contemptuous Aunt Grace, always mouthing that tired old indoctrination -- marital bliss. How convenient to ignore reality. Apparently, we're destined to repeat this pitiful stupidity...forever at the mercy of our comic chromosomes. Sensual June brides draped in make-believe white, virile grooms sprigged with lily of the valley, never again so innocent or well-intentioned. Specious. Deceptions necessary for posterity, but in fact absurd.*

She remembered that Paul Carl had equated absurdity with the photographer's *coup de chance*, the lucky chance shot of the extraordinary. But wasn't absurdity quite common, ubiquitous and hardly of value? Wasn't it everything? Oh, she mustn't be too cynical. It would leave her nothing.

I had so little experience when I first ran into Paul Carl. He must have made some kind of impression on me; I do remember that brief encounter. Rejection never really goes away. The hurt, I'm sure, the insult of being disregarded. After the ballet we wandered off to a new place, untainted with memories of Kenneth -- fresh blond wood, vivid yellow and orange colors--, a narrow-roomed bar with pyramid stacks of sparkling glasses. We drank beer poured from pitchers that looked like hospital urinals. I laughed and drank and went to piss, and drank and laughed and drank until I was numb, euphoric, a wasted smile frozen on my tender face. My long blond hair, tan legs, short skirt...so slim and eager, expectant. I wanted to topple all those precariously stacked glasses. I wanted not only excitement but a sudden deep recognition; adoration of course; simply to conquer the world -- oh yes, everything! The impossible which

innocence craves -- just liberated from a faithless husband but still small-world innocent. "Let's get close," was Paul's idiomatic seduction as he stopped us in an alley to embrace. We swayed down the sidewalk...thence to my old apartment, thence to my narrow little bed -- too short for his very long body -- thence, thence. He was gone by late morning and had already forgotten me by afternoon. For a few days I had a certain preoccupation with that self-important black-bearded machine. I always fell for cold talent and the threat of intelligence. I embellished with such hopefulness, then wondered why I wasn't loved back by a big throbbing red heart. In the end memory pegged him as a huge deceitful ego rife with designer labels attached to ridiculous clothing, a one-track man tracking fast.

I've slipped through the monogamous cracks. There are others under the floor boards in the dark, but I don't seem to hunt them or want them. Too exhausting. Too--

"Didn't mean to pry. Just thought you might get lonely, Mathilda."

She smiled and went on with her insistent stream of silent thoughts. And you, dad, could you possibly be missing poor mother's locked door, thick tongue, bruised limbs, sullen hangovers? Of course you remember her as she was in her twenties -- my memory fixed by photographs and vague half-dreams: an auburn-haired beauty, Mother and apple blossoms...sweet curly-headed naïf under an apple tree. Beautiful and full of daydreams. Beautiful and numbing her brain with fraudulent romance and then futile alcohol. What I remember is the sound made by her flaying hands knocking the needle across old Billie Holiday records while I viewed life's reversals from another angle -- trying to read Nathanael West with cotton in my ears. I wanted to understand why she had to hurt us in trying to find her way. When she was in her cups it wasn't the sudden unprovoked slaps I received that hurt so much; oh no, it was what she did to herself. A few times she and I did almost connect, short fragile moments more painful to remember than an inept slap or curse. Easier now to blame, but a distortion. She could always let us sample the sweetest temper. She could always withhold her love -- the most devastating punishment. Nothing of that will ever compare to my own final atrocity. Stay out of that memory. Stay out of that place. Better the assuaging knife of hate, clean and swift...but a lie.

I recall a few small things: putting a box together, a cardboard storage box purchased flat and begun with wild impatience. Moving too fast I had creased the laughably simple construction incorrectly, the error followed by loud complaint. Mother came and stood over her flummoxed teen-aged child kneeling above confusion. "Oh, that's hilarious, Tilldy. Here, try it this way, honey." I watched and stored away everything but the method of assembly. Her earnest red-lipsticked mouth twisted to

the side, mama's pretty fingers were for once of use, caressing a box that I thought was me. A vicarious embrace, sweet words from that so often angry, so often childish being. A helpless, self-effacing tortured soul who couldn't open an envelope without half destroying the contents in a rage and fear of what she would find, who changed her mind from morning until evening and never thoroughly considered much of anything. Kneeling down, her head bent to my task, for an instant reversing our long exchanged roles, reassuring hands, comforting voice, secretive eyes all tender, a minuscule granule of affection swelling over our barren lives -- for me it was love. I'd have traded parts of me for a love from her that was curious. She was never that.

And now solitariness is a habit...learned while growing up. You had each other, the diversions of fighting and making up. I wandered off alone and found solace in nature and books...a lethargic dreamy little creature with an imaginary horse for a friend, until, that is, you got me a real one. Perhaps it was my thyroid -- those thyroid pills our ponderous old country doctor prescribed. What did they really do? Too much? It seems a long time I've been unstrung, the stuff of capricious chemistry. How does one get calm, get ahold of a delicious and extravagant playfulness? Not by marrying: for me so ludicrous -- there's my argument, no apology.

Is it good for you to be so often alone in this place, listening to music, reading, watching skies...seasons? I suppose you doze and dream. There's television -- mostly crass fantasy and gossip. I always wanted all kinds of things for you, dad, things you probably didn't want at all. Do I mistake your peace for surrender? I can't ask. Why doesn't our blood tell us more? Have the few clumsy words I once believed an impediment really marked our understanding?

"Everyone gets lonely sometimes, dad." She spoke out at last with induced lightness. "I think I'm really a loner, though, but I have friends...a few acquaintances if I get desperate...a few good friends on the planet, from whom I come and go...some very special ones...college pals." She thought of dark trenchant Rafael, of soft loyal Frannie.

"I was proud of you in college...I guess you knew -- my kid an honor student. I thought you'd make a big success of yourself right here," her father lamented. She heard the chiding disappointment. "And you really don't get lonely out there running around all the time?...years of it now."

"Oh, sometimes, yes. But I meet interesting people. You know...I suppose it sounds strange, but my camera's like a friend...the words I write a sort of ongoing conversation, alas, with a dwindling readership. But what are you doing?"

"Same old thing. I read. Still play cards with the boys once a week...gotta tell me all their damned aches and pains, comparing our decrepitude. We made a pact we'd shut up about

that but it creeps back in. Ed's gone for good and we've got a new one now you don't know. Name's Earl. Irish. All talk but damned funny sometimes. Gracie and her grandkids come to see me. I don't mind playing uncle."

"Good. I'm glad."

Did he resent her for being unable to provide grandchildren, for not extending him in this primal way?

She disliked the insinuations of her father's righteous sister: fine pale hairs on a stiff very critical upper lip, the reproachful ice-blue eyes. *Aunt Grace disapproves of me. So be it. I'm completely out of her ken. It grates a little to know that she complains to you about me, but I can live with it. To have an opinion which isn't canned by one of the world's largest canneries is perilous defiance. Raw opinions are disorienting for Aunt Graces. They suffer with terror of, therefore hatred of, the nonconforming mind.*

"Going somewhere soon?"

Yes, that's what I do. I keep going and going, as far and fast as I can. You used to scold me for getting out of your sight when I played. Sometimes I did it to make you call me, hiding in the hay loft, craving attention. I wanted you to miss me. I know now you do and I'm sorry.

"You can always assume I'm going somewhere soon," she said, striving for a dismissive, light humor.

"Where is it this time?"

"Not quite sure yet. Let you know when I am."

"Is it that bad? When are you going to run out of those lousy places? Mathilda, my girl, I don't know if you'll outlive me or not."

He sighed and turned his face away from her to study the clouds rushing by on a squally wind -- his prodigal daughter so wasteful of his extended flesh, she supposed him to be thinking. She snapped a few pictures of him in that reflective pose.

"I could break my neck falling out of bed," she said, dropping her camera back into her shoulder bag.

"That old cliché isn't for you. It'll be some stinking mud hole a million miles from here...and for what?"

"For the right reasons, I hope. If it happens you'll know, because I'm telling you now, that I was doing what I wanted to be doing. That's all I can say."

He got up and went to his desk, rustling through strewn papers, tossing pencils and scraps of paper off stacks of magazines and newspapers until he found what he wanted.

"I do read some of your stuff. I like the way you always seem to find someone who stands for something. Here...what you wrote at the end of this article on Latin America:

'She is thin but long inured to
defeat, this old matriarch, proud of
her child self that learned to go with-

out shoes. Out of necessity still bare-foot, she endures, by now fearing little. The condition, she asserts, is preferable. Shoes might obligate change, would be far too great an unexpected gift.'

"I like that, Mathilda."

"I liked her." *She must have died, but really won't until I do.* "The way she talked, urgent, up close, with her hands... Her plucky shrunken face -- all wild impatient eyes -- comes into my dreams sometimes."

Frank Lind threw the article back on his desk. "Don't kill yourself too soon, Mathilda, a smart young woman like you. I don't want to live to see it."

"The moment of death doesn't thrill me, dad, but I'm not afraid of not existing. Once I wasn't here and all too soon I won't be again. That's natural, isn't it? You get this one chance and if you live right, receptive, aware, death should be the fulfillment of life...almost sweet."

Perhaps he assumed she was trying to mollify his exit. She was not and could not. There was heavy silence in which she regretted her directness. An irretrievable dark finality hung in the air.

"I'm sorry. Guess I didn't turn out quite as you expected...grandchildren...that sort of thing."

"I sure as hell didn't expect so much. Your old man's different now too. The conventional world isn't so hot either: greed, bigotry, pollution...the ones left out of it using guns and drugs, and the middle class on a treadmill, working to get relief at stadiums and shopping malls. No real heroes...just fantasy...movies. Too many of us...way too many." His head shook with disapproval.

"Margie and I weren't the greatest parents. She never meant to hurt us...suffered." Sighing and leaning forward with folded arms, he leveled his amber eyes at his daughter. "I wonder where you learned all this stuff...this attitude."

"You didn't dissuade me from learning it, dad. But I don't think it's something you learn from being told. You have to feel it. You look around you and sometimes you just feel so bad you want to run right at it...do *something*...go and face the mess at least...maybe stick it in the faces of those who can actually do more...shame them into it...if they still know what shame is. My God, that's a little vain, isn't it?"

"I'm damned proud of you, Mathilda, you know that? You surely have guts."

Mahta reached out, the rose-colored dress that her father had once said he liked pulling tight at her back -- nothing serious yet; just a little too much fat from areas in the world where people knew nothing of cholesterol or the effects of excessive carbohydrates; it would come off in some starving

place. She patted his hands. His long knotted fingers were pressed against his thighs. He was unused to touching his adult daughter, and she had found that it was confusing, difficult for him, but he pecked at her cheek. She gave him an answering squeeze of the hand and drew back in a silent rush of thought.

I wish I could curl up in your lap, dad, and tell you how afraid I am sometimes...not of the moment of my death, no, not that, but of dying without having done anything, without having been of any use. I wish you could give me that ivy-cottage warmth that was mine when you read to the child in your lap, the child here now, the story of Rose Red and Rose White and the bear who turned into a prince. I wonder if you ever recall those winter nights by the fire. If only I could have carried that little contentment away with me. Oh for a short journey into an imaginary tale with a pretty ending...escape from horror and ugliness. Please, some childhood talisman for peaceful amnesia, instead of poisonous quaffs for mindless relief.

She watched her father step into his neat white-tiled kitchen where he turned the carton of pickled herring into a shallow bowl. He brought it out on a tray, along with two cocktail forks and two blue and white Chinese tidbit plates.

"You want a little rye or some of your damned burry Scotch? I just keep it for you."

"No thanks. The dog bit a little too hard last night. But maybe I could stand a beer...which I can get."

"No, sit." He went out again and returned with a glass and a bottle of local ale. "They brew some pretty good stuff around here." He took a sip and handed the rest to her. "Not too shabby. Not too shabby at all."

She tasted the yeasty amber liquid, licking a bit of froth from her lips. "Oh I like this. Yes...yes, smooth. When did you get hip to the local brews?"

"The boys talk. They like the stuff. I listen and I sample, just to see if they have any taste left. Not bad, huh?...for beer."

"Good...not so bitter...good."

He popped a chunk of herring into his mouth and made an ecstatic face. "God, that's fine. I used to soak whole ones...take the salt out. Remember?...in crocks. Then hack 'em up, pickle 'em sweet in white wine vinegar. Where'd I get the energy? Now I'm too damned lazy to butter toast."

"You shouldn't eat too much butter anyway."

"A little margarine then, goddamn it. Why the hell live longer if there's no more fun to it?"

"Margarine might be worse. Am I supposed to tell you, wise elder, that life isn't all fun?" She was enjoying this.

"Spare me. I've had a suspicion of it for a helluva long time.

"Guess I'd better not eat too much of this," he said,

popping in another chunk, "or my stomach'll drop out."

"Your stomach is probably in better shape than mine, dad." Avoid failing organs, she quickly reminded herself.

"What's wrong with yours?" he asked with sharp eyes.

"Nothing, just kidding."

"Lord, I'm still learning how to read you, Mathilda."

"Me too...this head has uncut pages."

They talked and gossiped and teased, keeping the tone and subjects light and enjoying each other's company. The ale soothed and lifted her. Occasionally she would look across the room where a shaft of bright light charged the colors in the old Tabriz, or at the large watercolor of the barren rolling eastern hills above the Columbia River. She had painted it in soft earth tones when she was seventeen -- that first year with just her father alone, her father fishing in his silent grief while she painted in hers. They were together. Once again she studied the painting for evidence of her traumatized feelings at the time, but saw only an expanse of swelling earth, sensual curves, the low values rather good. Beyond her father's windows a crimson horizon crept forth, cranberry streaks of light, the pink clouds high above turning gray. One more swift sunset, sweet ache.

Preparing to leave her coping father to his familiar world of bittersweet reverie, she thought, with a helpless sense of squander, that it was another finality. Life was mere beginnings and endings. The shimmering out-of-focus middle was something one thought of as the future, unrecognizable as such when it arrived, gone in a flash.

Repressed emotion had once again to be swallowed. She owned that she had always been far more disturbed at what her parents had done to one another than they themselves had been. She had studied their sorrows too closely and with an emergent self-pity she had been quick to reject. One of her makers had vanished without vindication; the unfairness loomed before her as another source of guilt. Always guilt. A guilt to which must be added a final knife-thrust of failure as her mother's daughter. It was a memory so excruciating, so brutal it surfaced only in weak moments and was swiftly cast away.

All the things I can never say to you, old dear. In this head is a wary perception and a rage which makes me more wild and aberrant than you could ever imagine. Perhaps a fiery remnant of mother -- her stifled passion. Sometimes I've wished I'd never been born, but with the same vehemence I've wished I never had to die. The onus for that isn't yours or mother's; it's only the exhausting contradictory nature of us...skewed with biological necessity. You probably already know everything I'm never going to say.

In the moment of leave taking it surprised her how much she still wanted to be her father's pride and joy. "Love you," she said, aiming for naturalness, had taught herself to say it

because she was not taught. From this strange evocation rooted in blood and gratitude, she gained an essential satisfaction she could feel to the marrow of her bones, congenital and mysterious. The resultant pride and pleasure in her father's eyes told her that, after all, she had given him some part of her self which he could value.

"Mahta, you're tired, my girl," he said as she stood outside his door. "Why don't you take a little vacation."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do, dad...take a little vacation." She waggled her oft-bitten fingers above her head as she went down the hall.

IV

The growing surfeit of untouched mail was bundled and tossed on the back seat of Mahta's black Beetle along with a small bag of necessities. She had learned very early on never to need very much when traveling -- travel light, move fast. It was going to be only one precious week up in the Canadian Gulf Islands but it was, she knew from other such respites, all that she could tolerate when the inescapable beast of urgency redoubled its persistent stalking. She reckoned it enough time to quell the nervous energy which never entirely left her.

The long drive from Seattle to Tsawwassen across the Canadian border was easy. The highway cut through a green valley of rich alluvial farms snatched from the sea, and wound along the steep slopes of brooding young-forested hills. It took only about three hours, but she must make the 8:30 morning ferry in order to get out into the islands. She had never been late. With a gentle roll and rumble the large British Columbia ferry deposited her on quiet South Pender Island. There she switched to a smaller ferry, and by noon slipped into the narrow dark-watered inlet of Long Harbour at her destination: Saltspring Island. It was a world away from everything disagreeable and jarring.

Here, chilling turquoise waters lapped the little-known and startling white beaches -- some the early crushed shell middens of a Northwest Coast tribe, the Salish. High above the shore tropical looking red-trunked arbutus -- which Washingtonians called madrona -- stood out from the dark firs and pines. The curving boughs of these emerald-leaved evergreens reached over the pristine shorelines with exotic panache -- a flagrant dance of pistachio-green and burnt sienna trunks, the twisting peeling boles often springing right out of fissures in the water-sculpted basalt.

This secret haunt was her private cache of restorative nature, an extension of the wooded places of escape she had sought in her childhood. In recent years she found it necessary to come here alone to rest and savor the beauty of virginal sea-encircled land, a sanctuary steeped in rich native history. The

place held no sorrowful memories, only peaceful offerings: pine-scented sea wind, lapping water, bird songs. The plaintive cries of the gulls welcomed her, and the melancholy, although to her uplifting, evening cries of the mated loons echoed through the sapphire inlets -- a reassuring sound, ageless and at once fragile and enduring.

From the harbor a crunching gravel road wound up through deciduous woods and led her to a familiar rental cottage: a cozy brown-shingled habitat nestled among the trees on a narrow finger of land called Welbury Point.

Barefoot, clad in Levi's and plaid shirt, she brushed away a few dry leaves and let herself down into a wood-slatted chair resting on the deck of her cottage. The broad inlet shimmered through the trees. She stared far across the water at Saltspring curving back on itself. Hungry deer were down from the hills, browsers more often found high in the cool green glades of Mt. Maxwell in summer. They were used to humans but unapproachable and shy. With mixed emotions the resort owner had once again lamented their nimble defoliation of all the young arbutus which jeweled the piney fir forests at lower elevations. Two robust domestic rabbits were gnawing their way across the narrow strip of weedy grass clinging to the lip of the cliff just where it broke away. Beneath this beetling emerald strip a tumble of wooded rocks hung above the unseen shore directly below. The cottage itself was surrounded by a tangle of vines and shrubs, and a deer was audibly tearing at creepers on the west wall. She stood up and peeked around the corner. The deer lifted its head and stopped chewing, sniffing the air. The large moist eyes studied her a moment, then it flashed its tail and moved on.

"Go right on with your lunch," she coaxed, dropping back into her chair and remembering that she had forgotten to arrange for her own. She should have gone first to the grocery further along in the little town of Ganges. Still, the emptiness inside was not for food, was in fact an emptiness that diminished her hunger. She sat unable to bestir herself, eventually nursing some of the Glenlivet she had bought on South Pender Island, and munching the saved half of a salmon sandwich purchased on the ferry. Her glowing Scotch reverie transfigured the rippling sun to a lone Salish hunter stalking over the hills above the farthest shore, the red-tinted mist his fluttering cedar bark cape as he sank to his bed. Overhead, leaves whispered. Cries of a solitary loon calling for its nearby mate echoed across the water. The tremulous breeze was just cool enough to awaken her from a flushed dreaminess. She stood up and stretched.

The wood laid for her in the fireplace was still damp and slow to ignite. At first the flames curled and crackled with deceptive liveliness, but the dense alder began to sizzle, popping out tiny sparks. Very soon its glow darkened as it turned into a smoking black lump. She swore with impatience,

jabbing at the wood, pounding it with more and more vehemence and then smashing the poker into the recalcitrant slab with such fury that black, smoldering chunks flew out onto the hearth. A few pieces bounced onto the carpet. She jumped up and kicked them back with savage erratic attempts which finally connected. Smoke filled her eyes. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Oh, this is bad...bad, you fool!" she cried out, at once remembering her friend Jane's often suggested analyst Doctor Grossmane. *I should sit there like a self-indulgent idiot, talking, talking? That kind of babble is worthless and vain. Calmly, calmly fix this fire.*

Switching on the deck light she grabbed a folded paper bag from a kitchen drawer and went outside. The light was poor but she moved with caution out through the deepening shadows. Squinting and fumbling about in the dimness she began snatching fallen cones from beneath the firs in the far yard. When the sack was full she bounded back up the steps, heading for the fireplace. Thick and sticky the aromatic resin from the heaped cones burned very hot, igniting the dense alder to a staying power of flames.

The soft drum roll of the flames was soothing, the hissing and crackling of the wood promising. She lay down on the couch and gazed at the firelight dancing on the dark wood ceiling beam. Little feet pattered across the roof -- squirrels. Something rustled in the kitchen cupboard -- the resident mouse. Pulling the afghan off the couch back she snuggled beneath it, letting the fire lull her into a fragmented state which slowly dissolved into deep sleep.

#

A throbbing motor passed in the inlet below. Mahta at first thought she was in her houseboat bedroom. A peaceful lethargy suffused her body, inviting her to slide back into a dreamless sleep, but a small knot was pressing into her side. She felt her clothes twisted around her body in lumps, and her tangled hair reeked of wood smoke. Getting her eyes fully open, she focused on the dark ceiling beam; an olive-sized pregnant brown spider was blithely spinning its foreordained pattern of lace at the corner. She turned her cheek against the pillow and stared through the glass doors at the shimmering pink water of morning. Paddling ducks trailed a dark V. A deer stood as though cast in bronze. The noise of the boat motor receded, allowing the sound of wavelets tumbling on the myriad broken shells below to enter her consciousness. The peaceful swash of water was accompanied by a gentle wind stirring the fir boughs. Sweet indifference. *Let me too be a tree, a rock, a thousand wavelets of indifference.*

"Tonight I'll sleep in the bed," she said aloud, laughing a little and for the first time since her arrival.

There was a glass jar filled with black tea someone had left in the cupboard, and a new gray teapot from one of the island potters. She brewed herself a strong cup and sat prodding her lethargic mind into short-range plans.

Must go to the grocery, but even to venture into the harmless little village of Ganges seems too much. I'm here and immovable...have had less feeling of avoidance driving into Los Angeles. There the concern is different; one doesn't quite know where Los Angeles is and never really finds it. It seems to slip away, a mirage in a dirty pall of freeway fumes. Just to get from here to Ganges -- a country lane, a parking lot -- seems a chore...jarring. There might be tourist gum stuck to the sidewalk, cluttered aisles of boxes and cans...wilted lettuce. People...small talk. Western culture shock? I'll do it quickly...down and back and off for a head-clearing swim.

Indeed, the owner thought her foolhardy when she first discovered Mahta swimming. The temperature of the water was usually less than 45 degrees Fahrenheit. In the late history of the place, Mahta was told, the only other woman to swim here was a tall bronze rippling-muscled Dane, who was said to consider her feat a kind of penance. There was also a German man who came on occasion and suffered a quick dip. "Then I'm the only one who enjoys myself," Mahta had remarked. "I must be. There can't be a male alive who enjoys that withering cold." The owner, an agreeable but circumspect woman who respected Mahta's ongoing desire for privacy, had surprised her by laughing a great whoop of cheerful complicity.

The supply run was accomplished: four miles into Ganges, resting above its tidy harbor, the village with no indication of change -- the artist's gallery atop the post office was having a show by local artists just back from a European painting jaunt, and the parking lot rumbled with a traffic jam of a dozen or more cars --; whirring down the aisles of the smaller of the two grocery stores and snatching a few essentials, thence back to the cottage; stashing the supplies, then a hasty dash down to the white beach, wrapped in a large blue towel to hide her nakedness.

One descended to the shore by a short rock steps beside a huge and gnarled arbutus landmark. Below its spreading red boughs an islander had found the 10,000-year-old skeleton of a diminutive woman, about Mahta's size.

She pondered that small skeleton flexed in fetal curl and buried with fish and bird -- was it trickster raven or loon? She tried to recall what the anthropology report had said about the bones. The enduring skeleton began to enter her thoughts fleshed with life. The certainty of an ancient existence reaffirmed her own temporal presence.

Transitory flame of life, a woman passing through this age has thought of you: authentic spirit living in my head. Could your present have been as enigmatic as mine?

Clambering over angular rocks she slipped around a small and jagged point of high stone and drooping branches. There, in a private sandy cove, she removed her towel. Entering the water had all the delicacy and reverence of an explicit ritual -- the way the Aleuts thanked the new day for arriving. She bowed to the ancient arbutus, whose intricate filigree of twigs and leaves came fully into view as she stepped out of her craggy hiding place onto the beach. The highest branches were struck by the morning sun, all of their leafy abundance shimmering in a faint chilling breeze. Her feet crunched down into the first turquoise skim of water lapping at the white finely crushed clam shells. It was very clean, very clear, very, very cold water; a sheer glaze of crystal absorbing the patches of blue in the sky and magnifying the few dark stones lying on the phosphorous bed of pulped shells. The cold shot up into her ankles and calves and into her thighs as she walked out until the water encircled her waist. She stood cupping the icy liquid in her hands, sluicing it over her arms and shoulders. Her fingers found the red nipples of her firm breasts hardened with cold as her hands slid over their contour. Letting the harshness startle her into absolute clarity, her eyes stared out at the shore across the inlet. Her body slipped below the surface, rising fast with hands fingering back dripping hanks of hair, then sliding down again without haste, staying beneath and kicking out in a thick silence. Fragments of satiny brown and green kelp drifted against her skin like soft fingers. She watched it stream away into an opaque azure light that went on and on into the clouded distance. Reaching for the sky she broke the surface and rolled over on her back, letting out a gasp. She stroked along the shore, up and down, backward and forward, rolling like a silver harbor seal. Her head was purged of corrosive sentiment, her thoughts strained through the flagellating ribbons of cold. The startled body, encapsulating a closing mind and system, felt itself condensing, reconciling, drawing in to a hard insensitive core. Cold. First would come the frigid cancellation of memory. In a while she would sink down and feel nothing, becoming as the speckled white granite which lay among the pulverized shells.

Beneath the surface her body made a dazzling white arrow shooting toward the shore. She stood up and the flowing air pierced her skin with blades of cold. She moved with dreamlike numbness toward the beach, laughing and feeling the clumsiness of her slow-moving mouth, unresponsive jaws anesthetized in a frozen countenance. Her flushed skin tingled and burned after the towel's brisk rub. She gathered herself inside. Moving off she clambered around the rock point and rested a moment on a driftwood log. Her gaze fell to the empty burial place, looking now upon an old reality.

The little skeleton of the five-foot woman in her fifties or sixties had been taken away to the anthropology department at the

University of British Columbia. The water was encroaching upon her resting place but her fierce aura remained. A hole was discovered in her skull, one that she had lived with for many years; someone of her time -- mate, shaman, sister -- had sutured it in a miraculous foreshowing. Again there arose a vision like memory: the native woman walking in the shoals of a natural and spirit world perfectly meshed, reverent, marking the secrets of rustling shadows and murmuring forest. Such an ancient reality was still keenly present in this untainted spot. The lone woman had walked here with scolding raven at her back, gathering abundant clams in her fine-woven root basket, glad for each one taken, perhaps apologizing for her need of eating. Even in a life proscribed by ritual her profound animal mind had been unconsciously in tune with, unquestionably a part of the whole.

Mahta stood up and climbed the short incline in halting steps, making her way back up the sloping deer-cropped lawn of the grounds -- her cottage, nestled in privacy, faced out on an inlet at the other side of the narrow point. The pleasant numbness she had felt dissipated as her skin began to burn again with rapidly infused blood. Swimming in such very cold degrees lowered the body temperature. Mahta knew there was a price to be paid, a coldness that would persist after showering and even before the open hearth of a blazing fire. She built it with quaking hands as her body tingled. It was good, very good, to come so close to pain and to feel so vibrant, so alive. Tomorrow she would rise at dawn's low tide and dig the fluted white clams, as in earliest times, leaving them in clean salted water to cleanse themselves by dinner.

The rest of the afternoon was passed in reading, catching up on the work of her colleagues and treating herself to the elegant word pastiches of poet Wallace Stevens. He had long been her companion. His cool sharp imagery released her from emotion-charged reality into the realm of what her schoolmate Frannie Gauzemahn had called intellectual heaven. Remembering this she remembered Frannie and their long conversations. She could see Frannie with untucked shirt, old tennies, faded jeans, and wayward fine blond hair worn pulled back but always straying in wisps over her soft hazel eyes. A splendid violinist, Frannie had suddenly given up concertizing to become a governess in Switzerland, essentially teaching children to play the violin, and a year later married the stepson of her employer. "I'd already fallen in love with Claude," she told Mahta, and I took the position with the children so that I could have their stepbrother. Designing, wasn't I? And now I'm teaching our children to play the violin." Mahta was sorry that her friend had not continued with her career, but saw her from time to time in Zurich and found her content and attractively plump, now the mother of two little boys and a girl the image of Frannie. She was much in demand by endless streams of people who abused her

kindness. At their last meeting Mahta couldn't hide her concern and said, "Too many people are taking advantage of you." "I know that and I don't mind," Frannie answered. "They really do need me, so I overlook the imposition and enjoy being required." Thus, Mahta herself would return to Frannie again and again to have her friend's all-too-short but comforting attention, always stolen from an incredible schedule of busyness. "I suppose it seems extravagant to you, but all of this busyness is just my way of getting through our amazing life," Frannie told her without further justification. For a moment she wished for the presence of those wise and compassionate eyes that now floated away over the sparkling inlet. She heard the high ringing laughter which accompanied the irony of Frannie's incisive and playful college voice: "Intellectual heaven is where the serpent went after he pointed out the tree of knowledge."

Mahta supped on a light cheese omelette with toast, then washed her plate. A tiny scrap of cheese was left beneath the sink for the shy softly rustling mouse.

The moon came out, spreading opalescent bluish cream over the restless waters and the tangled black silhouettes of the night; moon glow so thick and rich she imagined that it warmed her body as she sat in her deck chair wrapped in the afghan. One hand rested on the wide-slatted arm, the fingers curled around a hot cup of watered Glenlivet. She lifted her eyes to the dark and rustling overhead leaves and whispered to the mute one, a revenant companion summoned as if from a shallow sleep, "You see, Brehnt, how well I'm doing alone? I'm used to it here...being alone. It's not so bad. Aren't you a little proud of me?"

After a while, she stood up with a long sigh, determined to do the mail. But her hands worked like the appendages of someone else, sorting without direction. There was a letter from her friend, Jane Blake, who was vacationing and painting in the Fiji Islands -- it was full of hilarious satire and fun at her own expense. That was Jane, a skilled artist with a sense of humor so copious it could easily have been divided up and shared with a dozen people. Jane was mildly manic depressive and swore by, and sometimes at, her psychiatrist, Doctor Grossmane. He was the butt of many of her jokes, perhaps punished in this way because he was on intimate terms with her weaknesses.

There were a few odd bills which weren't handled by her banker, proposals for work -- some tempting, others impossible -- journals, reports, and a large Manila envelope with the return address of a New York post-office box. Her temporary Los Angeles post-office box had been crossed out and the piece forwarded to the Seattle address by the post office. The original address was written with neat sweeping black letters, clean and explicit. She pried open the sticky flap with a dinner knife and found three 8 1/2 x 11 prints with a note. When she turned over the large photographs the adrenaline shot through her body. She sank

down at the kitchen table, leaning forward under the lamp.

In the first photograph her head was up against the crumbling dun bricks with eyes closed, her wide-open mouth fixed in a mad ecstasy of laughter. The child was looking at her with a gaping attentiveness. Her arms were tight around him and his little fingers clutched at her sleeve. Once again she could feel the fragile warmth of him; saved and safe for a fleeting snatch of his life. In the second picture she was gazing down at the child and, even with her dark blond hair against the darker head of the child, anyone looking would have sworn her to be the mother. Cheerful when bouncing many a baby on her knee, she had never been seized with any such sentiment. In that momentous instant of reflex, exchanging life for life, she had become Mother. Paul Carl caught that phenomenon with a swift and practiced dexterity. She had known a haunting feeling of maternal loss ever since she left Beirut, and yet it went unnamed until she saw the photograph. In the last picture she was helping a tired and hungry Lemur with his bread in that shabby hole in the wall, not even aware that she was being photographed so intense was her concentration.

Unfolding the accompanying slip of note paper creased once in half, she read the message penned beneath Paul Carl's letterhead:

Dear Mahta Lind:

These pictures (Dusty Madonna with Child, etc.) are part of my private collection, and I'll ask you first when I decide to use them.

I heard that you tried to take the boy with you, then left him in the care of an understaffed missionary relief organization. I visited there and found him fed, quiet, passive, not inclined to smile but cared for. What he really needs is the mother in the photograph. I'm sorry. This is the way life more often goes.

As to another matter, I'm again sorry. You said that people change and, having said that, left without checking to see if I had.

I wanted to talk to you, as a colleague. I've looked into some of your work -- it took only a little sleuthing -- and wasn't surprised at what I found. It's very good, both your camera work and prose. Somehow I knew this from watching you in the street. How have you managed to keep yourself so well hidden when your work is really prevalent?

If you're ever interested in a joint venture, let me know. Thought I might

catch you in L.A., but I wonder if you're in Seattle now. I'll be there in a few weeks for a lecture at the University of Washington. I'll try to see you, if you're in town.

Paul

With luck she would be gone. *Thank you so much for these; yes, oh yes, but please no disastrous third meeting.* A nagging little worry began. He could easily find her, had at one time taught photojournalism classes at the University of Washington. Why hadn't he used these rare and startling photographs at once? The restraint was very unlike their time-is-of-the-essence profession. Perhaps, as the founder of a prestigious photography school, the necessary integrity made him more scrupulous than his wily colleagues? Studying the undeniable proof of his very sophisticated artistry produced an uneasy sense of loss: of both Lemur and her privacy. Was privacy an obsession? -- material for old Grossman, the elusive head-Doctor who was never to be met, but who kept surfacing in the way one's thoughts traveled to the life raft in galley stowage when sailing in heavy weather.

She restuffed the envelope, cautioning herself to file it away, literally and mentally, while she concentrated on her upcoming assignment. This job was going to be trouble, although irresistible. For many reasons it generated nervous excitement.

V

Back from Saltspring, Mahta was busily preparing for departure, absorbed in her preparatory work without ever fully detaching herself from thoughts of Lemur, to whom she regularly sent things: clothes, toys, little stuffed animals, food, and more cassette tapes for someone to play for him. Did he hear them? Would he remember her voice, the caring sounds of encouragement, or would it have any salutary effect at all? It was better not to dwell on the innocent searching of his eyes day after day in a place where attention could only be minimal and never approaching a mother's love, better not to but inescapable, especially in the quiet of night.

After a long absence she was going to Guatemala on a special assignment, work she had taken because she found herself drawn to the escalating problem of human rights now being sacrificed on the twin altars of politics and greed. Until recently her own painful memories had caused her to turn away from this ambiguous country she had once loved, but after Beirut she was again charged with an urgent sense of purpose which overrode her personal anguish. Guatemala: *Land of eternal spring*. She hated the oppressive pall of fear under which it lay, a country sliding into infamy and now portrayed as: *Land of goons and death squads*.

#

Aboard her flight Mahta recalled the first time she had seen

Guatemala. How different her intent then. How eager and green and joyful her approach. It was the beginning of the dry season, summer, *verano*, the middle of November that first time, but it had all begun much earlier than Guatemala itself. She had once again become a student, studying the culture and art of the Classic Maya. It was a new beginning after her short and brutal disappointment with Kenneth.

Immediately after obtaining a degree in journalism she had married Kenneth, their small and private but meaningful ceremony accompanied by huge amounts of joy and optimism. The country was moving away from the misery and turmoil of the Vietnam War, and Kenneth was excited about their future. He had acquired a degree in business; she really thought it incongruous; he didn't appear that aggressive or goal oriented in the steely narrow world of commercialism -- in her judgment, a deficiency which indicated something positive: a soulful nature. Kenneth was a handsome devotee of politics and baseball who fell in love with Mahta in her senior year and wooed her with an irresistible persona bright and witty. He pursued her with a tenacity difficult for her young innocence to construe as self-serving: his fueled Corvette at her disposal when she needed to run an errand; endless large bouquets of pink and yellow roses with humorous notes attached; books she had only briefly mentioned as hard to find appearing gift-wrapped; Valencia oranges when she had a cold. Her enduring friend and study companion, Rafael Almeida, had boldly suggested that her growing attachment to a male he saw as domineering and possessive was a dangerous form of self-deception.

In reality often agitated and brooding, Kenneth engaged in an erratic sort of romanticism, falling easily and deeply in love with the desired image he himself created and then further embellished with instructive adulation -- he had fixed on Mahta. She in turn thrived on a sustained level of attention she had never come close to achieving at home. Still in deep grief over the untimely death of her mother, guilt-ridden and traumatized by the extinguished hope of ever winning her mother's love, she mistook Kenneth's fixation for a wonderful form of devotion.

Sitting in a late night diner after a basketball game she listened with a sympathetic ear, eventually proving fatal, as he explained that in his early years he had been both pampered and ignored. "Both mother and dad were busy making *beaucoup* money in pharmaceuticals, so it was feast or famine...messes you up. I didn't learn much about love from them, and as to sex...a few of my parochial teachers lectured that if you didn't intend to have babies it was sinful. Jesus, what a crazy trip. As soon as my hormones kicked in there was wild rebellion." These disclosures were construed as honest offerings, revelations from someone special who valued her trust.

They didn't actually go out much but he always seemed to turn up at whatever party or gathering she attended. When he

entered a room there was a kind of magnetism about him which made her aware of his presence at once. He had a low-key acid wit that easily induced her laughter -- too late the wit was brutal. Soon she began to think about him when he wasn't there. They began attending arcane arty films which both enjoyed.

"You mean to tell me that a delicious little sweet like you has never been tasted?" he scolded her at a passionate impasse one evening after a movie.

Extremely shy, she blushed at his incredulous remark, deeply thankful for the darkness. He was so good looking, his kisses so hard to resist, that she was afraid to say anything which might sound foolish and merely nodded with a soft murmur, perhaps still adrift in the lush scenes of the film.

It was a warm spring evening and they had just come from viewing a stirring and very beautiful film: "Romeo and Juliet." When she muttered her startling revelation of virginity they had been lying on a blanket in a secluded area of the park, enjoying each other in a playful and stimulating way. Kenneth's caressing hand soon strayed upon evidence of her excitement, thereafter her ensuing flash of embarrassment was rapidly extinguished by more urgent feelings, feelings heretofore experienced only in dreams.

"Oh, little girl, I'm going to teach you things," he said against her nervous mouth. "You'll be Juliet and I'll be Romeo, but no one will ever...ever get us apart." His skillful mouth was all over her face and throat while his practiced fingers undid her blouse and bra.

"Wait a minute. Stop it, Kenneth. Wait! Just because I haven't done it, doesn't mean I don't know what it is."

"Oh, honey, you've got no idea...but I'll help you, show you. You're mine. Aren't you? Aren't you?"

"I don't belong to anyone."

"Then I'm claiming you. Say, yes...say you're mine."

"Maybe," she said with a voice barely audible, thinking how right he was, that she really had no idea at all.

"Juliet, Juliet mine." His voice was like a song, his mouth stinging her flesh. "You and I...we're going to be so good together. Oh honey, you're not...on the pill?"

"No," she answered. The palm of her hand was pressed against his firm chest...so astonishing to be touching another's damp bared flesh with such an inescapably nervous longing.

"Well, hold on a minute. Just a minute. Let me get us all safe and happy. Sweet, sweet, sweet Juliet. I love you. I'm in love with you...and you're all mine. It's going to be good...so good, honey."

It was so good. For a while, it was very good. A full awareness of all that Kenneth was and was not only came later, too late as it always does for the inexperienced.

After their marriage his demands grew more obsessive. Mahta became his project as he strove to control very nearly the

entirety of her existence, arguing sharply over the way she did everything -- the way the house was to be decorated, the way she was to use her time, what they would eat and drink, what friends they would have -- and fussing over her appearance, demanding that she wear more fashionable clothes and pierce her ears, which she stubbornly refused to do, mainly because he demanded it and she wished to retain her independence in some small way. He bought her scant lace underwear and bathing suits so brief she was embarrassed to be seen in them at his club pool. She had never been ashamed of her nudity swimming with school chums in her favorite swimming hole in the country, but his erotic obsessions and need to display her before his male friends added a lewd quality which she found offensive. She was furious when he fussed with her blouses, making her unbutton them and then growing livid when men, not the ones he was trying to impress, stared at her modest cleavage. His constant handling and striving to make her into a flawless surface he could display to his cherished squash and tennis partners might have only been laughable, pitiful, had it not been so disturbing. It was also puzzling. He craved the approval of those ogling sports types far too much, hanging her out like raw meat, an endeavor which she later came to think of it as the inclination of a bisexual nature. Despite the satisfaction of their love-making, she was coming apart, increasingly distracted by worry over his strange secretiveness and sudden demands.

There were the emotional protestations of love, often with tears after a fight, the impeccable manners in front of others, the constant stream of little gifts engendered by guilt. Finally she realized that Kenneth was not faithful, that he had not been so almost from the start. Then came the wild love-making. She must understand, he insisted, that good love-making involved some pain. He wanted her to play kinky sex games that she spurned as infantile, and play them with others involved. In refusing she heard that many of these others craved his special skills. She felt only huge disgust, and announced that she was leaving him.

"No. You're mine. You can't leave me!" he raged. "You've always been perfect...perfect for me. If you leave me now I'll kill myself. Say you won't," he pleaded. "Make love with me here...right now. Now! I'll kill myself...I swear."

Such histrionics would have been ridiculous if she hadn't so feared his unpredictable nature. She wanted to put him to bed like a child exhausted from too much crying but then, with his heated persistence, she wanted to put her fingers around his neck and squeeze until he fell silent, out of his self-imposed misery at last. When he saw that no argument could sway her he was unstoppable.

"Don't hurt me. Don't you dare hurt me or I'll find a way to pay you back. I swear I will," she threatened.

The threat was like a red flag and, mindless of everything

but his immediate satisfaction, he struck her and forced himself upon her. Displays of his ensuing remorse were unending. Her desire and forgiveness evaporated forever in the summer heat.

But this was not the final assault of her mind and body. Even the humiliating conclusion was to prove messy, violent and destructive. On the night she believed she had at last severed their exhausting relationship once and for all, he suddenly hit her several times and then again threatened to kill himself. Immediately afterward he was on his knees, repenting in tears. Then she was in the car with him, shaken and stony silent, her suitcase stuffed in haste, expecting to be driven to her father's condominium. Sullen at first but agreeable to her departure, Kenneth began shouting and waving his arms, accelerating his weaving Corvette into a series of near misses he seemed to enjoy.

"If you really loved me you would have done anything I wanted. Anything...if you loved me enough!" he shouted.

"Right!" she shouted back. "I don't love you enough, you perverted...you spoiled child. I don't love you at all!"

Kenneth slammed his foot on the brake and the car skidded through someone's sprinkler system, crashing sideways into a large oak. She knew she should have kept her mouth shut but her reservoir of anger was too great. It was a miracle that she acquired only a few more bruises and a wrenched back. Weeping with rage and the searing pain in her back, Mahta stumbled away as rapidly as her miseries would allow. Above his raving voice, she screamed with all her might, "I don't care anymore! I don't care! Kill yourself and good riddance. I don't care!"

Kenneth was a harried well-off stockbroker now, married and with a couple of children. Gossiping mutual friends pausing in front of restaurants or airport terminals took pleasure in informing her of his peccadilloes, his indecisive affairs, tawdry bits of news she didn't want to know at all. She didn't even care enough to pity his wife.

During the divorce she had been sick with failure; some said it was a nervous breakdown -- a term she thought of as a handily packaged expression for a vast ocean of self-loathing accompanied by interminable waves of unlocatable physical pain. She had started out giving Kenneth so much love, so much attention, so much of her being, that she was missing large portions of herself which were sorely needed. They had bought a charming little ochre bungalow with white trim and white pillars on the veranda. In late winter the dark beauty of the rare old camellia trees surrounding the house gave a sudden efflorescence of color which left her breathless. She filled the yard with bulbs, loving the smell of narcissus in the spring. Many of her spare hours away from the small newspaper where she worked were spent in trying to perfect a few culinary triumphs for the dinners Kenneth wanted his stockbroker friends to share. Perhaps such fruitless devotion to domesticity was rooted in the longings of childhood.

This new role was supposed to play forever. But forever was so very long, a frightening smothering infinity. Her innocence was at last a loathsome thing which she could only blame.

Stoic, holding herself together, she just managed not to break in her father's presence, but she knew that he had seen enough to comprehend the damage. Then she began to punish herself with an array of unsatisfying men, numb, unable to recall their names, even mixing them up to their faces. Her father sent her to Hawaii with a visiting cousin, to a rented house in Hanalei on windward Kauai. She lay shivering on a searing beach, the tropic beauty of the Napali cliffs thrown away while she cursed her naïve stupidity and wretched weakness, completely indifferent to her own well-being. The scorching sun nearly killed her, and the sound of the birds became a monstrous cacophony, the doves and white-eyes and cardinals cooing and chirruping morning and evening in the ironwood trees. Not yet cured but nursing a fierce anger at herself for wasted time and misplaced devotion, she came home.

By dwindling degrees of self-accusation she managed to recover from her mistake, finally able to look upon her experience of marriage as a narrow escape. She was done with longing for romantic companions. Possessing a Masters Degree in Journalism she took a position with the Oregon Arts Commission. At first out of necessity, she developed into quite an adept photographer; the camera was comfortable and easy in her hands, and her selective vision grew quick and true. This nervous exploratory period included her brief encounter with Paul Carl. She was somewhat in awe of him, unable to ignore the self-engrossed but clearly demonstrated talent. Possibly she had identified a synergy which might ultimately serve them both; thus, allowing herself one more quick disappointment. Then, with her job easily mastered and very soon lacking stimulus, she was spurred on to a new endeavor by her deepening interest in the Maya civilization and her quest for human roots.

As with anything she pursued, studying the Maya immediately became a serious and consuming undertaking. After her class on that first day she stood by the lectern, explaining to Brehnt Ghilde, her archeology professor of Mayan Studies at the University of Washington, how she had walked into a museum gallery mainly to escape a rainstorm and found a traveling exhibit of Pre-Columbian art.

"I always wanted to learn more, to...to unravel a little of the mystery of the Classic Maya, but it never became a real thirst until I stumbled onto those amazing artifacts...to me such exciting treasures. Chubby little grave figurines, jade animals, large photographs of stelae...of those...oh, those incredible pyramids of Tikal. The rain was coming down so hard outside, and there I was standing in the quiet of that pale green room all alone...just...alone amidst a kind of magic. I remember a tri-

clustered black clay oil lamp...remember imagining a Mayan high priest hovering over it in some sort of ritual. I was hooked."

As he listened Brehnt Ghilde leaned toward her with a broadening grin of understanding, and when she finished his voice was filled with sympathy and enthusiasm. "That's how it happens. And I'm still as crazy about it as the day I started. No, even more so...much more so."

One class then another and another and finally the need to go and see for herself, focused and eager in her pursuit of the mysterious people whose heartland was Guatemala.

By this time Brehnt Ghilde had fallen in love with her, a silent unavowed love manifested in polite deference and a thoughtful consideration which restored her self-esteem. It was a far cry from Kenneth's needling criticism interspersed with outrageous demands, a far cry from the rebounding and hurtful encounters which had followed Kenneth. For a while she had been out of control, in need of nullity, her self-respect shattered, but the punishing wild forays left only more self-loathing, more bitterness and additional scars. The non-physical adoration Brehnt offered with subtle gesture and patient gray eyes, never voicing the subject except obliquely, was all Mahta could then handle and all she was expected to handle. She knew Brehnt couldn't fail to see her shrinking from close physical proximity, as he saw her reaching out for the respect that was offered. In time he won a measure of her trust. If she told him, circumspect and unwilling to wade once again through the pain and unshakeable humiliation, only that she had been recently divorced, he did little more than acknowledge it and went on drinking the coffee they shared in the cafeteria nearly every day. During these sessions their discussions were of the Maya, Brehnt Ghilde's passion and now hers. It was rich material for a new beginning, inviting endless scholarly speculation, and even sometimes humorous conjecture, with little chance for awkward pauses.

Stepping into the Aurora Airport Terminal to claim her luggage at customs with her fellow students that first time, she was for the moment happy. There was no hint of the intrigue and suspicion which would later cloud her arrival when her passport announced her as a journalist instead of merely a visiting student come to distribute American dollars, as readily accepted as Guatemalan quetzales among so many penurious *Gualtemaltecos*. Everything her Mayan-inspired vision fell upon held only new and stirring promise.

She stood alone and quiet, gazing through the airport observation windows. To the south and east of Guatemala City rose the volcanoes Agua, Fuego, and Acatenango, and above them hung portentous white vapor clouds hissing from Fuego's volatile throat. This, like the Pacific Northwest, was a cataclysmic zone where hot subterranean earth had the final say in man's destiny. Beyond the broad windows the purple cones floated, beckoning,

almost close enough for the jolting sounds of their rumbling depths. So fetching, young and old both, those quirky fire whelps of extruded earth, she wanted to dream after them, making this first glimpse an indelible image, but it wasn't a time for self-indulgence. An anxious member of her fatigued group called to her, and they were rushed into a line of waiting taxis.

The cars sped through busy traffic, heading north more than a mile down the noisy *Avenida* until they reached their immediate destination: the Hotel Ritz Continental -- a tall plain very unremarkable building, but with rooms adorned in an incipient flavor of the country. In rushing through the lobby her swift impressions were somewhat blurred by a succession of brief encounters with solemn dark-eyed clerks and bellhops; but once in her room her eager eyes wandered, free to consider all the strange new stimuli. Crudely hand-crafted dark pieces of walnut-stained furniture, massive yet friendly, rested upon the shining terra cotta warmth of tile floors. Framed by a tall window, a peacock blue twilight drew her immediate attention, the dusky vault studded with a single diamond star winking above motionless black palms. This fixed view suggested a startling *trompe l'oeil*, but one beckoning her toward all the mysteries which lay beyond. Somewhere outside above the roar of traffic, plangent odd-timbred bells clanged in a careless helter-skelter.

Immersion in this new milieu by slowly measured degrees brought a delicious satisfaction. Her hand wandered over a bedside nightstand, exploring fingers grasping a round pottery ashtray which had caught her eye. Cheaply made, light and friable, the buff earthenware was painted with the hotel's name half encircling a purple volcano rising over a blue lake; above the peak floated a small white vapor cloud. The homely innocence of this volatile scene made her smile. Kicking off her shoes her feet caressed the thick wool of a large hand-loomed rug. She breathed in the pungent cedar and leather aromas, ran her fingers over the thonged chamois chairs and teased the long fringe of the colorful bedspread; its warp and woof fashioned a human story hand-woven of brightly dyed threads; if she studied the mannered images carefully, she might come to understand the enigmatic figures and symbols so important to the weaver.

The room was to be shared and she was glad of it, eager to initiate the beginnings of friendships. The girls were all younger, lively and fun. She selected one of the twin beds and lay down to stare up for a dreamy moment at the slow-turning fan. Again, her curious eyes roved. The rich cedar scent, the Indian textiles, the electric blue window hinting at tantalizing views of ancient enterprise all deluged her senses. It was a small leap in the measure of things but large for her. Just then she felt alone, yet rich in fortune and fierce in self-possession.

So unfolded her first night in the valley of the Mayan legends. The faintest impressions, all the subtle nuances of

difference in those magical beginning hours were later easy to distinguish in memory. The sudden glimpses of abject poverty and misery that she came upon along the way would be temporarily suppressed, only to haunt her near the end and finally change her course of endeavor. Still, in those inchoate moments she believed she had escaped the past, stuffed it away like old clothes in a drawer, left the drawer, the room, the very house of sorrows behind. If she were older and perhaps a little more serious than the others, it didn't matter. She would observe a high culture, learn from it but also embrace the present and share the prevailing carefree mood. She had missed this camaraderie. Now she would reach out and grasp every human gesture offered.

Sorting out their rooms the chattering students made swift work of their unpacking -- a task interspersed with bursts of infectious laughter at anything and everything -- then regrouped at a noisy party hosted by Brehnt Ghilde in his fourteenth floor suite. They were careless with travel fatigue, their inhibitions cast aside in the unfamiliar surroundings. A jittery frivolity of displacement and exhaustion made them impudent and prankish. They found wonderful release in flinging daring quips at Brehnt Ghilde with volleys of teasing laughter. "Professor Ghilde, who gets *your* room?" a teasing young woman asked. "Only *Quetzalcoatl*," he rebounded, very adept at handling their playful nonsense. It was this light-hearted exchange and his quick laughter which drew Mahta's attention as she entered his suite. Her eyes caught the precise gestures of his expressive hands mapping visions, the white cuffs of his sleeves protruding from his suede jacket. She couldn't refrain from staring. So much was new and mysterious and different, herself for instance, and Brehnt Ghilde. No less dependable and centered, he was clearly in his element, ardently sharp and animated. In this charged atmosphere nothing was commonplace or predictable. The only certainty was that all the known intricacies of his subject would be generously revealed as he had promised. He winked at her and popped a cream cheese and pineapple hors d'oeuvre into his mouth, licking the tip of his finger. She stood smiling with a little rush of excitement as he grasped the shoulder of a student posing a rather elementary question and said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute; no, I'm not going to tell you that. You'll have to find out for yourself. That's why you're here. Think of me as...as an intermediary between you and the power of the Mayan wizards." His eyes delighted in the humorous jest. "Remember we're aligning facts with heady speculation here...shadow images from a reality long swallowed up...half digested in the belly of time."

Below in the streets the Christmas celebrations that would go on for weeks had already begun. Constant noisy fulminations and strings of hissing popping firecrackers reverberated over the city. Growing swirls of smoke drifted before the phosphorous

moon as bells ceaselessly tolled and drunken laughter echoed down the streets. The weary Guatemaltecos loved these diversions. Every night flashing conflagrations of bright light rose above wild laughter, discordant singing and exhausted little bands of raucous music makers. Clouds of pungent sulfur hung over the city's white-edged darkness.

Mahta rushed to the open window with a sizzling lighted firecracker someone had handed her. She tossed it out, jerking her hand back, but it exploded too near her thumb as it fell away into the night. The dull painless pressure of the blast made her shriek and cry out, "Oh, I can't believe this!" Seized by a childish joy, she shook her hand then held it against her laughing mouth. It smelled of sulfur.

"Let's see your hand," Brehnt demanded.

"No, it's nothing, nothing," she exclaimed, her excited laughter fed by her own recklessness. Everyone was laughing.

Brehnt lifted her hand and studied it, sliding his thumb over her fingers. She looked at him, at the hand now throbbing in his grasp, and had to withdraw it. He walked over to lean against the wall which supported a mirrored ebony sideboard filled with hors d'oeuvres and sparkling drinks. Her eyes followed him as he looked back at her. She could feel his quiet unwavering motive as he gazed at her from a new, more distant perspective. Then students gathered around him and he was soon telling tales of his early days in the field: broiling sun, torrential rains, snakes, and bloodthirsty bats.

"Mahta, help us. You must know how to do this," a merrily distressed female voice called.

Mahta knelt upon the pungent sisal floor mat, pulling her constricting tan poplin skirt away from under her knees. Her roommate, Jenny, had asked her to braid a crimson ribbon into her hair. Jenny's hair was long and dark, perfect for the native fashion just encountered. The clean satin hanks felt cool and thick and pliable in her hands. As she twined the shiny black hair and red ribbon through her fingers, above Jenny's bobbing head Mahta glimpsed Brehnt watching her again. This subtly provocative figure bathed in the amber light of the wall sconce was a different Brehnt Ghilde, an undeniably arousing vitality.

"God, he is rah-ther cool." Jenny spoke *sotto voce* to a smiling friend sprawling nearby, twisting her head with her hand held to shield her mouth.

With a spurt of surprise Mahta realized that Jenny was speaking of Brehnt Ghilde. Above the further away chatter she heard his distinctive laughter. "Hold your head still, Jenny, or I'll have to start over," she admonished with amused voice.

"Looks like an elegant stud in *GQ*," Jenny continued, "chestnut boots...chino slacks...white shirt open at the neck under that...so nifty suede jacket...unaffected casual, huh? Hey...never looked that good in class...did he? Oh, shit! Who's

he trying to impress?"

"Maybe you, glamour girl of the dirt pits. Go for it...or I will," her drawling southern friend encouraged. "I think he sorta likes your li'l ol' sexy braid, sugar plum."

"Oh come on, Meg."

"Well he *is* lookin' over here."

Mahta laughed with the girls, acknowledging to herself that Brehnt had awakened a flirtatious contest in his female students. Something thoroughly natural and yet a little unexpected had happened. Only a few years ago her seriously studious nature would have been offended: how silly and libidinous these girls. Now she only smiled with complicit understanding. Was it the unknown aspect, the dark primal history of this country which had suffused everyone with such heedless passion? Affected young women professing an earnest engagement in Mayan studies were now smitten as if by a Shakespearean mischief. They were competing, vying for the focal point of those gray eyes, the same relentless eyes that followed her. Without looking she sensed the steady probing, the resolve to reach her withheld interior. It made her restless, anxious. Nothing must be altered or begun. The certainty of discovery and its complications, the affliction of unhinged, unstoppable ecstasy exhausted her at the merest contemplation. Hungry as a starved invalid delivered whole from a long sterile illness, she craved only a stasis of adulation; to be adored as never before, coveted from a safe distance; to feel the unspoiling caress of admiring eyes.

Nothing was ever held back from the surge of time, least of all a human being in the heat of passion. Brehnt Ghilde was going to step off his square. Everything hurtled forward at breakneck speed. A thousand rough images were superimposed on the perfect one she had tried to sustain, and in the ensuing days her guarded static image stretched and blurred, whirling away.

They were getting into a taxi, Brehnt in the front with the driver and Mahta and two other girls in the back. He reached over the seat and handed her a yellow flower he had picked from a nearby bush; a lovely fragrant flower unknown to her. The girls looked at each other and smiled. She was furious, dropping her hand and crushing the petals as soon as he turned away. The taxi lurched forward. They were leaving the dreary archeological site of Kaminaljuyu east of the central city. She had walked over the narrow unstable board supports, looking down in the dingy light at realigned white human bones lying in profaning dirt, hardly attending what Brehnt was saying, inventing her own eulogy: *Here lies a person of late renown, stargazer, dreamer, keeper of numbers and seasons. His skull contained a compendium of useful information which has leaked back into the soil. He has not rested in peace or pieces.* A quick sharpness pierced her heart, and to defeat her bad faith she smiled at Brehnt and tucked the crumpled flower in the buttonhole of her shirt. The necessity of

reversing herself had become a habit, a thumbing of the nose at thwarted purpose, a satisfying kick in the rump of that which went inexorably forward.

#

Having arrived at last in Antigua the class was staying at the red-tile-roofed hotel "El Cortijo de las Flores." The square Spanish loggia enclosed a flagged courtyard of roses, banana plants, and brilliant sprays of bougainvillea, all bordered with neatly trimmed box shrubs and graced with a plashing fountain. Here for a brief look at backstrap weaving, earthquake remnants, and incidentally a coffee *finca*, Mahta was instead looking at Antiguans and photographing them. She found them beautiful, the young men very handsome with broad white-toothed grins and warm dark eyes that quickened the heart; the women with shining black braids, facial features smooth-molded as pottery, and lovely olive skin. These women walked proud and erect with large bundles of market textiles deftly balanced on their heads, their graceful feet tripping along as if their only burdens were the white clouds above. Far from burdenless, they lived in grinding poverty, which for Mahta greatly enhanced the worth and sweetness of their few humble joys.

In the town Mahta followed a young attendant through a little storage room of antiques which were for sale, very old dust-coated iron and leather and wooden objects that looked as if they had been trashed by the *Conquistadores*. She held up a large metal stirrup, wrinkling her nose, and the handsome young man in a clean but frayed white shirt grinned and fixed her with his heart-melting eyes. She grinned back. There followed a duo of mirth transcending barriers of speech or culture, the clumsy stirrup a fulcrum of hilarity, the most unusual rationalization she had ever encountered for sharing a few stimulating pleasures with the opposite sex.

Brehnt ducked his head through the door and came over to her. "What are you looking for in here?"

She was still laughing and knew that Brehnt had found her out: her obvious playfulness, woman enjoying man.

"Everything in here is undoubtedly for sale," he said with an uncharacteristic helplessness. It was a blatant and pitiful condition prodded by a most primal jealousy.

She wanted to hit him, revive him with the heavy stirrup, but instead dropped it back into the box of ancient kitsch, then brushed the dust from her hands and walked out.

In the early evening before dinner she sat on the loggia outside the door of her room, reading the *Popul Vuh*. Lost in the mythical history of the *Quiché* Maya, she didn't hear Brehnt come up to her. In turning a page her eyes fell upon his boots and she looked up in slow retreat from the House of Jaguars and the Lords of *Xibalba* in the distant mythical past. He squatted down

beside her leather-thonged chair, and she caught a pleasing waft of lime cologne.

"Mathilda, I want...may I speak with you a minute?"

She closed the book, holding her finger in it, and leaned back, waiting.

"Could you just step inside your room...please?"

Her roommate was next door playing gin rummy with two male students. She started to say something about this but then simply got up and went inside, offering him a chair and sitting at the writing desk.

"I like these rooms very much. Do you? I've stayed here before."

"Yes," she answered, observing with a glance the restorative promise of his tan fingers as they caressed the chair back.

"It's such a restful place. I love the smell of cedar," she went on in an even voice.

She studied anew the reddish walls of cedar which gave off such a wonderful resinous smell, and then looked for a moment at the black and white hand-woven merino rug thrown over the shining rust tiles between the beds. Her gaze lifted to the searching light of Brehnt's gray eyes, then moved swiftly away to stop at the window where broad banana leaves fluttered in the Spanish gold evening sun. A bewildering feeling of ecstatic pleasure swept through her body, again imparting the certainty that she was admired, held in esteem, desired, but more important free -- she must not forget this -- free to choose.

Even as she was held fast by his unwavering stare, her self-examination continued. *He wants to lie with you in his arms, Mahta, this intelligent long-suffering jealous guilty aroused male. What is it you feel? Are you afraid?*

"Mahta, if I sounded...if I offended you today -- I know I did -- I'm sorry. I was so damned envious of that fellow who made you laugh. I realized that I wanted to do that...am always wanting to do that. I *am* deeply sorry."

The quiet ceiling fan turned. A pigeon cooed in the adjacent courtyard. There was a soft sound of splashing water outside the screened corner window. Peacefulness. Warmth. Drowsing sweetness, and beneath it a rhythmic stirring.

A late ray of sun reflecting from an unseen surface poured in across a narrow segment of Brehnt's blond hair, catching it on fire. The same thin gold column streamed down his right eye and cheek and over the tan flesh of his chest beneath his open shirt; it was a dazzling medium, a small strip of brilliance dividing him into portions of indistinct shadow. He sat a little forward on the natural thongs of leather, his boots crossed. She imagined him in those boots crawling around snake-infested ruins at El Tajin in Mexico where he had done so much early research, his white shirt opened for coolness, the protective long sleeves rolled, Panama hat -- *sombrero de junco* -- pulled to one side and

holding off a burning sun. She pictured the supple earthbound hands, now resting on his knees, running over lacerated stone transformed into history. Here in this moment his preoccupation would not relinquish her, already possessed what it had never demanded. It seemed most important to give him pleasure, not to hurt or tease or test, only to give to him and thus, of course, to herself.

Mahta got up and moved toward him, his gaze following her with a concentrated anticipation. His silent mouth curved with encouraging suggestion. The dove-gray eyes so charged with the moment, close and vulnerable now, looked into hers. Her full quickening heart began to crash. The curled backs of her fingers touched against his cheek, a light touch before she was aware of any such command or that her hand was shaking. For a pulsing moment he sat aloof and motionless, his eyes half closed. Then he turned the caressing hand over and held the palm against his mouth with a soft murmur, as she in silence held herself still.

He stood up, strode to the door and locked it. Leaning against one of the beds he removed his boots.

Have I chosen? Mahta asked herself. Did I choose as I must always do from now on? Yes, I want him. I do want him.

She dropped down beside him on the edge of the bed, thoughtful even in the exhilaration of his nearness, then started to unbutton her shirt. His hands came around her and she pulled one free of her breast and looked at the tan fingers, kissing each one and shivering with the sensation of his lips on her neck. "Forgive me until I learn you," he muttered against her flushed skin. After that they didn't speak, only an occasional utterance, intoxicated, unconstrained sounds of their mutual elation, sliding away deeply into each other, his limpid eyes holding her own heated gaze and burning with the final effect of her astonished cries. Time drifted. Shadows of wind-thrummed banana leaves fluttered over the walls.

It had been so long since she had made love, and not ever like this. She wanted to lie in his arms through the night, but unfortunately her roommate would come back before dinner and it was impossible.

"I'll book you a single room next to mine at Tikal," he said, pulling on his boots.

She enjoyed watching him dress. Nearly six feet tall he was lean and agile, without detractive vanity, his blond hair a bit longish, curling over the nape of his neck. His slender gently flip-ended nose and quite evenly proportioned features clearly portrayed the stamp of his Dutch ancestry. In dressing he was quick, deft, and energetic, indicating so well how he valued the use of time.

He knelt beside her, touching her cheek. "You love with such abandon. I feel so very fortunate. No, what's the word I want?...*euphoric*. You please so deeply. My head is full of

you...high in the clouds...auspicious angel."

"Angel?" It made her smile she felt so unangelic.

"There are mortal angels in this land. It's not a contradiction. You know who they are, Mahta...and they know you. They exist in great numbers wherever there are huge amounts of love and suffering thrown together."

"Good people who rise above others to make changes," she said. "Those are the angels."

"Yes," he agreed with obvious satisfaction, his eyes searching her face. "Yes, you know that...I've seen that you know it...one of the reasons I'm drawn to you."

"Name another," she said, believing she had caught him unprepared.

He cocked his head at her, first with humor then a deepening seriousness. "The papers you wrote were...ah, were so very, very good...better than I'd have done...publishable. I learned subtle things from them. When a professor learns something of value from a student it's like an epiphany...a sudden manifestation that makes it all worthwhile."

"Hmm," she murmured, unprepared herself and silenced.

The gravity left his face. "Angelica, for so long the refusal in your eyes alongside the joy of discovering... Look now how radiant." He led her to a round mirror framed by a shining silver sunburst. Their two tan faces were flushed with the moment, lushly crimson-tinged, resonating with light, together very beautiful to her. She couldn't stop looking and smiling. "I feel...alive," he said. "What you've done."

Outside, deep bells sounded, uneven, reverberating through the red-gold air. Her roommate would come in to change for dinner. He kissed her, a longing kiss for such a short good-bye, and she stood flushed and amazed, thinking of what he had said about angels, the way he said it, with gravity and amusement, but with gravity. Had he really grasped the full dimension of what he spoke? Yes, of course. How indispensable were mortal angels.

#

In the sweet and pungent humid airs of day and night she was loved to a dazed near vertiginous state, he in turn professing amazement at her tireless responses. There were, of course, the ongoing hours of serious observation and study. These were followed by cunning stratagems of escape from the others into the insatiable eroticism of each other.

"They know," Mahta said, her laughter soft in the warm night air of a park in Mérida. "Of course they know."

"Not really," Brehnt responded, turning upon her, his arms enclosing her against the park bench. "They can't possibly know the important part...what this is like." She felt his exploring mouth concentrated upon her ear and shivered with the caress of his close softly mellow voice. "Enough of them. From the

ridiculous to the sublime...eyelashes thick as raven down."

"No...oh no, still very much the ridiculous," she responded with a general carefree delight. "Is there raven down?"

"Yes, doubting student. I have it firsthand from the very birds themselves...plumulae...soft underfeathers," he informed her with droll assurance.

"You've gone to the birds?"

"Come on, my object, let's walk...or fly like bats."

She was unable to stop laughing as they went along. "You know, don't you, that all the pretty girls are in love with you?...probably because you have knowledge of raven down."

"Oh that," he said with a mildly amused dismissive voice. "Well, I have to put up with man and boy always looking at you. In this homogeneous country there's something about a small blond woman...especially one whose voice is soft when most serious. As to my questionable drawing cards...infatuation goes with the territory. But you've cured them, haven't you...with all this slavish attention?"

"With what? Hmm, I might pass a thorned cord through your tongue while you're sleeping," she warned.

"If true to that fine old custom, you'll have to assume I'm Mayan royalty...make me do it and while I'm awake," he advised. They stopped in the shadows of broad dark leaves and kissed. "If you did it...I wouldn't even notice...Angelica."

They walked on through the lush park in the sultry darkness, stopping to watch a fruit peeler. The man stood turning the arm of a cumbersome old contrivance which was mounted on a box, while the oiled teeth of the slow gears meshed and a pierced apple was parted from its shining skin in a single long peel. Arms linked, they gazed on as the spinning red globe was stripped to its naked white pulp, nothing here and now more absorbing or momentous than the lengthening crimson coil playing out before them.

At last the students had gone home. They were alone. Their sojourn in Tikal, Piedras Negros, Quiriguá, and later again in Yucatán at Chichén Itzá and Palenque, engendered a kind of zealous love-making fierce as the enduring Mayan gods. Time was forgotten, outside the wrap of their silky cocoon. Suspended in a curious state of sharpest clarity and much-craved coddling, she received instruction in both the idiosyncrasies of the Classic Maya and the exclusiveness of devoted love-making.

"*Chac* sent you to me," Brehnt told her as they hurried through the rain in the marketplace of Chichicastenango.

"The rain god? How did he do that?" she inquired while jumping out of the wet dust and up onto the steps of the Church of Santo Tomás. Smoke from burning copal incense placed on the steps coiled into the rain, rank and sweet.

He stepped up beside her. "Don't you remember telling me that to escape the rain you entered a gallery filled with Mayan objects and in that moment fell in love with the Maya?"

"Ah yes, so I did." She took his hand and heard a roll of thunder. "You see, he's coming to check up on us." Standing close, giving themselves to the gentle rain, they heard another loud pronouncement from impatient *Chac*. They turned their faces skyward, feeling themselves like gods in weightless levitation.

One morning, while drinking their coffee in bed as sunbeams rode the dancing banana leaves outside, she said, mostly for some verifying effect, "Let's get ahold of ourselves."

He dropped the journal he was reading, with one leg bent over hers. His startled gray eyes made her burst into laughter.

"I'd rather get ahold of you and you get ahold of me."

"But I do...we do...on and on and on. Has the world stopped turning or...or is there something wrong with us?"

"No, everything right...so perfectly right. How can you insert puritanical nonsense into our few hours of wholesome decadence?" He felt her forehead. "I think you're feverish. I hope it isn't malaria. Have you taken your pill?"

She sighed. "In my past life I was well-intentioned, sometimes even practical."

"Don't you know that you're only here with me, my Angelica, because you float above the ground."

"Above the ground but not the bed."

He tossed his journal onto the bedside table and said, "Yes, come here. I've work to do and I need your help."

"Work?"

"All right, sorry, the work is this afternoon, isn't it? I was just trying to fall in with your strict work ethic. I'll call it whatever you like as long as we keep doing it."

His mouth traveled from answering mouth to pulsing throat to throbbing breast, his hands sliding down her hips and into the center of her hot stirring.

"God...I'm afraid, Brehnt."

"Why?...why afraid, my nervous jungle bird?"

"Because after this...there's nothing."

"There is no after this, Angelica."

It was clear that she would always have him, that he would come and go and come into her life with a consuming fulfillment. In the end they talked of poverty and greed, subjects which increasingly concerned him and eroded the pleasure of his scholarly pursuits. Some of this was her doing, raging at the inequities she saw. She knew that something powerful had altered his life but she had not quite grasped the extent of it. Nearly two years later his downed Cessna was spread in fragments over the Andes Mountains, his ambivalent journey, his guarded crusade ended. She had gotten involved first in writing articles about various Mayan sites and then more and more about the squalor of the people, and had been away from him at the time. Her rage and disgust and daring had already carried her into other theaters of war and misery. After she learned of his death a letter arrived

from him. She put it away, barely able to hold it in her hand it so resonated with his life force, completely unable to open it, the wonderful and terrible power of penned words reaffirming a vitality that was no more. This was a time of blackness from which nothing solid emerged and little was remembered. It was a taut and vacant exercise, moving through a world distorted by pain, hers and others. She would go anywhere. Let them try and kill her. Very slowly the blackness receded but the furious desire for him did not; it swelled and swelled, spilling into her dreams. The need for his tempering presence increased, his touch, his leveling humor, his quiet understanding and natural economy of words which so often referenced her thought. It was a dangerous madness to think of him. The sudden turbulence of the plane reminded her of his body strewn with the wreckage on a remote Andean peak. A groan, a cry was torn out of her, over before she realized her own voice. The handsome Spanish woman sitting beside her turned to stare. "It is only a little air pocket, *señorita*," the woman offered in sedate consolation. Mahta forced a smile, fingers clenched to palms, the knuckles white. Her voice sounded unfamiliar to her when she ordered a drink; it was something she rarely did while flying to a country where she was not necessarily welcome.

#

Her passport returned she went straight to the office of General Carrillo. *Mañana*, they told her, or *pasado mañana* -- come back tomorrow or the day after that.

She sat drinking rich black coffee at a small table on the narrow sidewalk of a street cafe. Unmuffled or barely muffled trucks, cars, and motorcycles roared down the old *avenida*, creating a perpetual jarring noise and leaving a steely blue ribbon of fumes. Flocks of pigeons flew high, dipping down and swarming in spirals over and around and through the near and far church spires, domes, and cupolas. One landed on her copy of *La Prensa*. Its beady red eye studied her while she studied it, gazing at the iridescent green and violet-purple neck feathers, the ash gray black-barred wings, the orange claws. The simple morphology of a common pigeon was quite beautiful. Perhaps it had once flown over the two of them, shuffled under their feet as they strolled through the square. She made no move to chase it away. To alter the course of anything harmless was unnatural; it could set off a whole chain of devastating events. The curious bird fanned its tail, then the loud backfire of a truck sent it flying. All the harsh sounds of the city vibrated together.

There were the recurrent church bells, inescapable, berating any silence in a hollow echoing protest of their ineffectual call to piety. When she had been right here with Brehnt not even the largest discordance had annoyed her -- the bells she had loved. Now she was marking time, barely holding out against the livid

cacophony while everything swept by: carts, thin dogs, blasting radios, weary vendors, hollow-eyed begging children, the lame and hungry and anonymous. Juxtaposed were the rippling fronds of tall palms and the vibrantly purple splashes of bougainvillea creeping over high walls -- the sensuous hint of private interior gardens. Confronted by all this lushness and squalor, she still didn't have to close her eyes to envision the two of them sitting in the very place where she now sat. They had come here on occasion. The last time was after a year of ephemeral meetings stolen from work demands; always needful of each other's company.

"Here we are again...in this lurid, this mad, this furious crush," she had announced.

"Guatemala Shanghai," Brehnt exclaimed, stretching out his arms to the grimy boisterous city that was theirs.

"I'm in it, all of it...somewhere in my head all the time; that's how much you've changed in me," she told him. "I'm so different now."

"How...different?" he asked just as their attention was drawn away from each other.

A tattered child of five or six had detached herself from a ragged band of children rushing down the street. She came straight up to the table, leaned on it with a fearless boldness and stared at the bread on their plates. Her little nose was smudged, her hair tangled, her black eyes sharp and cunning as she produced a sweet counterfeit smile, putting out her filthy hands. Mahta motioned the children over, broke all the bread into pieces and portioned it out among them. They took a bite or two then pocketed the rest and stood nearby a while, waiting. "How tough and fragile they are," she said. "A fierce family corporation of...of tenacious little castaways...founded to answer the needs of the scorned." A waiter rushed toward the children with threatening shouts. They were unafraid but cautious and, seeing there was to be no more, they left.

"Different like that," she said, finally answering his question. "When I look at them I can feel that kind of hunger. There's nothing put aside, nothing beyond their pockets...like little birds pecking in the snow. But a hunger for everything -- it's their whole short life."

She was silent a while and then said, "And there's more from you: the way I look at other human beings, finding ancestral clues, destiny...my own identity...all together there...the sheer observation of life; the deep excitement and...yes, the sorrow of discovery...the way I frame a photograph, functioning as the ultimate observer...as I see you."

He leaned on the palm of his hand with a keen interest, and then slid his hand over her nervous fingers which she had begun to tap on the table top, unaware. "I've changed you a little I suppose. You've changed me too, you know, very much to the good. And it's no mystery that *life* changes us...if you live long

enough you metamorphose completely. The trouble is it happens too slowly; it's only too quickly if you're looking at eroding stone."

"You can't imagine how much I've changed," she said. The fingers of her free hand played over the fringe of a violet poncho she had bought from an Antiguan weaver. His eyes traveled to her fingers which stopped their movement, the becalmed hand dropping into her lap. "The strangest thing of all was something called domesticity...or the attempt...as if I'd been programmed while asleep. I was programmed. You've never married but you must have..."

The waiter appeared, and Brehnt asked if she wanted more coffee. "Yes, please," she answered, "It tastes so good...so much better than that freeze dried ersatz in my kitchen."

"Where you have no pots and pans," he said with teasing voice.

"I'm never there," she answered, a little apologetic.

"You don't need to defend your life-style, my Angelica. And I certainly didn't make you do what you do...become what you are. You have a special vision. That's who you are.

"Anyway, I know you only come here because of the great coffee." He winked at her, running his fingers through his fetching tousled hair. As always there was the timely stroke of playfulness which lifted her up.

"Oh, absolutely, only for the coffee," she answered, her laughter a happy protest. "And here it comes."

"No, I never married," he finally replied when their cups were filled. "I considered it briefly...lived with another archeologist for a while...until she packed off to Greece and I to El Tajin. That seems a long time ago. At least our kind of work isn't the stuff of that domesticity you can't abide -- one of the reasons we're very good for each other. We're so engaged in our work...and when we see each other..." His eyes narrowed, closing over her like a warm gray sea. "God, it's so good when we see each other."

Their corresponding thoughts sent them hurrying away to their deep private pleasures: the dusky gold light, the leafy shadows, the street sounds, the mephitic and perfumed airs, the clanging bells, the sultry nights of flirtatious cafe music, the droll gibbous moon reclining on its back, their heatedly answered impatient desires, their long discussions, their wildly outsized aspirations, the incredible motivating force emanating from the merging of their restless minds and bodies. They had quickly learned that being apart held major benefits, heightening their senses and the fervor of their short empowering rendezvous.

Mahta lifted her eyes from her empty cup and was alone again. For one prolonged moment Brehnt had been so near she had almost spoken to him. She paid the waiter and headed down a narrow alley, taking a shortcut back to her hotel. Stopping to

admire brilliant red sprays of bougainvillea cascading down a wall, she saw a disturbing incident unfolding ahead of her in which she knew she would have to intervene.

An old gentleman in a crisp tan suit and Panama hat had emerged from a little bakery, carrying a small paper sack. A short distance away, he saw a well-dressed middle-aged woman standing in the street and looking around her with frightened jerking glances. A lost tourist, Mahta said to herself as she watched the elderly man approach the woman. The woman's purse was swinging free in her hand, and the man tipped his hat, muttered a few words, then tucked his sack under his arm and took ahold of the startled woman's purse; with exaggerated gesture he pushed the purse back on her arm and against her body. While he was so engaged the horrified woman began to scream. "No, no, *señora*," he said with placating voice. The woman's voice rose in a shriek as she backed away from him, swinging her arms. Mahta rushed toward the woman, calling, "It's all right. It's all right. He means no harm. He's only trying to show you how to carry your purse. A purse can be grabbed out of your hand very easily the way you were carrying it. It happens all the time here. He's just trying to show you how to hold your purse against your body." The woman looked at her, still shaking with fear and disbelief, and said, "Oh, God, are you American? I got lost." First Mahta turned to the disparaged old gentleman standing in ignominy. She smiled, apologizing, "*Lo siento mucho. Gracias, señor, gracias*," then she turned back to the woman and asked where she was staying; discovering it was her own hotel, she offered to lead the woman back. "And you're with a group?" Mahta said, knowing her assumption to be accurate -- only the seasoned or very foolish tourist ventured here alone. "Yes, they're all napping and I just needed to go for a walk. Oh, I shouldn't have come here. I got lost." "Not very lost," Mahta comforted, "but lost is lost; it's best to take someone along familiar with the area." "Never again will I do this," the woman said, shaking her head. "I shouldn't have come to this country at all." Mahta agreed in silence. "The man was kind...really helpful," she offered. She was thinking how embarrassed the old *señor* must be, and how regretful of the perils of his country. She watched him stroll slowly away, holding his tired frame erect with an abiding dignity and carrying his only reward, his little sack of precious sweets.

#

The next day Mahta was back at the office of General Carrillo. After a tedious hour of waiting she cajoled and finagled her way into his presence. Unfortunately he didn't respond with the enthusiasm he had once shown. He motioned for her to sit down, only half rising from his desk. Even seated, someone meeting him for the first time would see that he was quite tall, angular. He had wide large-boned shoulders, long

thick-jointed fingers and high bony cheeks. His hair was silver-gray, heightening the blackness of his now more noticeably hurtful eyes, and the leather-skinned yet pallid rectangular face was all pulled in toward his harsh-lipped mouth -- the center of focus from which strict orders were issued that bore a terrible finality. A man of excessive ego, in earlier apolitical times he had manifested pleasure at the courteous attention of his friend Brehnt Ghilde's interesting companion. Now their meeting was an inexpedience, uncomfortable. As he spoke, his once elegant amenities were blunted by a direct thrust of irritation.

"I shall not...should not see you, *Señorita* Lind." He pronounced her name *Leent*.

There were far too many responses clamoring to be delivered but none of them were amenable to the businesslike control she demanded of herself. She waited a moment in silence, forcing the General to lead the conversation.

"Do you continue with any of the Doctor's work?"

"Not concerning the Maya, but I try to pay attention to some of the work that...that preoccupied him at the time of his...his death." She felt a little sick. An uneasy loneliness and doubt swept over her. Momentarily she had lost the fierceness required for this necessary verbal wrangle. Yet her words had given a pointed response to the General. He knew very well, this devotee of the ancient Maya, this expedient militarist, what she meant.

"So, you lose interest," he went on.

"Never. I never lost interest...only time. I've lost that...unfortunately."

"Doctor Ghilde is my friend. It is horrible tragedy. I believe I am knowing him a longer time than you."

But not better, she thought. What was it that Carrillo and Brehnt could have had in common besides the Maya and their manhood? Nothing she could see or imagine. They shared a natural usefulness for one another, little else. The General mistakenly thought otherwise. She must pander to this false assumption, however her act was mitigated by Brehnt's absence.

"I know you knew Brehnt longer, so you must have come to see how much concern he had for--"

"*Señorita* Lind," he interrupted, looking at his gold wrist watch, "I do not want to ask why you come here...not as *mutuo* friend of Doctor Ghilde, not as the admirer of the Classic Maya, I see. I fear it is a difficulty in the present. I do not want to know...and I hope now you do not tell me."

"I've come to ask for your help in finding a missing young American lawyer named Jim North. He was here to assist in agrarian reform and--"

The General put up his hand to interrupt and gave a low brittle laugh. "We have the excellent agrarian reform, modern democratic laws. Do you not hear of the National Institute of Agrarian Transformation? Much is done there."

"Nevertheless, Jim North was apparently needed. The Benevolent Brethren Mission asked him to come here. He was working with a small village near the coast. Then he--"

"I know nothing of this Jaime Norte. This land is full of many kinds of people. The one who is looking for trouble is *perdido*...the easy one to lose."

"He wanted to help, General...to help descendants of the ancient culture you so revere. He came to see that the poor and unfortunate must have a bit of land and dignity...you see, Doctor Ghilde wanted...was forced to acknowledge the neglected needs of your people, their utter destitution. And above all else he--"

"No, no, Doctor Ghilde is the archeologist, the dedicated specialist...the man of honor. He does not abuse our friendship in this way."

"General, a woman can have honor too. I'm honor-bound to ask your help. The representative of a desperate family has asked me to investigate, to...to try and find their son whom no one in your government seems very interested in finding. Whatever I happen to discover, his family wants me to write. This is the only hope they have. Some people in the United States, people sympathetic to Guatemala, will read what I've written. I've come to you because you're the best person I know...in the best position to help. It isn't me...not *me*, but your own people who need--"

"You are *insolente*. Perhaps you do not understand. I am not your *confidente*...*si*, you are insulting."

"I imagine so. It's the reason I'm standing here trembling in my shoes."

As she spoke the General had risen from his outsized mahogany desk and strode past her down the long room and back toward her, past drooping flags and baroque-framed portraits of dark pompous saturnine figures. Some of the faces had jaded unseeing eyes, while others had fiery eyes, satanic like the General's. He was formidable, impeccable in his pressed uniform festooned with thick gold epaulettes, clustered brass, striped bars and ribbons.

I've exposed my intent without subtlety and he thinks me quite naïve, she thought. It was a dangerous tack. He was ready to throw her out, completely indifferent to a putative segment of sympathetic people of the United States, but with her self-humbling finish he turned quickly away from her. She watched him roughly draw the heavy wine velvet drapes from the embrasured high windows and look out. Dust motes from the disturbed drapes whirled through the stale air. Beyond his head and outside near the glass a dazzling spray of virginal white oleander gently swayed. The fearless Guatemalan sun leapt across the room, cutting through the oppressive officialdom like a flashing gold knife through silted water. It ignited a plump terra cotta grave figurine resting in a shadowed glass case. The little cherub's

sly jaguar smile mocked the General, whose shoulders were shaking, a slight movement almost imperceptible. He turned to Mahta, unwilling to stifle his laughter any longer.

"Ay, you tremble in your shoes, *Señorita* Lind. Ah, ha, ha! I tremble in my boots when Doctor Ghilde presents you to me. Before the fiesta I give for him I do not ever see my friend with any woman. Then I see...I see in the same *instante* of your first appearance he has the bite of the pesky little bug. The little bite that drives us mad, eh? I try to know what we are to share of you. I see a fresh new flower and perhaps I am a jealous man. I hope for your presence *frecuente*, for I think you must be important to the Doctor and therefore interesting...but I can never think of this *circunstancia*. I do not approve the woman getting into man's business. I am the gentleman, but when the rules are no more..." The General had turned serious harsh and authoritative, but as quickly his censure trailed off and he resumed his laughter. "Ah, ha, ha! Now you say you tremble, *señorita*?...to use and betray my office? You demand that I must give to you the cake and watch you eat? Is that not how you say it?"

VI

It was one of those still rusty pink mornings when setting off early in a Jeep might precipitate a great adventure, were it not for the grim prospects of the traveler. The Jeep was U.S. Army, repainted. The lean and sullen driver and his lean and sullen sidekick were two cadets the grudging General had quite unexpectedly provided. They were courteous and attentive when needed, snapping to in their neat olive green fatigues, but neither smiled and their youthful faces were impenetrable, devoid of emotion. Mahta knew their visor-shaded eyes held a surly contempt beneath the indifferent glint she was on occasion allowed.

The Jeep carried extra gasoline in tins, and canteens of drinking water. The cadets kept their rifles within reach and had pistols on their belts. What could they be expecting? The thought crossed her mind that she was a kind of prisoner. Yes, it was a certainty, being guided where others intended her to go, but it would not interfere with her plans once she got the true scent of her objective. Experience had taught her how to divert the contrary motives of others to her own purposes. It was a subtle game, dangerous but sometimes highly rewarding, and often the only path left to one in a hostile place. Hostile places were...they could pretend to be almost friendly. Effusive friendliness was a dead giveaway. Wherever humankind paid attention to more than immediate sustenance, a traveler could stumble upon a hostile place. But Mahta hardly had to stumble. Her position invited open hostility because it was bound to a contravening but clearly righteous purpose.

After they left the city the driver, whom Mahta was to address simply as Carlos, drove with a proud finesse, passing everything going in the same direction with one casual hand on the wheel, and scooting in between trucks and cars, often three abreast, in places where there seemed barely room for two. Each time they were successful in executing one of these tense maneuvers, Mahta wanted to call out *Bravo!* but concluded that such extravagant praise would encourage even more outrageous feats and hasten their end. At least they were driving on one of Guatemala's *caminos pavimentados*, but the paved road was often narrow, winding, and cause for grizzly excitement with its precipitous climbs and dips. For mile after mile death's macabre harvest yielded a plethora of white crosses by the roadside.

They were headed for Ixtapa, about 100 kilometers south on the Pacific coast. The area would be warm and sticky, inviting the body to do nothing in haste -- also lush, insect-ridden and enervating in the extreme. She could not make out exactly what Jim North had been doing there, but it was apparently the last place he had been seen.

The light tan cotton fatigues Mahta wore were good for profuse sweating and the ample grime of this kind of travel. On her feet were sturdy *caites*, functional Mayan sandals worn little changed over the millennia. She wore sunglasses and had bought an inexpensive straw hat as she often did in tropical zones, giving them away before boarding her homeward flights. She carried her camera and film in an insulated bag which also held her notebook, photograph of Jim North, and a cassette recorder and tapes. The rest of her things were in a small shoulder satchel: a rolled cotton shirt and skirt, underwear, toiletries, a compact little first aid kit, insect repellent, driver's license, passport, travelers checks, a couple of credit cards and a little ready cash, half in quetzales, half in U.S. dollars which were familiar and readily accepted.

These hand-picked cadets apparently thought North Americans incapable of going even moderate distances without eating. Before they cleared the city environs, the cadet not driving, and whom she was to call Miguel, had told her they would lunch in Escuintla, 50 kilometers distance.

After about 45 minutes they came to Lake Amatitlán. Mahta recounted to herself a short visit there with Brehnt. It was a busy little vacation get-away for city dwellers, run-down and not as much to her liking as Lake Atitlán 65 miles west of the city, but because she had been there with Brehnt it was still a place of importance to her, provoking an unanswerable and haunting arousal. It was one of the first places they visited after she had continued through Guatemala alone with him. She was to let Brehnt show her in his own spirited yet unpressing way what it meant to him and could mean to her. What it meant was not all pleasing. Squalid poverty, hunger and virulent filth prevailed.

Unhealthy children with outstretched hands emerged from every narrow passageway and hovel. But at first, in their consuming joy in one another, he kept the depth of his concern to himself and looked for beauty to share with her.

With the impelling celerity of cherished memory she was back standing beside him arm in arm, watching the vapors rise from the warm water of the lake. At certain moments the mysterious air of its tarnished natural beauty was still in evidence, enhanced by the steamy medicinal sulfur springs along Amatitlán's banks, fed by Pacaya Volcano. The volcano had erupted in 1964, and made the lake boil with its subterranean wrath.

"You grew up with a fire chain of volcanoes in your active Northwest, so maybe this isn't as exciting to you as it is to an Easterner like myself," Brehnt said.

"It's a wonderful display...pure nature...raw nature...new and exotic to me. As for mountains...dormant or...or inflamed, they always send me flying up to their peaks...and I naturally love every one of them I come across."

"You naturally love. You love naturally." He tossed a stone into the still lake and made it ripple, and when his gray eyes turned back to her they made her heart ripple like that, spreading warmth through her body. "We naturally love. We get information from each other almost calmly, and yet we two are unpredictable as...we're like those." He waved his hand at the vapor-cloaked peaks. "Close together we're in our active phase; apart there's a subterranean heat, but we haven't said love. My God, with all of it there's been we haven't exactly said that."

"Because we realize...because it's like blowing out the candles on the cake...or turning on the lights after the theater or...I don't know. I don't know."

"Don't know if you do?"

"Oh no, not that. It's... I'm...superstitious?"

"You?"

"Love...the word is bursting at its seams. It means everything...anything," she explained.

"But here it is...with a definite context."

"I think because I write I've always been afraid of overstating and ruining the reception of truth."

"Maybe that's it for both of us...something like that. Saying it somehow brings it to an end. But that's foolish. We won't let that nonsense stop us, will we? I love her...this one here!" he shouted across the water.

The steam rose up, indistinguishable from the clouds over the lake. Drifting out of this opacity there emerged the dark-melded forms of a hunched little figure and a tiny boat, as though wafted forth on a surge of white mist. "Look there, Charon is after us," Brehnt teased. His hand touched her shoulder. But it was Carlos rounding a curve, her shoulder thrown against the Jeep's side. Miguel was staring back at her.

She thought she must have cried out, her face unmasked by the daydream from which she was hurled. She knew the cadet mistook the emotion for fright, thought she was afraid. She was hardly there at all, was still with Brehnt. Yes, she had finally said it, had needed very badly to say it, and then had to be careful not to overdo it, but that consuming memory was out of place. She longed for a consistent toughness, unable to expel the rawness and tenderness which fed her recurring memories.

They were now in *tierra caliente*, the hot country. The skin above her lips was beaded with sweat and she tasted salt. They were sliding down the coastal plain through semi-deciduous tropical forests over fertile soil composed of volcanic ash and rich alluvium: highland streams rolling seaward, savanna, mostly spreading cattle ranches and large banana plantations.

In Escuintla they had wiped their brows under the slowly turning fans of a restaurant that was nothing but a square room filled with dark heavy chairs and long rough tables. But the food was delicious, unusual: rice with chicken and *semillas* from the *Marañon* tree. These beautiful dark trees with their russet-yellow fruit tips produced the rich gold cashew nuts that formed in crescent-shaped husks. Shadowy green images of the tree bloomed in her head as her eyelids drooped. The lunch had been too heavy, still sat heavily in her stomach. It made her quite sluggish, drowsy, and she struggled to stay awake behind the aloof green cadets. Their bodies were so near and yet she felt light years apart, without any common ground. How did members of the same species get so far apart? Her head dipped.

A rough spot in the road awoke her with a jolt as they were coming into an area of blowing palms. The strong monsoons came in May, and this was only a mild end-of-season wind that rustled through the sugar cane and flapped the banana leaves with a fetid steamy breeze. They drove on in silence, through the banana plantations, and then through dense groves of thin arching palms. Some of the trees were bent nearly to the ground by earlier monsoons which imperiled the banana crops with rampaging blowdowns.

They had turned off the main highway to San Jose and were heading southeast on a dirt road to Ixtapa. Drying mud holes scoured out in the rainy season made the ride over scrub flatlands rough, uncomfortable. Dipping and sliding by the bucking Jeep was a thatch-roofed shed half blown away, and then the rusty wheelless frame of an ancient truck. Here in this forgotten spot was the fringe of someone's ranch, sliced through by the barest imitation of a road. Going straight to San Jose and cutting east along the coast to Ixtapa would have been faster although longer.

Wariness was always a healthy component of such irregular journeys. This time she tried to keep paranoia from creeping in. An interior voice warned her that her drivers were doing this on

purpose. Punishment for being a ferreting nuisance, or possibly a wild goose chase to keep her occupied. She shunted these notions aside and stared into the flat emptiness of heat. But the soporific warmth weighed upon her heavy eyelids and again her head slumped.

Brehnt was sitting with her on a slab of stone inside a Mayan tomb. She didn't know where. Stifling heat...hard to breathe. The incised gray walls felt cool and clammy to her touch. She ran her fingers over precise numerical incisions smoothed by time, her tingling skin coming into the realm of ancient artisans. Sweat stung her eyes. Brehnt leaned down and wiped her forehead with his handkerchief. His unique brand of enthusiasm was more restrained, more refined than hers. He had long ago come to terms with the consuming awe which now held her in its thrall. He grinned, and she felt an ache in her throat. His face would never age: perfect teeth, taut jaw, smooth lips. He wasn't sweating at all. "I'll never be able to give you up. I can't find anything wrong with you," she half teased. "Poor Angelica, there's something very wrong with me...the worst thing of all." He was smiling but she saw pain in his eyes. His face wavered, floated a little. "What's happened to you? What's wrong? You're white as a ghost...your eyes are fading." He stood up and backed away from her. "Leave this place, Angelica. It's a tomb." He said no more, and then she couldn't see him, only his eyes like distant stars fading in dawn light. A high voice that was hers called for him with a wrenching fear, but she was the one going away. Her father put his arms around her. "You had to go because of what you said. He saw that you knew, and then you couldn't stay." She was sick. "Oh, dad, dad, what did I do? What did I not do?" Now she was back in the empty tomb. It swayed and rolled. An earthquake? No, not a tomb, her houseboat in a wake...a wake, a wake! "You told him what you thought, that's all. He knew he had to let you go, and I'm going too," her father said. "Come on, honey, all of this is going to be destroyed." She was alone and small. The water rose up, thick and green, higher and higher until it rolled down upon her. She gasped, jerking her body and crying out with dread. "No. No. No!"

The two cadets were standing beside the Jeep smoking. They had parked under a scrubby shade tree beside a hacienda which looked deserted. They had simply left her there in her fitful sleep. It meant nothing to them whether or not she ever got anywhere. Why should this be surprising? She felt an angry frustration, was sweating, dry-throated, and needed to pee. A nightmare in the middle of the day. Whenever her defenses were down, almost whenever she slept, it all rushed in upon her, engulfing her in the heavy green waves and pulling her down in an undertow of wonder and dread. She shook her head with a forced jauntiness and grudging smile. Stepping out of the jeep she

stretched and looked around, then started a slow walk toward the hacienda.

A bandy-legged woman with a face of deep wrinkles came out to meet her, cautious. A weary body swaying on bowed legs. Improper diet, Mahta noted, and returned the woman's toothless smile. When she came out of the fly-blown john, the woman was sitting by the door of the hacienda with her hands folded over her dirty red skirt, waiting. Waiting for what? A lost child? A husband? Nightfall? Death? Christ? Her hands were folded, her head held to one side, her very dark soulful eyes focused down into the center of the earth. It was a pose often repeated by women at doorways and hearths and roadsides all across the land. She remembered the old women shielded in black, huddling against the sacrosanct stones outside the churches of Spain. They waited in the winter sun with white shrunken faces. Their open eyes saw only visions, their bodies given up, closed to all external stimuli, as if piety and revulsion of the incarnate world had turned them to the inviolate stones they hugged.

Mahta lifted the picture of Jim North from her bag and asked the woman if she knew him, had ever seen him. She pressed into the woman's crooked dirty fingers a few worn quetzales. The woman's eyes narrowed as she bent close and stared at the picture. Her vacant eyes turned to Mahta who wondered if she could see very well. "No, *señorita*."

The two cadets came and stood beside Mahta, glancing at the photograph. They fidgeted with their hats, trying to cool off their prickling scalps, then walked to the Jeep. Carlos got behind the wheel, adjusting his sunglasses while Miguel stood waiting for her to take up her place behind them. She waved to the woman, calling out thanks, and the woman lifted her hand with a lackluster smile, curling her gnarled fingers in toward her own body as she waved back. Her glittering black eyes seemed for a moment to be responding to an amusing joke they shared, then her expression flattened to indifference.

After a long humid drive through kilometers of unremarkable ranch country and lush emerald green banana plantations, they had come to the marshy coast with its unrevealing mangrove islands and rough black sands. They were staying in a place called Casa del Lujo, but unlike its name there was nothing very luxurious about it. It was reasonably clean and peaceful, luxury enough for an exhausted traveler.

Mahta had never been to Ixtapa. By the time she bathed and ate roasted plantains and rice with shrimp, it was too late to see anything. She knew only that Ixtapa's most recent claim of historical importance was as the site of Guatemala's first boat building and repair operation begun in 1967. She carried in her notebook the name and phone number of a man who was supposed to have seen or been in contact with Jim North. His name was Palo Nervo. When she tried to call him the phone clicked, buzzed, and

repeatedly went dead -- the notorious malfunctioning Guatemalan telephone lines. She asked one of the cadets to try and find him. Miguel acted surprised and spoke with Carlos in the doorway of their room across the hall. They looked at her and shook their heads. They wouldn't know, they said, how to find this man. They were eager to have their evening beer and cigarettes. It was clear to Mahta that they didn't want her to upset their anticipated pleasures or cause them reason for suspicion or concern. Her hands were tight fists.

Humidity further shortened her patience. She walked up and down outside, fanning herself with her notebook. A slow-moving breeze coiled around her, expiring a malodorous saltiness. The street was quiet. A slow rusty-green taxi cruised by. She had intended to sit on a bench under a tortured palm and write. But what? The uneventfulness of the moments ticking by? Still, there was a purposefulness in writing; it connected the ellipses in time with reality, making the empty spaces appear to contain useful actions. The street light provided only a very dim illumination, not good enough for writing. The motionless air was thickening with night scents. A lone barking dog set off a chorus of answering barks. On the corner a man in uniform was leaning in the window of a derelict car. "Ah, the *policía*," she whispered. She copied Nervo's name and number onto an empty sheet in her notebook and tore it out. Rummaging in her shoulder bag she withdrew her wallet and extracted a few *quetzáles*. With this commonly accepted inducement crumpled inside her fist, she approached the officer. Greeting him, excusing herself, holding forth the paper, she smiled and explained her plight. If he could do her the great honor of finding this man, the news could be delivered to her at the Casa del Lujo. Pointing over her shoulder with the notebook she simultaneously held out her fist of *quetzáles*. The officer studied her with the dark eyes that could so easily reveal nothing, the pupil blending into the iris so that the eye becomes a black camouflage of any possible sentiment or understanding. He took the paper without reading it, then the money. Nodding, he went back to leaning inside the car.

"You're very welcome," Mahta mumbled to herself as she retreated into the proclaimed luxury of her bare-floored room.

For a while she lay pondering the odds of unearthing Nervo. The strident cicadas were awakening and promised a deafening nightlong chorus. On the night table stood the warmish beer she had ordered brought over earlier. She downed most of it as fast as possible, almost gagging at a tepid bitterness which left an unpleasant aftertaste of sweetness. Her head rolled back on the hard pillow and she squinted at a dark spot on the ceiling then closed her eyes, too inert to investigate. Whatever it was, a stain or an insect, she didn't want to know. Sleep refused to arrive. Squiggles of colors formed and dissolved under her

closed lids, and her eyes flew open. She tried self-hypnosis, fixing her eyes on the gold ring on her finger. Her hand was resting on the pillow so close to her eyes that the ring was out of focus. Brehnt had given it to her. Never off her finger it was almost too tight now to remove, an Olmec jaguar face, a smiling baby face. The puckish little face glared back at her transfixed gaze. It seemed to have a laugh, a faint little titter of sound emanating from its thick curled lips. An answering smile formed on her lips as her heavy lids closed down.

Brehnt smiled at her with so comely and amused a look she was too weak with emotion to lift her arms. "Brehnt! I can't believe you're here. And yet I knew you'd come. I *knew* it. Ever since you left I've been wanting to ask you something but I can't remember what it was. I know it was important...really important. I feel like crying. They said you were flying supplies to a starving village. What were you doing? Had you really given up your work? Please tell me it wasn't my fault. Somehow it was...it was. But there's something else, something so large and complicated. Maybe you couldn't even answer if I remembered.

"Oh, you look so confident, capable, relaxed...making coffee in this neglected kitchen. You're right, it's really poorly implemented. I don't cook very often. I'd rather watch you here -- Levi's, bare feet...tousled hair combed with fingers, but you, never inapt. Your skin has darkened in the Mayan sun...sacred circle of fire...and you...its dark mystery. Can you tell me what you're thinking? What are you going to do? I don't know where your reasoning leads you. You said you wanted to use yourself up. You said, *Why should I pursue only the ruling grandeur of a race when its remnants are dying?* Did you say that because I grieved so over their misery? Yes? Yes? Your cheek is twitching...no smile. Don't leave me yet. Talk to me. Don't go. Why go now? Please. I'm trying. It will take me so long to find you out. I have to. I've waited and waited. Brehnt!"

Moonlight filtered through gauze. Coughing herself awake she reached overhead and lifted the curtain hem. A diminished moon of phosphor was fastened in the screen. Her perspiring body had dampened the sheets, most uncomfortable. She rolled onto her side, biting her fingers. In a while she got up and fumbled through her bag for her aspirin, swallowing them with the stale beer. Horrid bitterness. She gagged, choked and swallowed, a retching sickness rising in her throat. Head hanging, disheveled hair spilling over her knees, she sat on the edge of the bed. Her moist eyes dripped onto her hands. *No more dreams, no more, please...no more dreams.* When the nausea passed she lay back with a faint burning in her stomach, gradually mitigated by rescuing sleep.

At 6:15, a maid brought her a note instructing her to bring her possessions and take a taxi to the only blue house on *Calle*

Barca. She ate a slice of banana bread and drank a cup of very good black coffee. Back in her khaki slacks and shirt she slung her bags over her shoulder and went out into the morning sun. The salty air was rife with thick scents, the exotic perfumes of unknown flowers. A wild chorus of birds greeted her as they flitted in and out of the ruffling palms. The taxi came at an unhurried pace, the same rusty car she had seen passing the night before. As she got in she eyed the parked Jeep and smiled. The two cadets were probably sleeping off their night of beer, secure in their assumption that a lone foreign woman would not dare to go off without them. They were quite young.

#

Palo Nervo spoke fair English and was a small quiet man with grayed receding hair and steel-rimmed glasses. Although he was not a priest, he reminded Mahta of certain liberal men of the cloth: polite, determined, serious, and, although weary and persecuted, asserting themselves as a part of something large and undefeatable. He gave no impression of involvement in anything clandestine or dangerous. This observation brought only a mild comfort, for Mahta's first sense was of a man who stood for the truth in a place where it must always remain undisclosed.

Behind a wrought iron gate and the brick-red wooden door of the blue house, Mahta and Palo Nervo sat in a peaceful courtyard. It was just large enough for a pungent eucalyptus tree, a family of geckos, a stone bench, and a spreading but failing rose bush with a few pale pink blooms.

"How did you come to know Jim North, *Señor Nervo*?"

"*Señorita Lind*, it is better that you know little of me. If you go, I send with you two trusted *hombres*. I cannot say where you go. It is better. It is not an easy journey. *Tal vez no se puede*...excuse me. You will perhaps not get Jaime Norte this time, *pero* if you make photographs and write *es posible* he has freedom."

"At least he's alive then?"

"*Si. Que sepamos nosotros, es verdad.*"

"Only as far as you know?"

"*Si. Señorita, no es fácil. Es peligroso.* Dangerous perhaps for you. You must decide."

"What?"

"If you go."

"Yes, I'll go."

"So quick. *Es necesario tener cuidada.*"

"I know. I try to be careful always. But I've come to find Jim North. I never thought it would be easy. Why do you want me to find him, *Señor Nervo*?"

She saw that her question surprised Nervo. It was not expected that in her intense pursuit of an endangered subject she would stop to question her abettor's motives. For him, her query

must be superfluous if not inappropriate. She found that nothing more specific would be disclosed.

"You want to find him, no, *Señorita Lind*? What is your reason?"

She laughed. "I'm certainly not here for profit or fame. I guess it goes this way: Jim North's life and work are immensely valuable. What has happened is wrong. His family is grieving. I want to do something to help. One has to start somewhere. In this business one starts many times, but the trouble is it's never finished."

"*Es verdad*. My purpose is as yours and I, too, never finish."

Nothing more of motive was offered, and the answer hung in its limbo, identifiable only by its association with the common expectation that all humans should have a right to escape the bounds of hunger, poverty, and oppression. She couldn't argue with this, although she would like to have known what more expedient result her presence invited.

#

Soon in the thick chase of a startling new reality, plodding along in darkness, she reasoned that she should have left a note so as not to get her two surly cadets in trouble. But all she could have said was the obvious -- I've gone for Jim North -- although that at least would have indicated that she had gone under her own volition. Why should the General care how she'd gone? He cared only where, if at all. As nearly as she could determine she had no one to fear but him. Still, one must pretend in order to leave doors open. Ah well, if she met with success she'd work it out with him on the way home. *I had to go quickly so as not to miss the opportunity*. Go where and with whom? She would not be able to say. Moreover, she was angry at being patronized and clearly detained in the dilatory guise of assistance. There would be no explanation unless demanded, and then it would be in the form of misinformation. She had identified the enemy. She could therefore lie with ease.

The car ride had been short. It was not the beginning. That came astride an unpredictable mule in the middle of the night. Even this was not a surprising start for her. As she jogged along she thought of why it was not surprising: because she was in what she called her *mode*, her mode of preadjustment. *Whatever comes next is just what I was expecting*. A technique of preparedness which allowed her to slip into the event developing just ahead as if she had planned it herself. *Be loose, flexible, sharp; notice everything, especially the mistakes of others*.

When she asked where they were going she got only, "A *l'este*." But how far east? "*Kilómetros*?" she asked. Her two guides shrugged their shoulders.

Two male companions again. As close-mouthed as the others

but a little friendlier, easier in manner. Far from green cadets with buried identities, they were nevertheless taciturn Indians who only smiled a little when she spoke to them with a gently encouraging grin. They wore dark clothing. Nervo had sent along a black felt poncho to throw over her far too visible white shirt. This time she was not told the name of either man, so she gave them names of her own. The thin shorter man with small deep-set black eyes and crooked teeth she called *El Pájaro*, because he moved in quick nervous motions like a bird. The other man was built like a bale of hay, squarish and stocky and verifiably powerful. The mule tilted its ears back and then forward with respect when this man tossed her heavy high-cantled saddle onto its back. The saddle rose through the air seeming light as a feather within the grasp of his thick stubby fingers. Very soon this burly figure became *El Cuerpo*, the body, because he entered into her vision and thought like an invincible bulwark of solid flesh.

The moon was lost behind a ridge as they dropped into a shadowed ravine. There were loose stones and it was rough going even for these sure-footed animals. For a while she had to lean back in the saddle, and soon the small of her back began to ache. Each jolt came to rest at the base of her spine. A weak back not meant for such abuse. At every hint of stress it sent forth complaints, had done so for years -- perhaps first exacerbated by Kenneth's reckless driving -- acting up even if she sat too long at dinner or slept lying flat and supine. Curling forward as much as possible and resting one hand on the pommel of her saddle, she attempted to rub her back, cursing her flimsy spine.

The monotony of darkness and the pain of jolting became the music and lyrics of a numbing lullaby. Her awkward head dipped forward and she threw it back with force, opening her eyes wide upon a nightscape of canyon without moon. The moon was buried behind a close-ascending horizon. The jet sky was a narrow avenue overhead, dusted with white pinpoints of starlight.

Must stay awake, she told herself as awareness ebbed and flowed. Must stay awake. The difficult transition from day to night. Know the dark hours, all the way from this oblivion to there...wherever. No sleeping on the job...might have to do something fast. Ah, my complaining back, reminder of a mistake. My concentration is failing. Why does my deceptive brain swear my eyelids are heavier than they were this morning?

In her losing battle with consciousness submerged memories floated to the surface, startling her into short periods of wakefulness. *I'm back in this old dreamland of ours, and I want to think of you. How can I do those memories justice in this hallucinatory half asleep half wakeful state? What truth is born of sleepless darkness?*

The bed was too soft in that dry place near Uxmal. Under our weight it folded in the middle like a lawn chair. I woke up

on my stomach but my back felt as if it were bent the wrong way, sharp as a jackknife. Pain. I didn't want you to know but you had your leg over mine. When I'm alone and I wake up like that and the pain comes, I hook one foot over the edge of the bed and pull myself over. Then I ease my knees up to my chest until I can unbend and stand up. I thought I'd attempt this very slowly and try to rise without waking you. The immediate pain was so stunning I was temporarily immobilized, and to cap it you awoke and thought I was playing a quiet game of escape. You pounced on me and I gave a rousing scream. There followed streams of tears. I couldn't help any of it, although I regretted the scream. The innkeeper, the other guests must have thought you were beating me. The *look* on your face.

"Angelica? My God! What? What did I do?"

"My back," I muttered into the pillow. "Roll me over...slow please, slower...very slow...oh, the small of my back. It's the damn bed not you. Oooh, God."

You knew just what to do, as if you'd been doing it all of your life...all of *my* life. You put your hand under my stomach and lifted, rubbing the small of my back with your clever, clever fingers. The tenseness slackened with shivers of pleasure that I can feel even now. I was rolled into a rejuvenating fetal clump, vertebrae popping in succession like happy castanets. Then, face down, I received the quintessential back rub, every disc on my spine massaged into peaceful repose, the muscles in my neck and shoulders soothed into buttery ecstasy.

"Oh God, that feels so good...so good," I moaned, and then remembered myself and whispered, "Our neighbors must be curious by now."

"If you were trying to sleep beyond these pretended walls what would you think?" you asked me.

I was so content, for the moment cured and brazen. "You have love in the palms of your hands," I sang out.

"Yes, I have *you* in the palms of my hands. Say it in Spanish, if you want them to hear."

"*Tienes amor en las palmas de tus manos!*" I shouted.

How we laughed as the publicized treatment went on its wonderful palpating way. Soon I found myself transported by another remedy, all the pillows under my spine...no pain then unbearable, only the excruciating spell of Eros, hands locked above our heads, our bodies glistening with sweat. Finally we did try to hide our cries...authentic cries.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No...yes...love hurts. Oh, God!" I cried. "I'll die of this." *But you were the one.*

In the afternoon we slept; that perfect Spanish submission to the sun's dominion: siesta...the shaded room, the white heat outside...languor. I woke up and spoke to you. Did your eyelids move at all? Did any part of you move or your breathing change?

I waited. Only the dry little song of a buzzing fly. When you flung your arm over your head I whispered again, so in need of your consciousness, "Brehnt, why are you an archeologist?" I really wanted to know.

Your voice was thick with sleep: "*Christ*, how can you do that...wake up with...with fully formed sentences like that?" I felt inconsiderate, but you were well-mannered, even amused, and then curious...very curious. "Sometimes you...you open your eyes from REM sleep and pose questions that...as if you were deep in the middle of research. How on earth do you do that, Angelica?"

"Flashover brain," I answered. "It works that way. My dreams flow into wakefulness and back into sleep -- like the guiding dreams of early Native Americans, seamless, back and forth. Everything flows along... I was dreaming of you. I want to know things. Why are you an archeologist?"

Your mouth against my temple you answered with the slow grainy voice of sleep, "My parents were both serious scholars. University professors who would -- ah, I'm still asleep -- who used any spare time...a...traveling to augment their research. When I was a boy of...I don't know, I think ten years, my parents took me to see the Pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty at Giza: Mycerinus...Chefren...and the Great Pyramid Cheops looming, ah, yes...looming above the Sahara."

You sighed and lay on your back, awake and staring into space at the past. Your eyes were now a boy's, filled with colossal monuments.

"You discovered the Sphinx," I said, kissing the palm of your hand, kissing your chest...kissing wherever I might.

"Oh certainly the misunderstood Sphinx...of which there is even less now -- if you keep doing that, my ubiquitous love, I'll need to have you again. The Sphinx...the Sphinx, part lion, part god. Will it crumble to dust in the coming century, and we along with it? Will we vanish like the Maya from their starlit cities, or will we live to save the Sphinx...and if we do will we save it with intelligence or madness?"

"I vote madness," I replied to your rhetorical musing as I left the room.

"Where are you going, Mathilda?"

"Just to pee."

After a while you called, "Come back here so I can get my hands on your damp little body, Angelica...now you've got me aware of you and the heat...all this heat."

The dun bathroom tiles felt cooler beneath my bare feet. I peered around the door, watching you lying there with your arms behind your head. I loved to watch you waiting for me, loved the idea of possession to that degree. But you wanted to talk and I came back to your drowsy voice.

"Among the things my young eyes feasted upon was the -- pardon...this...yawning -- was the gold cover of Tutankhamen's

coffin at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo -- dazzling -- and a photograph of his mummified body...his *fragile* body!...the mysterious reality of him after millennia...mortal god forever eighteen, his taut blackened skin desiccating in the Valley of the Kings. Altogether those experiences altered my life. I realized that human existence had gone on quite some time before my overindulged arrival...and in a very impressive manner...one I needed to investigate."

"Then you began to read voluminously and make notes."

"Yes." A kiss for my hot flesh.

"And as you grew you visited other museums."

"Yes." Another kiss, so engaged as to be mindless of sweat.

"And in between your studies you went on digs."

"Exactly. Have I told you this?"

"No, but that's how it works, doesn't it? Unlike the Sphinx, no great mystery."

"The great mystery, Angelica, is you."

You were grinning, chuckling over some jag of memory, its seductive invitation to relive a specific pleasure.

"I hadn't thought of that childhood episode in a while. When I said investigate I meant it. I began immediately. I wandered out of the hotel in Cairo and got lost trying to find my way back to the museum. My parents were beside themselves. What an outrageous nerve I had. Inexperience is also a great teacher. I had no idea that anything could happen to me, that I could be sold to a flesh peddler and vanish into darkest Africa."

"What happened?"

"I was never found."

"Oh, you...you!" My punishing hands then swiftly caught and restrained, I said, "Well, tell me what you did."

"I had a few nice hours wandering down very narrow alleys in and out of dim shops...looking at trinkets, drinking cardamom tea. Finally I was hungry but hadn't enough money. I thought it would be a great plan to take a horse-drawn cart back to the hotel...and so I did."

"You must have been a brave little boy."

"More foolish than brave. My doting parents had made me quite self-assured. I was exuberant...obnoxious if my high spirits were dampened...always curious. That damned unquenchable curiosity got me into a lot of trouble...but finally it saved me from interminable boredom.

"And how was your childhood?" you asked. "What possessed you?"

"I discovered death too soon." My spontaneous answer surprised me but then I went on. "I wasn't even over the shock of existing. I guess I never will be." My caustic humor was so far off the mark, but you understood at once, lifting me up against your heart. I saw how serious I'd made you. I knew we were both thinking of the shortness of life. How could we

accomplish such overreaching dreams in fleeting human time? I barely heard your soft curse...like a sigh.

"I think I'll have to shed this tender skin," I said.

"Never never do that, Angelica."

"I'll have to. I'll be hard-skinned...an impervious snake in the grass...callous and dangerous." My voice held such foolish pretense. Necessary or my nemesis or both, I knew I would never be able to shed it, this thin skin still with me. The hurt was no longer in my back and you knew it. You always knew. Then your eyes became my palliative, my opiate, that soft hypnotic gray -- but with warming glints, like the pearly shimmer the annealing winter sun makes on the Sound of my north country. Eyes full of the moment, holding a silver promise, hiding all that painful knowing, all that certainty of the finite.

#

Sharp rattles. In the darkness not an imaginary snake but a real lethally coiled one demanded his right of way. The mule's ears flattened, his back arched then his hind legs shot out toward the warning rattles. Swiftly pitched off, Mahta rolled a little way down a shallow draw and came to a stop snagged against a crackling dry bush.

"Señorita! Señorita!" the men cried out in harsh whispers. They dismounted and moved down to her over the softly clattering stones.

"Viva yo," Mahta called out with a light but shaken voice. *Applause for coincidence.* Her spontaneous good humor won her a measure of respect as they hurried to lift her out of the bush's sharp embrace.

Well, at least I'm thoroughly awake, and I no longer feel the pain of my back as my foremost misery. Now it's my battered shoulder. Glad I didn't have the camera hanging from it. Shit! It hurts. Wonder how my stuff is. Guess it's still on the damned mule. Can't blame it though. Wouldn't want Eden's gatekeeper curling around my ankles. Poor snake didn't care for my analogy, but what an effective reputation. Probably lots more of them rattling around out here. Companions of the night, hunting, and that without very much dissimulation. If the incline had been any steeper I'd have been dinner cut to size. Nothing going to eat me alive and whole, just strike or sting me to death for intruding.

"I thought these damn mules were snake broke," Mahta muttered through the pain of her shoulder. Her droll slang was just for herself and comforting. The desire to laugh asserted itself, supplanting enervating anger. Actually she had developed a fondness for her irascible mule and thought it's incredible back kick a remarkable defense. Her aching body approached the captured mule with caution, a greater measure of respect. The testy creature stood with no hint of apology in its brooding eye

while she remounted.

Rubbing her hurting shoulder she jogged along talking to her still unsettled animal. Daybreak would be the most welcome event of these last hours, excluding her illusory thoughts. A rest. She would lie down as though dead and let everything crawl over her, as long as it kept going.

They didn't make a fire but ate cold tortillas with dried meat, and drank from their metal canteens. The food took a lot of chewing and washing down with small sips of water. She was consoled a little by assuring herself that it was probably better than junk food. Ah, but she would have given her sandals for a hamburger.

They were camped in a dusty dry wadi near a grove of scrub growth struggling to produce the merest of silvery leaves. *El Pájaro* squatted on the stony earth. His elbows jutted out and his sweat-darkened hat was tipped back off his forehead. He was rolling himself and *El Cuerpo* cigarettes. His lean and cracked fingers were stained, the ragged nail tips black with the dirt beneath, but the confident hands moved at their simple task with a graceful dexterity Mahta found reassuring. Pájaro licked the cigarette paper with one swipe of his tongue, slid his bent thumb over the roll and handed it to *Cuerpo*. When he was puffing on his own smoke he looked up and found Mahta watching him. He lifted his pouch of tobacco from his pocket with a polite and questioning look. Mahta responded with, "No, *gracias*."

Searching for privacy she picked her way down the wadi and came back in a little while to find the mules tethered and the men sleeping under camouflaging bushes. At the rattle of the pebbles under her feet *Cuerpo* lifted his head. He watched her for a moment, his eyes noting and appraising the location in which she had chosen to bed down. Perhaps the men took turns sleeping, or slept with one ear open like animals used to being stalked. Mahta rolled up in her poncho -- not for warmth but for protection from whatever crept by -- and lay down, using her small duffel as a pillow.

Oh, bloody hell, she thought, I desperately wanted to sleep, was so sure I'd pass out instantly, waited with such eagerness to get off my mule. Now I can't turn off. *Take deep breaths. Relax. Start with the top of your head and work down to your toes. Oh God, this is the sort of thing you do on a nice firm mattress with reasonable give in it. Know where you are? Not exactly. Don't start a long interior monologue about what you're doing here. Aching shoulder. Something cutting into my side. Now my leg. Glad I have a little more padding than I used to have, although it seems to be melting away. Don't start rolling back and forth looking for a softer place; you'll turn black and blue. Can't sleep with all this light, buzzing insects. Birds. That funny long cry with a loop at the end. Very soon it will be hot. I can already hear twigs snapping. Pull that dark green*

scarf out of your duffel. That's it. Wrap it in a band and tie it over your eyes. Sleep, sleep, before the heat swallows you up and spits you out into the night. Then you'll sleep, fall off that jackass and turn into rotting meat.

During resting times before sleep Mahta would attempt to describe her journey, talking into her tape recorder, reminding herself that she was working, but the sessions meant much more, overriding moments of uncertainty. Mostly she talked to herself in silence as they traveled. *Three days out or four? My sense of time is melting away. I'm certainly not Wonder Woman, not an Amazon, not invincible, but my rump will be as tough as rawhide when and if I finish this trip.* She also played some of her tapes back to herself as she jogged along. Catching an exchange of glances, she wondered what her two *hombres* thought of this practice. *Why don't you ask them? Why don't you ask them what they think, period?* Her Spanish wasn't sophisticated enough for philosophical interrogations, she quickly reminded herself, but perhaps -- fortunately for them -- neither was theirs; all she could do was observe and speculate.

According to the stars, which Pájaro pointed out with Mayan cleverness, they were zigzagging their way east at a methodical pace, up stony hills and down into brush-filled valleys. The landscape varied from a lush green mantel on some of the mountain slopes to a dry tawny monotony in the valley plains. They could ride into a lonely rancho at dawn and get fed, even if the food was only a few tortillas. All that was required were a few words of greeting, achieved by a subtle magic in the words of Pájaro and Cuerpo. It was a message of fraternity conveyed with a special inflection which produced an immediate understanding, one that she could probably never have elicited by herself. Along with thin tortillas there might be black beans or squash or chiles, sometimes a large avocado, guava pulp or *atole* gruel made of maize meal.

High in the hills outside a dirt-floored stone hut, they warmed themselves over an open fire of pine boughs. Her hair and clothing smelled of woodsmoke. They had crossed two rivers. In the last one she swam just as the crimson dusk turned the water an inviting pink. Rose water. River cologne. She crept out in her underwear while the boys were huddled over their smokes further downriver. The feverish sweat of night riding was a tormenting promise which only the cool river could assuage. Lathering herself with the crude brown bar of soap she had carried from the inn at Iztapa, she slipped beneath the surface through a filmy circle of pink bubbles. Throwing back her head she let herself slide dead weight into a deep pocket. The frigid northern waters off Saltspring Island came into her thoughts, the folded bones of the native woman. Her own bones could lie here in the sediment of this river, discovered in a millennium. *Female, around five feet, approximately thirty years of age.*

Drowned? Skull crushed? Bullet hole? She kicked off the bottom with a chilling notion that she was hastening to her imagined fate.

The cotton underwear dried against her cool skin while she sat under her poncho watching the elongated sun go down, waiting to ride again. The soothing water had drawn out some of the stiffness and soreness in her legs. "I'm a bowlegged mule woman," she muttered. The soft tortured flesh of her rump felt as if her joggled bones had begun wearing through skin, the fatty layer burning away. Perhaps it was true. She slid her hands beneath her, testing the soreness, wishing it could cancel pains of the heart.

Malleable flesh, fragile flesh, amazing that it wears so well. Will I have calluses on my equestrian rump? she wondered. Then I'll feel nothing, a tough mule woman. *Too bad you can't get calluses on your heart, foolish girl, but you wouldn't be worth a damn that way, growing into an insensitive tough old shank through and through.*

Her world closed down to the logistical problem of reaching her uncertain destination, closed down to an acute contemplation of her guides and the possible reasons these increasingly respected men were leading her. What was their reward? She had been asked to provide some money, but it wasn't entirely the welcome *quetzales* which brought them into hazard. Were they fellow travelers who dreamed of seeing a positive change within their lifetimes, one to which they might contribute? She would be paid for her story and in turn pay her creditors but it was quite incidental to her reason for being here. Having to depend upon Pájaro and Cuerpo, giving herself up to their judgment, she naturally began to concentrate on them, on their methods of survival, their habits, their irritations and humors, their humanness. She hardly spoke to them or they to her except out of necessity, but she knew enough of their habits and language to find them familiar to her as men who live from day to day. They were, however, a little mysterious as men who dream. They want food, shelter, women, children, enough land for corn, a little *aguardiente*, but then they want more, she thought. Their minds aren't cluttered with intricate political dogma, but honed down to a mule's bridle, a star's position or signs of a hurricane. Yet they love liberty, the right to own a piece of land and work for themselves, or they wouldn't be here. She hadn't paid much, and she knew that Nervo could not afford to pay them enough to perhaps die in the company of a foreign woman whose motives must be mysterious -- must be because they were mysterious even to her. What could one puny life such as hers contribute? She had not resolved the question to her satisfaction, no longer even tried. The inequities of the world were large and awful to behold. Always with her was a dark and nagging sense of futility with which she had to do repeated battle. This aggravation,

however, had a usefulness, provoking her stubbornness and making her refuse to give in to its whisper of hopelessness. But these two men, to their credit, were not much given to introspection. They were preoccupied with studying the external: the land, the sky, the wind, the eerily augmented sounds of night.

When it came time to cross yet another river, the men let it be known by their crouching silence and solemn scrutiny of shadows that the thing least to be feared was the water itself. This last river flowed swift and dark between even darker banks. Mahta could feel their fear, much stronger now; it hung about them as a charged aura. They moved differently, with their arms raised in front of them and their muscles flexed. Why should this be? What made this river different? Were they near the end of their journey? Didn't she have a right to know? She argued with herself but the tight set of their mouths forestalled her. They waited in silence until there sounded a new note in the river's song: the hollow bonk of a paddle touching wood. Along the bank came a swaying dugout with the dark outline of a young man. They got in quickly and started across against the unyielding current. The dugout had a small motor of a few horsepower but the boy had to paddle because they couldn't risk the noise. Mahta's two *hombres* didn't help with the paddling. They sat turned away from each other toward the opposite banks, watching the black depths of the forest with their ears tuned to the smallest variation in sound. Mahta squinted at the boy's silhouette. His powerful arms stretched toward the far unseen bank and pulled back. Stretched and pulled, stretched and pulled in a steady rhythm, hypnotic. He was young and strong, and she smelled no fear mingled with his sweat. *Still, even at his age he has seen enough death.*

A creeping disorientation came over her, rising from the swirling blackness. Perhaps they weren't moving at all, the boy's stretching and pulling arms only a repetition in place without time. Mahta closed her eyes, searching for the light of day in the colored flashes of her mind. Indistinct components of Brehnt's face flickered before her, emboldening her and giving rise to an interior monologue.

Look how we're hung up here between uncertain banks, Brehnt...betwixt and between in the River Styx. When I open my eyes in this darkness I feel disembodied, as though I were only a soul, and you my love, you can join me then. Only our souls cross here, but if I slip beneath the surface of this water I'll take us both away to silence.

She sat straight and still, her hand clutching the rough wood gunnel. Waiting -- it was the hardest thing to do, especially in unrelenting darkness.

After a while the stenchy smell of soaking and rotting vegetation came off the water, and Pájaro whispered for her to duck low. They were maneuvering in among branches. The boy's

bare feet slipped into the water, then the dugout dragged and crunched into soft sand. Cuerdo's thick hands lifted at her thinning waist, impersonal but careful -- as if she were a small bale of dry goods --, and planted her on the damp sand. She had made ready to get out herself but had submitted to the handling as if it were part of a concise set of instructions from higher above and not to be altered. *Handle With Care. This Side Up.* She stood a moment in silence and, when no immediate response came, began to feel that she was merely incidental to the whole proceeding. More accurately, she thought, I feel like some essential piece of equipment being transported by the King's militia. Smiling at her choice of parody, she was snapped to attention by Pájaro's grip. He was shaking her hand, bidding her good-bye. And just as suddenly he and the boy were shoving off in the dugout. Cuerdo wasted not a moment, guiding her through a snarl of vines and leafy branches brushing against her disturbed face. Soon enough her feet told her they had come upon a rough path. It was narrow, perhaps made by animals traveling to the river to drink. There was a nakedness at her right side with Pájaro gone. As she tugged her snagging shoulder bag along in the darkness she was glad that Cuerdo kept ahold of her arm. In close to three quarters of an hour she saw a faint pink line forming on the horizon. They were moving toward it, still going east. Cuerdo dropped her arm and at once began to unroll their blankets, which had been slung over his back. He spread them on the rough ground in a thicket of brush. "Sueño," he said in a quiet voice. But she wasn't sleepy, only nervous, excited. She had caught something different in his manner ever since they left the dugout.

"Please tell me where we are, *Señor. Localidad?*"

Cuerdo's evasive eyes glowed in the pink-orange dawn. He hesitated a moment, looking away from her as his words came in a hushed prayerful voice: "*Señorita, El Salvador.*"

Even though she had almost known it in a kind of half-receptive dreamy awareness, letting the possibility hover a little distance off without ever allowing herself to really acknowledge it, her reaction was still one of shock.

"Christ!" she cried out in a hoarse whisper. "I've entered the country illegally, and what's worse there's a civil war going on here. You, *amigo*, can vanish into the countryside, but I...I stick out like a very sore thumb."

Cuerdo motioned his hand for silence. They must hide, sleep and wait for darkness. "*Durmamos,*" he said in a firm but hushed voice, insisting that they must sleep. He was tired and lay down, rolling into his blanket.

Before bedding down, Mahta decided to hide her camera and equipment bag. From now on she would do this, having learned the wisdom of obeying her intuition.

Finally she closed her eyes. "Stop U.S. Intervention in El

Salvador" the bumper sticker on the back of the car said -- one of the last things she remembered seeing as she entered SeaTac Airport for her departure. She knew that U.S. backing did not necessarily mean she would, if caught, emerge safely from El Salvador. Possibly it meant that the government would more openly investigate what they would term her accidental death -- hardly a very comforting speculation. She was finally able to resolve the matter in sufficient time for a little rest by simply asking herself if she would have come had she known where she was going. The decisive answer came in the affirmative, putting an end to further grievance.

#

She overslept and awoke to find a dusky blue twilight. It had taken so long to fall asleep. She was still tired, and Cuerpo was gone. She squatted by a bush to pee while she thought of how the time had passed. They had awakened once to eat tortillas, and then she thought Cuerpo had gone to relieve himself and bed down again. They were both restless. Waiting for him to return she drifted into a dreaming sleep, revisiting another foreign place.

Lemur, standing in barren desert -- this hostile land that keeps you. I can't see your beautiful eyes, little one. They're closed down tight with tears of rage. A thumb in your wailing mouth...such a small body shaking with sobs. "Your mother and father didn't abandon you." "I know you're here, Brehnt, so tell me." "I will tell you. You saved him. Now he's yours. If life is kept from its premature end only to be forgotten, better to let it go in the first place. A human life doesn't recommend itself merely by existing. Its value is in its nurturing, from its beginning to its swift end." Philosopher, pacing in chestnut boots, holding your Panama on your hip, threading those restless fingers through your sun-bleached hair. You, bronzed beyond the edges of your sweaty half-buttoned loose shirt, have eaten life. Tossing your hat aside you roll your sleeves away from moist forearms, retrieve the hat, and carry Lemur off. The departing sun scorches even as it goes. I am working now, writing you as story -- no longer all Brehnt, yet very much more so. Lemur says to us in perfect English, "Are you my mother and father?" "Yes, we are," I call. "You can't be just because you want to be," Lemur accuses. "You have to do something to make it happen." I am not disturbed by your voice in Lemur. Your long shadow is growing thinner. You put Lemur down and walk further away. Your hair goes black, vanishes. Your eyes are the sky. The light passes through your body. "Sorry," you call from the distance. Your body in transition ripples over the sand. How can I write your pale exit? Being is no part of not being. I hear you but no longer see you. "Remember what I said. Do it, Angelica." "No, I can't, my love. Please come back." "You will do it." Gone. Lemur stands alone far off on the flat sand. There is

nothing else in sight, but something threatens beyond the seam of earth and sky. Lemur stretches out his arms and begins to cry. "Mama! Mama!" I run across the sand. My heavy feet sink into the loose grains, deeper and deeper. I feel so tired, running and running, but I can't move. "I'm here," I call. I can hardly breath. "I'm here, my little innocent."

Reaching for Lemur she reached into wakefulness, from what she believed to be a short evening nap. A cock crowed somewhere in the darkness; it must be three or four o'clock. She blinked her eyes hard, staring into the barrel of a rifle half in shadow. She put up her hands to shut out the lights flashed on her and wondered if she had really awakened. As more dark forms moved forward with rifles extended, she made a silent plea to reenter, to remain in the unfinished dream.

Their uncertainty about what to do with her suggested that her fate might easily be decided by a very inferior level of authority. Although they left her with a guard and moved away from her, she could hear their harsh arguing. Proceeding with hesitation they brought her out of the tangled vegetation to a Jeep standing on a dirt trail. Once she was seated in the vehicle Mahta was blindfolded. She was left sitting there for perhaps an hour, then they set off with her riding behind two silent soldiers and beside a third. Their bouncing journey at first gave a sense of distance but the road wound back and forth and may have been contained within a small perimeter. Had she not been so distraught and tired Mahta would have laughed, for to blindfold her was ridiculous. She had no knowledge of the terrain she was in and, even if she memorized every bush, tree, and hill, she would never be able to relate the army's position to an enemy with whom she was falsely presumed to have contact. They stopped a number of times and left her sitting there for long enervating lapses of time. Once she was certain she heard them arguing about having her body. Sweat beaded over her face and she was afraid even to ask to pee. A good thing she hadn't drunk very much.

Reasonably sure that they had not found her camera bag, which also contained her identification, she wondered if Cuerdo would remember where she had stowed it, if he had seen her being taken, or if, when he found her gone, he would even dare to stay around long enough to recover it.

They stopped once again with a sudden lurch, and she coughed in the rising dust. A hand pushing at her back, another pulling her forward made her stumble to the ground. She was yanked back to her feet. Nearly tripping several times, she swore under her breath partly to keep up her courage. Sweat ran from beneath her breasts, from her arms and down the middle of her back, soaking her shirt. After nearly a hundred yards of faltering steps, her feet shuffled over a solid flat surface. The heat of the noon sun was at once mitigated by shade. Humid air, close and musty,

a smell of urine, perhaps just outside the walls of the building she had entered. The blindfold was removed and she stood blinking in the dimness of a small cement block room. A cot, padded with husks covered by a coarse wool blanket, was shoved against a wall in one corner. The single window at a right angle to the cot was glassless and barred.

Answering an increasing thirst was now foremost in her mind as she ran her dry tongue over her cracked lips. Her body was weak and shaky from the wild pumping of so much adrenaline earlier. A spate of dizziness dulled her senses. She leaned against the wall, staring across the little room at the cot which now seemed more inviting. Dehydration was loosing for her the struggle with equilibrium. Please let them give her water, just a few swallows. A metal bar clanked into place at her back. The door was slammed shut and locked. She spun around in surprise, thinking how badly she needed water. Would they leave her alone without it? No, perhaps not if she made a fuss. Probably they wouldn't do anything until they found out who she was and what she was doing here. This produced a grim smile -- if she were to ask herself the same questions she wouldn't have lucid answers. It was necessary to think very clearly and her brain was not in the best shape for such fine nuances of reasoning.

Through the window bars she saw the movement of a man's shoulder and urged her body over to see what he was doing there. A soldier holding a rifle stood in the narrow strip of purple shade cast by the building. Beyond the shadow the yellow light of the sun was blinding. Even in this most troubling state of affairs, her heart gave a slight lurch of recognition as she stared at a distant emerald mountain, a heavenly promise of freedom beckoning with lush indifference.

Curling her moist fingers around the rusty bars, she steadied herself and cleared her throat. She had been about to ask for water in Spanish but stopped herself.

I'm so damn thirsty I haven't reasoned carefully enough, she thought. If I use Spanish I'll be more suspect and they'll easily grill me in it. God knows they'll never believe I'm a tourist. Hah! If I tell them I'm a journalist from the U.S., chances are they'll be careful with me -- not inclined to do anything that might upset U.S. support. On the other hand, they've a perfect right to incarcerate me for entering the country illegally. For the time being I'll play dumb.

"Water," she said. "Water, please."

The rifle bearer pushed his hat back and squinted in through the bars. Throwing her head back she made the motion of drinking. When the soldier left she sat on the cot with her back against the wall, trying to extract a bit of coolness from the cement blocks.

In another fifteen minutes or more the door was flung open, and an officer entered bringing with him a corporal carrying a

chair which was set before her near the cot. The officer sprawled in the chair, stretching out his boots. Mahta remained sitting upright on the cot.

"*Como se llama usted?*" he demanded.

Mahta looked at him with as much incomprehension as she could muster.

"*De dónde es usted?*" he went on.

Mahta again gave him a blank look.

"*Hable!*" he shouted.

"I don't understand," she answered.

The officer leaned forward, grinned, and said in a softer voice, "*Habla usted español? Dígame usted la verdad.*"

"What are you saying? I don't speak Spanish," Mahta replied. He didn't believe her and struck the cot with his fist, but she refused to give in.

Monster, she thought. I'd have more feeling for a hungry crocodile if it walked in and took a bite of me.

He began slapping something back and forth in his hands. She saw that it was a pocketknife. His reddened neck was heavily scarred, possibly from burning. Thickly fleshed and sweating profusely, he was furious at the inconvenience of Mahta, but his narrowed eyes flashed at her with a divergent pleasure. He was so obviously one of those who enjoyed giving pain.

"*No creo. De dónde es usted? Dónde? Es necesario que usted habla. Me quedo aquí hasta que habla.*"

He didn't believe her, demanded to know where she came from and would remain there questioning her until she told him. His eyes were an insensate overt threat, dangerous.

"Please, can't you understand?" Mahta persisted. "I don't know what you're saying."

"*Agua?*" he asked her, but the lovely word so hastened her thirst that she kept her revealing eyes lowered.

"*Agua,*" she muttered finally. "That's water. I know only a few words. *Agua, yes, agua, please.*"

The officer yanked off his hat and rubbed his oily head, roaring with malevolent laughter.

"*Si, Si. Tiene sed? Ha, ha, ha! Agua!*" he demanded.

A cup of water was brought. He drank it down, letting most of it trickle from his lips and splash over his shirt, wiping his chin with the back of his hand and slapping his knee with pleasure.

"Do you speak English, you bastard?" Mahta said.

The officer stood up then leaned over her and struck her face. Even though she instinctively ducked, the place where her cheek was caught stung so sharply it brought tears to her eyes. Bending her head to wipe her eyes she was stunned when the officer hit her again, knocking her head back, and then again as she put up her hands. Her lip was bleeding. Dizzy with stinging searing pain, she crawled over the cot and settled in a corner.

Slowly folding in her legs, she closed her eyes.

"*Cree en Dios?* he asked. "*Creo que no.*"

Did she believe in God, he wanted to know. He didn't think so. Was he making a case for more mistreatment, her dispatch? No, she was a *norteamericana* and possible trouble for him. He was toying with her, trying to make her squeak out answers like a cornered mouse. Nevertheless, if she were supposed a friend of the rebel forces she would be fair game. She remembered the intrepid nuns from Maryknoll Convent who had been murdered in this country. A cold shiver crept up her spine. She wiped the blood from her mouth with the back of her hand. Her head ached.

"I got lost." she said in an aloof even voice. "I'm a tourist from the United States. I don't know where I am. I'm thirsty. Water, *agua*, please."

The officer stood up and kicked the chair toward the corporal who was standing at the door.

"You tell me what you do here. You get water. Like that, *señorita.*" He clapped his hands.

What was going on? Was Jim North with the Salvadoran rebels or was he held by these soldiers? Why had Cuerpo vanished? Was he alive? If only she had reached her destination. But what was it? Without water she was in trouble, but they couldn't let her die without finding out what or who she was. Could they? As a U.S. journalist she should have immunity, but that was wishful thinking, and what would they do about her illegal entry? She could deny it if they never found her passport, say she had lost it. She decided to try a hard bluff, stalling for time. But what would time buy her? She plunged ahead without an answer.

"I want to see General Ramirez," she demanded, remembering having met him in better days at an embassy party. Someone near the top seemed a safer bet than remaining at the bottom where people disappeared without a trace. "I think you are going to be in big trouble soon. I'll bet you understand that, don't you?"

The lieutenant colonel hesitated, studying her with a convulsive anger that nearly added more bruises to her skin. Instead, he swung his arm through the air in a semicircle and stretched it straight out toward the door, with his index finger extended. The corporal opened the door just as the lieutenant colonel kicked the chair forward, and the corporal barely managed to sidestep the airborne chair as it went flying through the door. Looking straight ahead, the lieutenant colonel passed through the door but as quickly returned. He fidgeted with his hat and then let his speculating hands come to rest on his buttocks.

Mahta stared him down. If only you knew whether or not I was any trouble, right? she thought. It's going to take some time to find out. Meanwhile, I'll probably get some water and maybe even something to eat. I'm not very hungry but I've got to keep this battered little frame energized.

As predicted, water and a few limp tortillas were forthcoming, the stale tortillas washed down with tepid water. Probably the water is full of bugs and they'll have to let me sleep near the lavatory, she thought. Her lip bled as she ate, the blood mingling with her dismal food.

After she was allowed to visit the outdoor lavatory she threw herself on the dreary cot. Her head was still throbbing from the officer's painful attack, but her split lip had stopped bleeding, leaving a swollen mound of coagulated blood. The scratchy cornhusks irritated her skin, some of them poking through the rough wool blanket, which was itself abrasive. I've nothing to do I might as well cry for a while until the air cools down a little, she decided. She had really meant to humor herself, but waiting for coolness she did begin to cry, and with increasing intensity, soft secretive sobs. It was a useful general release from everything. The roof was tin, causing a hellish buildup of heat inside. The scratchy blanket felt like a bed of coals as she thrashed across its surface, but a slightly more tolerable night temperature gradually arrived, and with it mosquitoes. Their minuscule humming sounds broke the silence like a rock band. Her nerves would go at any moment and leave her screaming. Get out of yourself, out, out! she ordered.

She thought the abandoned place she was in must be an old *beneficiadero* where they used to dry coffee -- the cement patio outside -- now all gone to ruin. Broken, rusted, shattered equipment. The air rank with death and destruction. Husbands and sons gone, never to return. Weeping widows, raped mothers and daughters...maimed, orphaned, dead children. Why couldn't she stop this?

What else can I think about as I lie here listening to cicadas and mosquitoes? Something constructive, please. Tomorrow or the next day they'll know what to do with me. If I panic, cringe, rave, it will do no good. I could easily become non compos mentis imagining the horrors to come. They might, just for something to do, just because I'm the weak and they the strong, they might decide upon torture...rape. Stop this or you will go mad.

Women bear a lot of pain. There's the pain of bearing children. I'll never know firsthand because doctors have assured me I can never have any. If I could have children would I be here? It's the wrong question. Everything changed. I thought Brehnt and I might eventually do that, and then in an innocent routine checkup was told it was impossible, a congenital defect. I'd always thought myself so healthy and fit that it was a shock to find there was something wrong inside me. Yet, it was as if I'd always known it, and in a way I did -- I couldn't have them at first because I told myself I wouldn't. I was too busy straightening myself out to ever think of children earlier. Kenneth's mother said, "What are you waiting for, Mathilda?"

Surely you don't intend to leave it up to Kenneth to ask for children. Men seldom think of asking, you know." I don't know if that's true. There must be a lot of men who set out to have children...of course there are. In Kenneth's case I think his mother was right -- at first I must have thought there would come a time when Kenneth would ask for a child. He did bring it up in the end, as a flimsy excuse to keep me around. How I laughed at his transparent scheme. I did think that Brehnt would make a wonderful father; he was so good with children. I thought about it, yes, until the doctors told me... It wasn't a viable idea anyway. Just an idle daydream. I never told Brehnt. Actually, I felt a little relieved. I could be a decent mother but I'd never settle down solely for that, so I'd have to be a very good one. But why have children when there are already so many without mothers? All-powerful genes again. In some ways I was stronger when I was younger, naively cocky, but at least I've learned endurance, even patience...patience with these rusty bars...ah, self-examination to what end...a final one?

Come on, get perspective. You've got to do some clear and useful thinking. You've often thought that if you could leave one final message it would be to urge every lazy mind to think...reason...examine the facts...look around and question everything. Now do it yourself.

If this is the end there'll be no message from me. It's hard to believe that I could end here. But how easily I could...can. There's nothing to it -- death. How fragile I am. This puny little body. The choices I've made led me here. I must remember that. If only some usefulness will come from this...some good for Jim North...or future victims.

I suppose I won't be able to sleep in this damned chaos of mind and matter. I'll tell myself over and over again that I'm falling asleep, until I'm so sick of hearing it that I lose consciousness.

#

The repeated crow of a diabolical cock. Soft pink light at the barred window. She thought it must be about 4:30, squinting at her watch -- a cheap one not worth stealing -- but her eyelids wouldn't quite come unstuck, and the early light was dim. A rising dread forestalled consciousness. She didn't want to wake up, wanted to lie on her side curled in a ball, her thinning arms covering her head as if they belonged to someone else, virtual protective arms of a lover. No lover could protect with such an unassailable devotion...delusive confections of the imagination.

A mother could protect like that, could suffuse her callow offspring with a powerful security. She was certain of it, although she couldn't remember ever feeling much of it. At one time she had wanted it badly, with an obsessive almost shameful longing. "Mama, why don't you stand up for me?" she had cried

when she was under hurtful attack from her Aunt Grace. Her mother sat there with sealed lips. "Tell her I'm not what she says, not promiscuous. Tell her I'm good." Tell her how good I am, how much you love me, she wanted to further instruct. Her infraction, for all this accusation, had been to stay out late working on the school yearbook, of which she was the editor. Why did Aunt Grace have to be there, have to butt in? Yes, she had forgotten to call home, but why couldn't they have believed her, even been a little proud of her? After a while her debilitating need for support and trust -- or simply a little attention -- was reassigned to a sparse number of unreliable high school and then college crushes...ergo Kenneth. Following his betrayal her encounters were nothing more. Ultimately, she was not so easy to deceive. She accepted no promises and promised nothing herself. And then there was Brehnt.

Brehnt had given her a wonderful sense of attachment, the closest she had ever come to unconditional love, which she had returned with her own steadfast devotion. While it lasted it had been solid and reliable. Knowing she was a part of him, she could let go of him, go away from him, far away, and still feel connected. As long as he existed she was held...held in a safe zone of trust, recognized, respected, valued...given such a deep, deep... She thrashed over the wretched cot and lay staring at nothing. Unfair was not a realistic word for human circumstance. *This is just mental wear and tear; emotional instability due to prolonged stress, an attempt to suppress fear...a longing...oh, this damnable unfinished longing.*

You're gone. Nothing I want at this moment is or ever will be possible. We all live with death. Why can I not live with yours? There would have come a day of discord. That's really the natural order of things, isn't it? No, it doesn't matter, means nothing, nothing at all...alters my feeling not in the least. Our relationship would only have deepened. I know this. I live with it. It's worse, much worse to bear than this little captivity I'm in. Here, I really turn in on myself. When I talk to you, my love, I'm talking only to myself...but I go right on talking. We were going to live until we burned up our bodies, driving ourselves on cross-fed energy...mutual encouragement. Now I rely only on myself. At last my security, however shaky and flawed, is me alone, as it should be, as it always should have been. Ah, but the dreams...I have you and do not have you. The unconscious knows you but hides your meaning. There you do struggle with me, not bitter but patient, benevolent, toward some higher reach -- the unobtainable green mountain beyond my window -- freedom inside and out...even from you.

#

For three days nothing happened. Mahta was fed her meager diet, marched to the lavatory and back and locked away without

comment. Her feverish anxiety grew, joining the haunting menace outside her cubicle, or, as she called it, her crucible. She had been shelved like a lost package at the post office, but not forgotten, even if her sadistic lieutenant colonel had made himself scarce. "For the moment I'm radioactive," she informed the night's raging cicadas.

Finally, when her caged body reached an intolerable pitch of nervousness and the ongoing heat was not so excessive as to be prohibitive, she began to run in place and do a few bending and stretching exercises. These activities were more important for her sanity than her physical well-being, for she tired easily on her meager diet. The black beans rolled in chewy tortillas were her only source of protein and she ate them in a hurry, both to avoid sharing them with her huge cockroach roommates and to dispense with the monotonous process of tasteless fuel intake. She reminded herself that many people outside her four tight walls were eating the same meal. At least her diarrhea, inevitable though it was, had been kept somewhat under control. Trying to find humor in her steady loss of weight, she told herself this was one hell of an effective diet and that it was fortunate she had begun her journey with a few extra pounds.

The exercise period became high entertainment for her captors. She hated the leering faces, knowing that the more attractive she made her body the greater the danger of its violation. Her guard regularly summoned passing soldiers by waving his rifle in the air. They gathered near, peering through the bars at the crazy woman inflicting torture upon herself in the enervating heat, until they were ordered back to their duties. "Boot camp," she whispered to herself, trying to lift her vacillating spirits. "I'll soon be in better shape than any of you layabouts."

In the dusk of evenings Mahta stood at her window, her eyes wandering within the red-tinged green corridors of her tranquil mountain. Her body was motionless, her fixed eyes staring and staring until the mountain and she were one. Then the soft flesh and troubled brain of nonessential Mahta no longer existed as a separate entity. In this seamless state there flowed a sweeping rapture of integration with all things; it was a familiarly summoned condition, very useful in transcending imprisoning boundaries. This was something she had done since early childhood, only learning in her late adolescence that she was engaging in an ancient practice.

Returning from her semiconscious immersion in peace, she remembered what Brehnt had said to her as they sat gazing down into the black water of a natural limestone cistern in the wilds of *El Petén*.

"I've been speaking to you for several minutes."

Touched with wonder and amusement, his patient and level voice had at last penetrated her consciousness. She looked up,

surprised. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

"You were staring into the cenote, so transfixed. What was it?...maiden sacrifices?"

"Nothing...I was thinking of nothing...not even myself or you. I was just being a part of everything."

"Ah...a very old practice."

"Yes." Her slow smile still held the detachment of her previous condition. "A nice way of existing."

"You do this often?"

"Not very often of late. I've done it since I was just a dreamy little one."

Now fixed with acute interest, the steady chert eyes waited to receive any revelation from her. She looked down into the wide circular pool, then up, her gaze traveling over the far rim where leaves flashed in the sun. Glancing back down the sides of the spiraling limestone walls to the inky black water, she thought of it as the earth's dark eye flashing at the heavens. For the first time in a long while she did want to reveal something about herself. Was it the right thing to do...make herself more vulnerable?

"Shall I bore you with the roots of this old practice?"

His finger backs slid over her cheek. "I don't think you can bore me. You're so circumspect that when I get personal information from you I consider myself fortunate."

"Well...maybe I have my mother to thank for my Taoist practices...or maybe I'd have turned out this way no matter what...some old yearning...more atavistic than induced."

She was conscious then of the moist warm air that suffused the jungle, made it and held it in place. In the uneasy quiet with the strange cry of a bird and the close bark of a howler monkey -- wildlife hunting and digesting each other beneath and above the leaves and fronds --, it was quite extraordinary to have the thought of her mother interpose. Such thoughts were usually suppressed at once, for she had learned that it was dangerous not to do so.

Brehnt studied her face and then looked up at a billow of drifting cloud. "Don't tell me unless it's good for you."

"Good for me? Hmm...like therapy. I don't know. I suppose a lot of people could tell it...this story. It certainly isn't unique...God no."

"Mother drank. While I was still very young she never drank to excess, only at an occasional dinner or party where alcohol flowed within reach. None was kept in the house until...until she learned to hide it. But I remember my confusion and fear the first time I found her in that condition. Before others she was always careful to give the impression, however it must have stripped away her...her fragile strength, that she was an engaged and happy woman. Really, she was secretive. In those early days I don't think anyone knew enough about her to pay any attention

to what she was doing. Feeling miserable, incapable, she drank. She could be funny then...sparkle...become someone else. I can imagine her pretty young face glowing and happy with the first rush of alcohol; she could probably be very amusing, although when sober she never had very much to say that related to others...a strange sense of humor...the most peculiar little witticisms. Then after the sparkle she would withdraw...morose and silent. It was dad who bundled me up from the bedrooms where the children slept during parties at the homes of friends or relatives. She would huddle to herself, quiet in the car with dad driving, once home stumbling off to the guest room with a headache. Much later -- I saw it so many times -- complaint mixed with apology and weeping...clutching the bedclothes like a scared child. Then merciful sleep would carry her off.

"My father generally drank only a moderate amount -- he and I have the same strong tolerance; I suppose mine is just will. That first time, probably tired...apathetic from the drain of the party and the late hour, he didn't see how bad it was. He knew her delicate temperament, but he must have missed the seriousness of her condition. The beginning.

"When I got up from my untucked bed after waiting for my mother's goodnight kiss, I discovered the...the red-blotched cheeks...twisted clothes, lipstick on her pillow. I heard the awful ranting...amazed that some of it was directed at me. What had I done? How could I make it right? After that, the safety of mother was never certain. Soft pretty mother now a hard unapproachable stranger...helpless, out of control, ugly inside and out...sometimes with great purple bruises. Thereafter, her absences would always be a little suspect. The terrible thing might happen again...so very unpredictable...sudden. And it did...again and again and again. She had rejected the role of mother, or the role had disintegrated into that of a disturbed child -- irreversible. Then...then the fearful daughter became the...the rigid accusing mother."

Mahta looked around her. Her heart was exploding, her hands shaking. "I'm sorry. The floodgates opened. I can't...don't want to...to degenerate into whimpering self-indulgence. God, I was that little girl again. I've got to stop."

"No, don't. You haven't even gotten to the important part: the part about you...the part that interests me. Please tell me. You want to, and I've decided it's good for you."

He didn't try to hold her or exude gushing sympathy, but his focused attention and gentle prodding made the retracing of that old memory easier, somewhat alleviating.

"Well, I hope you don't imagine I was a sweet long-suffering daughter...oh, no. In years to come I did all the wrong things: raged, lectured, tried to tell her -- once she covered her ears and sang to me while I talked on and on -- that alcohol was really a terrible depressant. Many times I hated her. At first

I was too young to posit rational explanations -- if there were any --, and I suppose consuming emotions would never allow it. In the end...no...maybe one day I'll...I'll be able tell you that. Not now. Anyway, the dread, the fearful uncertainty were so unbearable that I had to find a way to escape.

"We lived on a sort of gentleman's farm, a fortuitous inheritance from my maternal grandfather. After that first incident I cried myself to sleep. I woke up at sunrise feeling anxious...found I couldn't run to my father. Instead, I ran outside...to the pond where the water lilies were turning, so innocent in the sun. How could they be? How could the quiet morning be so fresh and sweet...serene? I stared and stared into the shimmering pool of water until I became the lily...its cool spreading leaves...the water holding the blue sky...the very sky itself. I floated away little by little...dissolving into earth and sky. I had melted completely into my beautiful and soothing environment. My self was clean away -- swallowed into the whole of...of Tao. I went there often...that calm place above turmoil. I never considered what I'd done until years later...or that my mother had inadvertently caused something good."

"We all do it differently. You did it well, devised your own positive way of coping. It's hard to forgive a parent who's bruised your love so badly. Have you?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, I have...but she hasn't...can never forgive what I... No, no more now. It's like falling down, recalling the end...falling and not getting up. She was self-destructive and...suffered to live...all without a shred of natural joy."

"But not you. You had it then and you have it now, a special kind of joy...a constant wonder at so many things."

"Yes." She wanted to feel herself free and light then, unencumbered, to embrace his promising assessment. "Yes, wonder of...far too many things...so many, many interests. They'll be the death of me." The words had come out wrong.

"No. They're the *life* of you."

She was content simply to look at him, another human being at that moment wholly there for her: his body crouched on the ochre rocks, his arms bent over his khaki knees, his consecrated hands arrested beneath his chin, his eyes fully given to her, his smiling face vitally in the present moment, energy flowing out as if his entire supportive being were also holding up the sky.

"This cryptic old depository...this dark *cenote* has yielded some of your close-held secrets," he said, reaching for her and finding her with ease. The calm gray irises encircled black pupils of powerful brilliance, containing something she wanted, something not so easy to define but broad and deep and timeless as the watching cavernous pool, into which together they gazed.

#

The sun was gone now, the mountain faded into darkness, but

still she stood at her barred window. Where was Jim North? More and more she pondered his existence. He had become her silent, though ever-present, partner in a foreordained complicity of which he must somehow be made aware. The feeling that she would soon meet this unknown figure was firmly fixed -- her sixth sense playing a game of chance which it could sometimes win.

When she had achieved a restless sleep very late one hot buzzing night, Mahta was awakened by the crash of her door thrown against the wall. In a semiconscious daze she was hustled from her bed and led off to a Jeep with its engine running. This time she was not blindfolded, the confining darkness presumably left to act as blindfold for her rapid departure.

As the Jeep spun around and shot into the dirt road, she saw that camp activity had accelerated to a frenzied pace, soldiers dashing pell-mell to transit vehicles amid shouting voices. The fear-driven confusion of this total dispatch clearly indicated disaster for the camp, and possibly for her as unwanted baggage.

The convoy traveled about ten or fifteen kilometers with gears grinding and engines racing when red tracer fire suddenly flamed across the night sky, and everything accelerated forward at breakneck speed. Her throat filled with dust as the driver of Mahta's vehicle, hoping to avoid the heavy barrage of gunfire, skidded onto a side trail which was nearly impassable. At the speed they were traveling the Jeep struck ruts with such force that its four wheels lifted several feet off the ground and came down in hard jarring bounces. Positioned in front with the driver, Mahta had nothing to hang onto and was nearly pitched over the exposed dashboard. They repeatedly ducked under the perilous slap of overhanging branches, causing the blinded driver to propel them into a part of the trail deeply eroded. Dropping at a steep angle the Jeep slammed with tremendous momentum into exposed jagged rocks. Mahta grabbed the right side above the instrument panel and hung on as the Jeep sailed into the air. Her body was thrown to the floor with the landing impact and almost tossed out while she clutched at the gearbox, at anything her hands could grasp. She huddled on the floor, held there in cold fear by the sudden explosion of machine gun fire. Flashes of Beirut gunfire and Lemur assaulted her startled brain. Her bruised head left her dazed, and for a few seconds she thought she was back in a Beirut street. They careened over, moving sideways as a spray of bullets took out the left rear tire. The vehicle slammed broadside into something solid, possibly the stump of a tree or a pile of rocks. Mahta was lifted and thrown against the soldier who had been driving and who was now motionless and collapsed over the steering wheel. His right temple oozed blood, shiny black in the tracer fire flashes. The soldier riding behind her yanked her from the Jeep and began dragging her through the scraping brush. Her head was reeling, her legs unstable and she could barely negotiate, even though she

was only half propelling herself. Dense unyielding brush forced them down until they ended up crawling on their bellies through an overhead tangle, the dangers of nature forgotten as her captor struggled to put distance between them and the enemy. More torturous meters ensued, until her screaming bones and muscles refused the brain's commands. Needed parts of her body were throbbing with pain, and her mule-damaged shoulder had begun to ache again. The last measure of strength deserted her. She lay with her face pressed against her hand and only enough energy left to breathe. The soldier hauled her forward, putting his hands over her body wherever he pleased as she gasped for air.

"No," she moaned, "I can't," then gasped out, "No. No. God damn you. Shoot me!"

Her stomach was churning. She pulled herself to her knees, hunched over and vomited. The top of her head tingled with icy pinpricks and, instead of the phantom blackness that for an eternity had closed down her world, she saw white. Fields of white. White without horizon.

#

The burbling sound of channeled water flowing across a field; she could see it in the distance without lifting her head. Lying on her back she had opened her eyes upon deep blue sky. Just to the left of her blue dome a clump of tall coarse grass bent its swaying tips down to her. Rising and falling patterns of the tasseled grass's morning shadows played across her face. Turning her head she saw that the steady gurgle of water was coming from an irrigation ditch. She tried to roll to her side and sit up but found, with a knifing jab, that her right hand was restrained. Searing pain there. Rolling the opposite direction and lifting her throbbing head with caution, uncertain of her balance, she saw that her wrist was cuffed to the rusty iron ring of an irrigation gate, which long ago had been pushed aside to allow water to pass. Weeds had grown around it.

She sat up, a little dizzy, half mesmerized by the trickling water, trying to piece together what had happened. The last thing she remembered was an engulfing whiteness, then nothing. Her unconscious state had turned into a frenzied sleep filled with fragmented terrors: murderous captors in uniform, a blood-sprayed Jeep, a twisted body with vacant eyes, and hands pulling at her. Trying to escape the clinging dream and its encircling reality, she blinked, swallowed and rotated her head to relax her neck. Her wrist ached, apparently damaged by thrashing around in her unconscious state, and there was a puffy red ring under the manacle which the MP had made too tight. The exhaustion of wild activity and shock swept over her. But soon thereafter she remembered how the soldier had put his hands on her, and began to wonder if her body had been violated while she lay there unconscious. Her free hand automatically reached out to touch

the crotch of her slacks but nothing felt different and her clothes, although torn, were intact. Another strong wave of fatigue pulled at her with the force of gravity. To lie down and drift into sleep lulled by the soothing gurgle of water was all she wanted, but the anxiety of being held there, of waiting for the next assault, fired her nerves.

The soldier who had brought her this far would return to reclaim her as soon as his reconnaissance was completed. If only she could get free. Someone would help her. She knew that, knew the humanity of a people driven from their humble normalcy into the center of chaos.

Removing her sandals, she swung herself around until she could dangle her feet over the edge of the ditch, just reaching the water with her toes. It was cool, refreshing, but only augmented her thirst. Probably not fit to drink. Back in a sitting position, she put on her sandals and tried pulling at the cuff on her tender wrist. It was tight. Her wrist had swollen. As she yanked, the pain came so sharply that tears welled in her eyes and she was at once dizzy, shivering and perspiring. The delicate skin on the puffy underside of her wrist was torn loose close to the veins, dangerous. A fraction more tearing and the vein would puncture. Once a nurse giving her an I.V. told her she had wonderful veins, so easy to find, so close to her thin skin. A woeful childish moan of frustration escaped her lips, followed by a defensive spate of fierce cursing. Tears of pain, of fatigue and rage, flowed without restraint.

Finally soothing herself with generous words of humoring encouragement, she lay back and tried to clarify her thinking, to activate hard reason.

Calm yourself and try to use this time resourcefully. Why do I have the feeling I've missed something obvious and really important? I keep going back to Jim North, wondering where he... Suppose he was held in the same place I was. Suppose Señor Nervo intended to have me captured in order to get near him. Sounds rather far-fetched but... People at home do know I've come down here as a journalist...with flimsy immunity. The availability of this information may have temporarily prevented something drastic from happening to me. On the other hand, if the rebels could rescue us both what useful publicity for them, what a nice story for their supporters.

She watched as the tired MP limped across the field. Something must have happened to his leg when the Jeep went flying through the air. Her spirits lifted in gratitude for his incapacity, much less threatening. He unfastened her tormenting handcuff, without acknowledging her wincing reaction, and led her to a trail running along the edge of the field. Two horses waited there, a sorrel gelding and a smaller chestnut mare. It pained her to move her hand but with the MP's help she managed to get astride the mare and they set off. After nearly half an

hour's dusty ride they reached the entrance to a very well kept ranch, an *estancia*.

From this moment on Mahta found herself being treated, in many respects but not all, with a formal politeness, almost like a business guest who had just flown in to conduct an interview. The transition from her recent experiences was extraordinary. A seething rancor surfaced but she swallowed it down, knowing that she must wait to have her role articulated.

The scarcely visible *estanciero*, so clearly the owner of this *estancia*, remained in the background, nodding once from a distance. She was confronted verbally only by military people -- just remarks concerning her immediate needs. The household staff remained silent.

A lapis mosaic-tiled bathtub filled with warm water welcomed her aching body. After a soak, which she would have preferred to extend, she was led off by a tight-faced female soldier and given fresh clothes -- underwear and slacks and a blue baggy man's shirt -- while her own were being laundered and mended. As soon as she was dressed, a light meal of fruit salad, banana bread, and coffee was brought in by a silent Indian woman. She gazed about her as she ate.

The room was spacious with large windows looking out on a veranda edged with flowers and broad-leaved plants. The floors were orange tile, and overhead: a slowly turning fan. The windows, she found, had been secured from outside and could not be opened. Some fresh air did enter the room through narrow screened louvers near the ceiling, and was gently blown down by the fan. Lying down to rest atop her exceedingly welcome bed, she stared up at the revolving wooden fan blades of the old fan, letting their rattling wobble gradually mesmerize her into a soporific state.

Her battered shoulder and the damaged wrist made their complaints with persistent throbbing pains. A few simple aspirin would have been welcome. The wrist was swollen and inflamed, but when she had asked for a doctor to look at it she was given only a little salve and the matter treated with insignificance. She knew, of course, that beneath this surface of rigid politeness she fostered in her expedient captors only a larger concern for her disturbing presence.

As evening drew near, Mahta paced back and forth in her room, finally asking a servant to summon her guard. When the guard entered, Mahta, testing, expecting refusal, wanted to know if she could walk outside on the grounds.

The serious-faced young guard gave her a blank stare and thought a moment. "*Si*," he answered to her surprise, although the single word was like a bark of anger.

He led her from her room across the hall and through another room which opened on an interior garden. There, within the shadows of the loggia, he sat down on a wooden bench, placed his

submachine gun across his knees, and motioned with a rough gesture for Mahta to proceed into the enclosed garden.

In a cage above the wide steps hung a bright-plumed macaw. It ruffled its feathers and nattered back at her greeting as she passed by. If the circumstances had been different, but no, she thought, it didn't matter, she really was feeling better. For the first time in what seemed an interminable nightmare she was clean, reasonably fed and, except for a few annoying head and body lacerations and her troubling infected wrist, unharmed and without immediate bodily danger. From all this arose a simple truth: in tumultuous times, as comforts were withdrawn, the need of them grew unimportant, and thresholds of pain were raised.

Sprays of bougainvillea in brilliant colors muted only by the fading light fell over the walk as she strolled across the flagstones. The air was heavy with the sweet, almost visibly coiling perfumes which certain resting plants release into the evening. A hummingbird darted by, hurrying to its roost with abrupt little chirrups and fast-whirring wings.

She sat on a stone bench, attempting to assuage her nervous mind with a short interior monologue. *Waiting, I think of hostages, political prisoners, who have waited years and are waiting now in the most degrading conditions. I must not complain but I'm so wildly impatient, so angry at being ineffectual while some devious machinery grinds along determining Jim North's haphazard fate.*

Across the garden the guard sat watching her, motionless in the shadows but a flagrant impasse. A white cat strolled by and rubbed against his leg. He bent over to stroke it. In that fleeting moment with his eyes removed from her, she scanned the entire loggia, searching over the dark windows which faced upon the garden. Something drew her scrutiny, as certainly as if she had heard a voice call out, but there was only the buzzing lisp of the garrulous parrot. A flash of movement at a window, a hand, then a face, yes, a face up against the arched glass, catching the last light. A blond young man with searching eyes, gone in an instant. Imagined for want of discovery?

The guard was watching her and she looked quickly away, standing then kneeling down and snapping off a spray of scarlet bougainvillea. With racing heart she went along slowly, slowly, stroking the bougainvillea sprig and prodding the stones with her toe. What if he were here? Jim North in this place. How could she get to him? She didn't even know what room he might be in. The urgency of her charged imagination might be leading her astray. It was time to go in. Perhaps they would soon bring an evening meal, and she would sit and think.

The supper was late -- chicken and rice and memory-summoning pink guava juice. After eating she sat for a while, reading selections from an old leather-bound copy of *Don Quixote* which she had found at her bedside; it was printed in ornate Spanish.

When her eyes grew tired she tapped at her door and was led down the hall to do her brief ablutions, while the strapping woman in military dress stood guard just outside the bathroom door. When she returned to her room the guard followed her inside, poking around the room, pulling the drapes and finally departing. The sound of the turning lock outside her door left her secured, accounted for until morning. If she wanted to leave before that she would have to bang on her door and wait for a response.

With the lamp extinguished, she opened the drapes and sat in a wine leather chair by the window. The air was charged with the activity fomenting in her mind. She didn't want to fall asleep, felt extremely restless, even guilty, as if there were something she was supposed to be doing and hadn't worked her mind carefully enough to discover what it was. "I've got to get out of here," she repeated in a whisper. The meal and this insistent litany caused her drowsy head to fall against the back of the chair. In this dreamy state of approaching unconsciousness there gradually came a faint rustling sound, as of something sliding across the floor. She snapped to rigid attention, sitting with bristling awareness. Was she imagining some nearby presence merely in an overwrought desire to have something happen? No, the hairs on her quivering arms stood out in animal reflex. She waited. Silence. Then again a soft rustling. A shiver prickled the back of her neck. Someone was in the room. But how? She started to turn around at the same moment that a hand came over her mouth.

"Shh, not a sound. I'm Jim North. Do you know of me?"

She gave an aggressive nod of her head. The arm across her shoulders, the hand at her mouth were removed. "Yes," she whispered with eagerness. "I was looking for you. I'm here because of you, but not very useful at the moment. How did you get in? There was a guard outside my door."

"Shh, there still is."

Mahta squinted to make out his lanky form in the darkness as he whispered an explanation.

"There's a young female servant here, Anita, married to a rebel. She told me about the small doors to the right of the windows fronting on the loggia. They look just like cupboards, but were made to pass refreshments through to the rooms from the kitchen. I squeezed out of mine, worked around and hid under your bed while you and the guard were down near the bathroom. They'd already checked me earlier. I saw you from my window. I could hear you through the louvers, speaking good old U.S. English to the parrot. Then I saw the guard. I figured it was time we got together. Got a feeling all hell's breaking loose any time now. Our angel claims she can get us out of here...says her old man is waiting somewhere out there. She's cooking up something to get the guard away in a couple of hours. We've got to sit tight till then."

"I thought the servants weren't aloud to talk. They're

never left alone with me."

"You don't have Anita watching over you. She's a hell of a lot smarter than my guard. She works things out, damned clever situations, like a broken glass of juice when the guard is headed for the john or his lunch. So the putative klutz is locked in my room with me to clean up the mess. See how it works?" There was a flash of sparkle from his shaded eyes.

"Yes, I see." A sudden recognition made her want to hug Jim North in a rush of affectionate camaraderie. Moving closer to him, she was able to more carefully study his face in the dim light coming from the window.

He was young, fatally strong, that dangerous strength of unshaken conviction. She knew this at once. And he was old with newly acquired wisdom and pain, lean-faced and tired but alive with purpose. He might be the brother she never had. He might be a prime-of-life upwardly mobile American icon, jogging with carefree abandon on a vacation beach, playing tennis, washing his sports car, regularly satisfying his erotic needs. But he was here doing this, using his young life in this way. A consuming assuagement welled up in her troubled heart. Jim North's fight, the reality of it in his grave and sensitive demeanor, had at once become a comforting vindication of her own querulous nature.

"You can't imagine how happy I am to see you." She had almost said *alive*. "I'm Mahta Lind," she whispered.

"Mahta. Glad to see you, too. How did you get involved here, anyway?"

"Your parents' attorney was looking for someone to write about you, try to find you. They're very worried."

"Well, I'll be damned. They were a little pissed about me being here in the first place."

"Jim, I hope to God I don't do anything to keep you from getting out of here in one piece. If...if it comes to that, please don't look back."

"No time for martyrs, Mahta."

"No, I'm not martyrdom material. I'm...well, I guess a foolhardy journalist...free-lance writer-photographer, that's all. I think I can muddle through." Her own bluff amazed her with its unfounded assurance, but she was high on the excitement of the moment, on at last finding Jim North. "If they catch me I'll probably get out somehow. That's all I meant. Just don't do anything on my account."

"I'd rather we both got out and soon. Okay?"

"We have to," she said, "after all this."

She touched his arm. "I've thought of you so much it seems like you're a part of my family. Are you all right?"

"Yeah...I'm okay. Let's just be quiet and rest here a while...not press our luck with all this whispering. Have to get hyped for the big getaway."

A strain had crept into his voice. He was so thin, so

tired. She wondered what his treatment had been. At this tenuous moment, speculating on that question was a bad choice. "I'm wide awake." She patted his arm. "You lie on the bed and I'll wait in the chair."

"Right," he whispered and, without the slightest protest, lay down on his side and closed his eyes.

Sitting in the darkness with her rigid hands gripping the chair arms, Mahta pondered the coming minutes and hours. What stupendous act would draw the guard from her door? And if they made it, what then? Once in rebel hands they would come under the fire of the Salvadoran government, and they would then both be considered culpable, expendable if caught again. The tension of all this speculation finally produced fatigue. She rubbed her heavy-lidded eyes and tried to stifle a yawn while her head drooped.

Surprised to discover that she was the one who had drifted into sleep, she was urgently awakened by Jim's tight and hurtful grip on her sore shoulder.

"Mahta, smell smoke?"

"What? Smoke? Yes! Yes, I do."

"I think this is where we make our great leap of faith, but just in case it's not I'll step briefly into the closet."

The door was thrown open, hitting the wall hard. A young woman entered followed by an old man in field clothes.

"Señor Jaime?" the servant girl, Anita, called out, and Mahta pointed to the closet just as Jim came rushing out.

"Anita, *bueno, bueno!*"

"*Vamos!*" Anita cried, her hands waving and her dark eyes flashing with nervous excitement. Mahta caught the mood of this risky bid for freedom with a cry of relief. Caution turned to a wild thrill of escape as they rushed from the room, then from the blowing hot winds of a kitchen fire.

#

Afterward, when they were miles away in a forest hut and resting near an open hearth, Mahta felt compelled to sort out and talk about what had happened, but it proved too enervating. She lapsed into a dazed exhaustion, watching Anita's rosy-cheeked concentration on the ageless ritual of food preparation. Bent forward on her knees the graceful Anita swayed over humankind's happiest work: giving sustenance. The humble task of preparing nourishment slowly dissipated Mahta's anxiety, and the scene before her became mesmerizing therapy. The pregnant rebel, the dauntless young woman in her swelling blue dress, was making tortillas in the ageless manner. This simple primal act was so heightened a reality, after all the previous unreal shocks, that it restored a world inflicted with madness to a calm progression of order. Drawing up her aching body on a palm frond mat, Mahta began a sort of mental convalescence, slowly lulled into drowsy

peacefulness by the earnest young woman's fire-lit motions.

With an economy of effort Anita's smooth brown hands dipped into a large red gourd, lifting a mound of freshly ground damp maize kernels. Her flying fingers patted the meal, giving swift even tosses and spinning it between her expert palms until it emerged a perfect round flat cake. A seasoned earthenware plate braced above the fire on stones was the tortillas' unfailing griddle. Turned once with a quick pinch of bare fingers, they were served crispy warm. The teeth's gentle grinding of these light cakes gave a filling comfort, here synonymous with freedom.

Jim wrapped *frijoles* inside his second tortilla and bit into it, eating with a practiced agility and nodding his approval at Anita, who returned a shy smile.

"She's lost her job because of us," Mahta said.

"Yes, but she's very pregnant with her first, and they were working her too hard. At least she's glad for the excuse to get away."

"Did she start the rescue fire in the kitchen?"

"Sure. I'm not going to ask her about that...make her uncomfortable. By now they've probably got it out. It doesn't concern us. Are your clothes dry yet?"

"Almost. Look at this. I stubbed my toe on a rock in that irrigation ditch we were slogging through. I've been getting a real workout lately." Mahta couldn't repress a tired chortle of laughter at her blue toe.

"Sorry, but that ditch was the good idea of her husband Carlos...kept the dogs off while we clawed through those hectares of brush to the old man's truck."

"He's her uncle?"

"Her father's brother."

"What brave souls to tackle the army like this."

"They hate them...with good reason," Jim added. "Sadistic destructive bastards."

"I'm hoping not all of them."

"No, it's never *all of them* anywhere, but you can't be too trusting...idealistic. They'd kill you fast enough if it suited them. You've been around, don't you realize that? You think a woman reporter is immune? Not even a nun. It's all following orders and dogma and the end justifies the means...and that's just for the very few who think about it before they act."

"But this is almost funny," Mahta said. "I thought you were the principled one here. I come and go from these places, giving nothing. Is that what an idealist does?"

"An idealist doesn't do much of anything, but you give a helluva lot. You're important, my friend. You represent the only policing eye that *is* friendly. You come in here. You take a risk. It doesn't work only half done. You have to tell a story, a true story. And look what's happened to you so far. It's not over. Maybe we'll die."

"Don't say that, Jim. Let's not plan on dying so soon. We'll have to do it soon enough. I've never handled that idea too badly...not as well as I'd like, though. It's really a large part of what motivates me...trying to make it all mean something before it's gone...or I'm gone. When you're old and tired, maybe sick, it might be...welcome."

"Sometimes I've welcomed it."

"No, don't say that either. You're way too young."

"Well," Jim went on in a lighter voice, "it's just how I do it...how I make myself deal with the inevitable when I run out of alternatives."

They sat for a while, quiet until Mahta spoke.

"I was surprised to see *El Cuerpo* turn up...thought he was long gone...got my recorder...guess he has the rest."

"*El Cuerpo*?"

She laughed. "Oh, sorry...my guide. That's what I've been calling him to myself."

"His name's José. He's a good man."

"A very good man, and he follows orders...hung me up out there, right? How can I complain when... I guess it was a necessary--"

"Diversion...somebody's idea...sorry. They were set to finish me...had to rethink their plans when you came along."

"My God, if I had to be expendable that was the best reason I can think of."

His matter-of-fact acceptance of his fate made him more familiar to her -- the stoicism, at times fatalism -- ; it was the attitude she herself tried to maintain. For her it was much easier to think of her own life in jeopardy than to imagine his being, as he put it, finished. That thought was not sustainable. It made her anxious, dry-throated.

She drank mountain spring water from a yellow gourd dipper passed to her by a nearly toothless woman, the old man's wife, probably not as old as her wrinkled face suggested; her dark eyes were half closed, holding minute diamond points of some dreaming thought as she waited to repossess the gourd. Tilting her head back to drink, Mahta saw the rough ceiling blackened with smoke.

"All this smoke keeps the insects out," she pondered aloud. "Despite the comforts of the ranch, this dark smoky place seems like heaven."

"That's freedom," Jim assured her.

Without taking her eyes from the ceiling she asked in a careful voice, "Will you tell me how you got to El Salvador?"

"Guess."

"Well," Mahta uncrossed her legs and stretched out on her side, "maybe the Guatemalan government wanted you out permanently and decided to get themselves off the hook by slipping you across the border for the Salvadorans to...handle."

"Yeah. The army got U.S. dollars for taking me. Hot tender

around here. Guess I was hot tender too."

"What were you doing...exactly?"

"You think maybe I wasn't planting corn?"

His amused eyes mollified a badly scarred place inside herself, a place she had not wanted assailable in this moment. But an old question leapt into her consciousness, concerning Brehnt's work. She pushed the thought back into its shadowed recess and looked at Jim North. There were dark circles under his still unflagging gray-blue eyes. Her next thought was that Jim North was clearly one of Brehnt's mortal angels. She knew instinctively that Brehnt himself was one. He would have denied it -- that very poetic term for self-sacrifice.

"Planting corn is something *they* could teach you," she said with a mildly scolding voice of admiration.

"I was training *milpa* workers to survey their *milpas*, teaching them how to claim land as reparation."

"Dangerous. May I ask what the army has been doing with you?"

He watched her move her hand in back of her, lifting her recorder and turning over a tape.

"Are you taping this?"

"Uh-huh."

Waiting, she saw that the taping had produced a fast glint of displeasure followed by a slight grimace. The pale eyes glazed over, as if in pain, then his mouth cast a faint ironic smile. She thought the constrained mannerisms reflected shame as well as disapproval. Here was a person who for some time had had no need to be ashamed of anything he'd done. His shame could only be for his enemies, enemies of their own country. She waited.

"I see you're not going to give up on what the army has been doing with me. Just the usual, I guess. Mild torture."

She sat up. "Mild torture?"

"Well, severe torture -- I've seen it -- usually results in death, and I'm still alive."

He brought the conversation back to her as subject.

"Let me see your wrist, Mahta. What's this?" He picked up her hand with a gently palpating grasp.

She liked his long thin fingers touching her, turning her wrist over, reifying the way their minds touched.

"Oh somewhere along the line I got handcuffed."

"Where was that?"

"They were keeping me in an old *beneficiadero*. Then one night we roared out of there. A retreat from the rebs. Our Jeep took a lot of flack. The driver was killed...it was... I went crawling, half dragged, through what I would've sworn was impenetrable brush. I passed out and woke up handcuffed to an irrigation block not far from the ranch where we met. Actually, I started sort of in the middle of the story but you get the idea. Hey, this is about you not me."

"It's about both of us. We've been having one hell of a time, haven't we? I wanted to go on doing what I was doing but I knew it wouldn't last."

He covered his mouth, resting his thumb and fingers on his cheekbones and muttering against his gripping hand, imprecations, accusations, she couldn't hear but knew it was about pain and regret at being unable to complete his work.

"I'm so glad we connected. I wonder why they didn't just shoot the both of us."

"They were probably going to..."

"What? You do think they were going to shoot us?"

"Yes. And you would have been raped first, Mahta."

"I thought about that at first, but didn't think it could happen later at the *estancia* -- maybe I'm being naïve there too. When they first captured me I heard them talking about...arguing about me and I thought... Then when the soldier was dragging me through the brush he put his hands on me, but he was hurt and too exhausted to go any further."

"Jesus, that was pure luck. Come on let's have Anita put one of her healing nostrums on your wrist."

"She's a nurse too?"

"Not bad medicine. I've been treated with things down here that druggists have never heard of. Sometimes they're pretty effective. A lot of medicine comes from tropical forests. Except they're cutting down the Amazon rain forest. Global suicide for a quick fix."

"I've explored some of it...the shrinking Amazon...all that lush indifference. There's a remarkable woman named Margaret Mee...an artist explorer who's spent a part of her life trying to find and paint the flora there...to save things..." She grew silent, her troubled mind soothed by clear visions of intricate botanical renderings; meticulous artwork flowing from the brush of that intrepid and fragile woman; some new discoveries, all of Mee's very accurate work radiant with natural beauty. It was painstaking work done in a steamy, often hostile insect-stinging ambiance. Probably still so many species dying unknown.

Jim rose on shaky feet and went over to speak to Anita. Mahta had thought he moved oddly because he was just bone tired; now a troubling realization assailed her. She studied his back, the diagonal stains running across his taut blue shirt, not streaks of sweat but... She got up very fast and approached his back, touching it gingerly with just the tips of her fingers. He winced and turned around.

"Don't."

"Take off your shirt."

"No," he asserted, turning back to Anita.

"Off," she demanded in her most authoritative voice, but with a grievous bile forming in her throat.

"Never mind."

"I want to see for myself."

"No. It'd probably make you sick."

"Then I'll let my wrist rot. Gangrene. My hand will drop off."

"So will your life. God, you're as obnoxious as my sister. You remind me of her."

"Then I'm my brother's keeper. Is it coming off?"

He faced away from her, unbuttoning his shirt with slow fingers. The wounds were swollen, suppurating and red, likely made by something sharp-edged. A rawhide whip? Examining the mutilated once smooth skin made her blood heat and surge, her own back sting and throb.

"Oh, Christ!" she cried out, "And you were asking about my *wrist*." Tears welled in her eyes. Standing at his back, she brushed them away before he could see.

"Sorry. Seen enough? Yes, it hurts. Nothing like a good spate of flogging to make you appreciate your pitiful fellowmen. A big chunk of the world still indulges in it."

"I want to do something. What can we do?"

"Nothing."

"But infection is--"

"Anita gave me something for that...and she has something for you too."

With Mahta's help he fumbled his way into his shirt then took from Anita the mug of palliative liquid she had brewed for him. "This has a little something in it too," he said with a grateful smile for Anita.

"My God, when you lie down... Those bastards!"

Jim propelled the enraged and stricken Mahta back to their mats where they both sat down. Mahta was dazed.

"We're not out of here yet," he said. "In that sense, my back hardly matters."

Echoing with this sinister reminder, a dismal silence fell over the hut's interior. It was difficult for Mahta to speak with an even rational voice while the fierce anger burned in her throat. Beyond the open door the sun was shafting a path through the dark Montezuma firs. Her eyes caught and held onto the honeyed columns of light spilling over the dry grass. Even now, framed by this humblest of dwellings, nature could still offer her a token of hope.

When she looked again at Jim he was lying on his side on blanket-topped cornhusks, his emotionless feverish face sagging in a deep sleep from Anita's narcotic tea. Mahta focused on her untouched cup and decided it was time she herself swallowed some of this useful brew, anything to stem the wild restlessness coursing through her. The tea was slightly bitter and she drank it with quick swallows.

Punching the cornhusks under her lumpy blanket, she lay down with her eyes searching for signs of Jim's rhythmic breathing.

Her slackening eyelids closed over a view of the faint rising and falling of his shoulder.

The white-ashed coals were glowing in semidarkness when she awoke. She heard frightened chickens squawking. A large figure of familiar proportion ducked through the door and stood over her a moment. Pulling her stiff and sore body up, she saw that Jim was speaking in soft Spanish to this big man in the shadows. "*El Cuerpo*," she whispered to herself. He turned around, grinned and leaned down. She saw that he had both her camera and tote bag slung over his shoulder. "*Ahora, regressamos*," he said.

"Yes, we return, you fox," she chided.

They would soon be leaving and there was little time left for picture taking. Mahta began photographing the hut and everyone in it. She insisted on photographing Jim's back. "Do they care if I take pictures here? Is it dangerous for them if I do this?" she asked.

"No, by now everyone knows who started that fire. Just don't take any pictures outside to show our location," Jim answered. "Oh, and don't publish the ones with José, if we get that far. They probably know who he is but it doesn't help to publicize it."

She asked Jim to photograph her with Anita and "*El Cuerpo*." Then she put a gentle arm around Jim's waist and handed her camera to Anita. "This is my brother," Mahta said, looking up at him to make her last picture.

Whether or not *Cuerpo* himself expected her to be found by the Salvadoran army, she didn't want to verify. There was every indication that he had expected it, yet she bore him no ill will. This was the way it had gone. Her capture had been of use and, with luck, *Cuerpo* would return them to Guatemala and she would get Jim North home, but only if they fell into the right hands in Guatemala. They would have to find Palo Nervo or someone who worked with him. The pain of her wrist meant nothing compared to the pain Jim must be feeling, but fear of infection for either of them was superseded by anxiety for what lay ahead. There was still the River Styx to cross, three rivers in three versions of hell for an exhausted and injured young man.

Cuerpo went away with Anita's husband, saying he would return in the late night when they would set out for the Guatemalan border. She talked a while with Jim about their journey. He was sleeping off and on and passed out mid-sentence. Mahta slept but sat up when she heard Jim groaning in pain. She raised her head and watched him. Silence. She needed to pee. Tiptoeing across the packed dirt floor, she stepped through a red-gold band of evening sun coming in around the loosely sealed door's edge. Letting herself out with attention to disturbing noise, she then walked through the seared grass and into the shadows. The dry air was still and smelled of pungent weeds. When she returned she stood near Jim a minute. He turned his

body over with a soft groan. She knelt down and, without exerting pressure, tested his forehead with the back of her hand.

"I'm all right...just a dream," he muttered, opening his eyes.

"Will you really be able to travel?"

"Sure...just rolled over on my back...dreamed I was floating on a river of hot lava. Did I wake you?"

"Don't worry about it. I had to go outside anyway. I hope you can get a little more sleep."

"I don't know. I'm awake now...thinking about what I've been doing...about life here."

He raised up and leaned on his elbow. A thin stripe of the departing sun fell over a ravaged face of unmasked pain. The ray of light crossed one slate eye, rendering it nearly colorless, a glassy intensity against the red-tinted flesh. He wanted to speak. She turned on her tape recorder.

"These people are like people everywhere, some good, some bad. Not many heroes or demons...varying degrees of both. Lots of times a maddening schizophrenia, hero and demon in the same sandals. The Indians I know in Guatemala are austere...harsh from a hard life -- birth mortality is incredibly high here --, devout from helplessness, cowed by hopelessness, sometimes playful and childlike, sometimes incredibly foolish and full of *aguardiente*...sometimes wise. They've had their so-called noble culture kicked out of them along with most of their will. It began with the church which tried to erase their past. They had to please all their gods and the *godly* human intruders, to mix all the Christianity with their reverence for nature. They still do this. More foreigners, local wars of greed, cruel Ladinos, and landlords did the rest. There's hardly anything noble left. A hodgepodge of mixed culture at the bottom of the heap. They're tough. They persevere but they need a sense of pride...unity. The splendor decorating their bodies -- what tourists expect to see -- is all gone...brilliant feathers. The textiles are still around -- their identity sells -- dress that could once tell you in an instant where they were from...mostly replaced by polyester rags. You can't weave your history without a future. You know that. You said a while ago that once you came to study their culture. What did you find?"

"At first beauty," she said, switching off her tape recorder. "My eyes were clouded with expectation...and of course preconceived ideas. I was looking with such exquisite fragments of ancestral achievement in mind. But then I tried to see through the eyes of the people here and... Well, someone... It happened that I..."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing...nothing. I still see remarkable character, some proud identity...alongside all the rags and misery."

She had wanted to speak of Brehnt Ghilde's effect on her

view of Mayan culture, and her own galvanizing view of its descendants, but it was intertwined with a firmly guarded sentiment and out of place. Sharp emotion-driven thoughts superseded memories of the scholarly conversations she had loved to share with Brehnt. Once again a heated frustration, a fragility swept over her, debilitating.

She thought that to fall in love was to fall from reality, to be rendered madly willingly vulnerable. Love was a singular drug which steeped the mind in false power, both a sweet infusion and a cloying addiction that came drifting back without warning, as it did now, pervading the senses of the addict with token visions: pink guava juice in clear tumblers of rum, rank and sweet and earthy; warm neon-blue twilight casting a single bright star above surrendering palms; the unfailing arousing mouth of love prevailing over need, withdrawing to be recharged, returning with hot mercy; the vital hand, unseen but known to wait for her, resting on the back of her chair; the artless joyous awakenings, conjoined in rose dawns, *desayuno* with banana sun: *café con leche* in heavy-plated metal on starched old white linen; pineapple jam and light rolls jeweled with sugar crystals; crimson and purple bougainvillea with hummingbirds and laughter, always the laughter of love. Flesh and bone love -- all in good time, such a good time. A very short time. And all run out.

"Mahta?"

"Hmm?" She made a hesitant return and was surprised to think that Jim's hard scrutiny could make her skin flush, she, a rather inured and seasoned creature -- she had coaxed herself into believing; a belief that was now suspended by an unrequited longing, so powerful it again made her vulnerable, and just then unable to mask her condition. She felt certain that Jim must have caught at least a hint of what she had almost revealed. Their severely tested nerves and exposed emotions engendered a kind of sixth sense which made the strongest unspoken sentiments more easy to read in each other.

He laughed as though he had shared her inflamed reverie and said, "I wanted to marry a Spanish girl who was helping me with the Indians."

"Then why don't you?"

"Everything's all fucked up now. They'll get rid of me one way or another. Look what lengths they've gone to. I can't settle down and foment." There was the clear irony of sarcasm in his tired voice.

"Hobbes was wrong," Jim insisted, "It isn't life in the *natural* state that's poor, nasty, brutish, and short. It's life in the *controlled* state...that's where the rot exists."

"But there always has to be some order," Mahta hastened to answer. "And humane concerted order is better than specious words...we can't just mouth aging philosophies -- those are all closed systems...abstractions...clever finger exercises played by

the culprits themselves: Homo sapiens."

"Right. But we're really a lethal virus. So how do we stop infecting the planet?"

She was reminded that the microbes were after her stomach again. She felt bone tired. "Oh God, Jim, I don't know what to tell you. We haven't learned how to use our wonderful brains. So confusing...isn't it? We haven't evolved enough to properly use what we already possess."

"You're quite a sharp woman, Mahta. You don't seem very confused...maybe a little, but it doesn't keep you from doing this. I haven't seen many like you coming around. That makes you a rare character...and very useful."

"No, you're that...very rare and necessary." She laughed a little at her half numb vacillating mind and said, "Tell me about your family."

"My father's a psychiatrist."

"A...really? I didn't know. I met only your father's rather uncommunicative attorney. We didn't talk at all about your family."

"Surprised? You probably thought my father was a union boss. My sister's a naturalist, smart...has a female lover, and my mother's a fairly straight social animal...a busy sort of leveraging do-gooder. I think my sister's also going through a troubled where-do-I-belong-on-this-planet? phase. But at least she's in the driver's seat...and a good kid."

"Well, how did you...how did you get from there to Latin American cornfields?"

"Just borrowed a little here and there and made my own gritty stew. I did okay in school, law school, and...I grew to see beyond the end of my nose. At least I wasn't a damned sheep."

"We seem to agree. I guess we shouldn't start a long harangue right now."

"God no. I haven't the strength."

"Try to sleep, Jim. You'll soon see what it's like to be a night person, caught between a river and a mule. How did you travel before?"

"Jeep."

"Well, it's not the same."

#

They were able to get away undetected by running the motor as little as possible, Anita's uncle coasting down out of the mountains while the two of them lay under a prickly merino blanket in the back of a rusted Toyota truck. They knew the moon was lighting the driver's difficult path over a jarring dirt road, but they were lying in stuffy darkness surrounded by large rickety boxes filled with dry corn cobs. Mahta held Jim's hand and knew he must be gritting his teeth in pain.

By the time the sun sent pink washes of light up to tint the eastern horizon, they had walked for several hours behind Cuerdo and a serious young Salvadoran rebel named Federico. There were no mules. They bedded down in haste, but not before Mahta threw together a mattress of leaves and dry grass to ease Jim's back. He was feverish and she wondered if he was keeping internal bruises to himself.

Beyond the expected boatman, who would materialize in the night at the border river, there were the other two rivers they would have to immerse themselves in to cross, not wide rivers, but the current would tax Jim's strength. She knew he should be in a hospital. Whenever he caught sight of her worried frown he gave a wan chuckle and raised victory fingers. Finally he said, "I'm a pretty good actor, huh? These are just takes, not real life. You get through them and then you live again. Unless of course your number is up."

Falling into a ragged sleep she thought of Jim and the rebels and self-sacrifice. Where did it end? Must it end by sacrificing one's total self? She thought of the grace-infused intellectual Simone Weil who had fallen ill and died refusing food the nurses brought, refusing because others were starving. Saintliness or stupidity...madness? Was there a useful effect? Federico had lost no time in telling them that villagers, kind peasants -- anyone who was caught helping the rebels with even the slightest gesture -- were taken away and shot. "Are Anita and her uncle in serious danger?" she asked Jim and, hearing herself sound far too much like a credulous innocent, received the answer she already knew: "Of course they are, but they live this way because for them there is only the one choice."

In the heat of fever he went on, "It's too bad a moral person can give his life only once while the immoral tyrant can snuff so many lives with a single decision, and live to do it over and over. The would-be Pol Pots build their tyrannies out of human bones. Only a great moral power can stop them. No such viable power exists. When they fall it's almost by accident." How could such cynicism persevere, she wondered aloud. "It's my conscience," Jim answered. "There's no choice."

#

The boatman was late in coming, and it was near the end of their last dark night of travel before Guatemala. *El Cuerdo* had gone ahead to make arrangements for the end of their trip. They would have to cross the border river in early dawn's exposing light -- very dangerous. She wanted to wait for the next night, but they might miss their final connection and, worse still, Jim's strength was waning. The boatman was not the same young man who had ferried her across. She would ever after wonder if he was a Salvadoran agent or in the pay of one. Any imagining, however paranoid, could easily be the truth.

Jim sat hunched over staring at the water, his right hand clutching the gunnel. She knew he was holding himself up he was so weak. His hair fell over his eyes and she reached out pushing it back as he lifted his head. His tired face was a shaded pink, tinted by the morning light, and then the radiant sun of his brave smile. She leaned forward to hear his soft dreaming voice.

"Once I swam to the middle of a river that moved like this. I was ten...had my clothes on. It was to save a duck wounded by a hunter. I didn't know how to swim against the current...got tired...nearly drowned. But I got the duck. It died. My mother was terrified...very angry at my impulsiveness. 'You have to think,' she told me. 'You have to think or you'll drown in wasted compassion.' She was half right, wasn't she? Thinking got me here."

She considered his mother's deep love for him, an unwitting influence of imperilment. He was clutching at his knee with his free hand. She put her hand over his, feeling its cool tension.

"We're halfway across," she whispered. "Very soon you can go home and get well."

"No...if I leave they won't let me back in."

"But what if they force you to?"

"They'll have to."

"Oh, Jim, you have to think."

"You and my mother." He gave a soft laugh. "I've done that...a lot." His voice wavered but held conviction.

There was still the sound of his tenuous hopeful laughter as his hand tightened around hers then relaxed. She heard no alien sound, only the thump of oars, but found his body crumpling in and down as though the air had been let out of him. Then she saw the widening red spot on his shirt front. He let go of her and half rose in a slow twisting motion. She caught at a loose fold of his shirt, the tightening fabric wrenched from her fingers as he slipped backward over the side of the boat and sank into the rose water.

Screaming with rage, Mahta pulled away from the boatman now trying to hold her. "No! Let me go, damn you. Goddamn you!" She dove straight down into the river, surfaced once and dove a little further back. She got ahold of Jim by his right leg, pulled him up and held his head out of the water. His face was white, his eyes open, blood from his mouth washing away in the current. "I love you. Oh, I love you, Jim!" His smooth watery cheek was cold against her mouth. "Get...away," he muttered, afraid for her and coughing feebly then silent. She swam in a seething rage with his body locked tight against her side, the knifing pain in her wrist stimulating her frozen heart. Her adrenaline-powered right arm beat against the current in rhythm with her legs as they drifted downstream, a slow laborious struggle to reach the shore. Guatemala.

Jim was dead. A single bullet. She lay on the sand,

stunned and gasping, too exhausted to weep but shaking with a fury that exploded through her body. A long endless howl lay coiled tight in her chest, heavy and searing as a hot stone.

The boatman had brought her bags and gone away. "I'll take Jim home," she said to the nervous Indian who had come to claim her. This was the man who was supposed to get them to Guatemala City but he soon disappeared.

For a while she was alone with Jim. She smoothed his wet hair and sang with slow dreaminess an old blues song that Sarah Vaughn sang: a few rhyming lyrics about a departing lover who would never know how much love was left behind, sung in a halting voice that finally went silent.

"Hospital," the arriving soldier told her. They could affect solicitude. There was no longer any need to oppose her quest.

"No, not for me. The United States," she answered with unshakable resolve. "Jim and I are going home."

#

Before Mahta left she tried to find the young woman Jim had wanted to marry, and got nowhere. They wouldn't let her go to any of the places he had been, using as an excuse her need for medical attention. The telephone was suspiciously uncooperative; when it finally performed no one knew anything. Everyone was deaf and dumb and blind. The ones who could help were surely the ones who had wanted him to disappear: the general, the soldiers, the government. The others who knew what had happened couldn't surface. Their work went on. She understood how they viewed this tragedy. Perhaps she could do them some good. Perhaps not. This time she didn't fight to see General Carrillo. She didn't fight with anyone at all.

Getting on the plane, a former U.S. Air Force plane which also carried the coffin, Mahta moved with nervous caution, still believing she would be stopped. The paranoia lessened when she was out of Guatemala but it was still pervasive, along with the rage, heightened in a more subtle pathological way. Her own unique chemistry kept her in a blur of forgetfulness. There had been photographers in Guatemala City, where she and Jim were airlifted in a jarring government helicopter. They photographed her in bare feet, still in the clothes in which she had swum the river, her hair a tangle. She didn't, couldn't focus on anything in particular. When she put her hand up to her face she could feel the bones in her cheeks. Someone saw that she was clothed and fed, but she ate only enough to enable her to function. They gave her sleeping pills which she refused to take, sitting on a bed in a dim room, pondering very little. As departure neared, customs officials checked her bags, looked at her emptied camera and tape recorder, shrugged and handed them back. The general had sent her a bouquet of long white carnations. She stood on

the tarmac, frowning with surprise at the new sandals on her feet, the odorous flowers dangling unnoticed from her hand. Someone touched her arm and pointed to the plane. She laid the flowers at her feet.

VII

Mahta had returned from Jim North's hometown, Chicago, in extreme fatigue. The funeral was over and the grievously dreaded conversation with Jim's parents and sister concluded. The Norths were older and far more vulnerable than she had expected. Mrs. North, trembling and white-haired, cried a great deal, clutching at Mahta's hand. Jim's tall reserved father appeared more adept at restraint, the habit of profession obscuring overt emotion. Only his darting eyes belied his grief. Mahta had no idea what his relationship had been with his son. Jim's younger sister, Raina, was pitifully distraught at the loss of her brother. Her quietness was filled with tense emotion. She was not what Mahta had imagined either, but a slim young woman with short coppery-blond hair, plain even features and a splatter of freckles spread prominently across her pale grieving face. Mahta liked her at once and promised to be available whenever needed; it had seemed so important to Raina. It was a normal reaction, the wanting to hang on to every fragment of Jim that was left, the unknown Jim in Mahta's head. "If I'm not in, leave a message and I'll get back to you as quickly as I can," she offered Raina, who lived in California. She said it with warmth and sincerity but feigning a greater strength than she possessed at the moment. If only she herself had someone helpful to call upon. There was Jane Blake, whose cheerfulness would seem profane, and whose strained façade of jaunty optimism was far too promising to abuse. And Jane would, of course, insist upon Doctor Grossmane again.

The ungovernable anger, which she was too tired to suppress, prevented Mahta from calling anyone for relief. She tried to busy herself with preparing a story on Jim. His parents were seeking an investigation of his death. Theirs would not be an easy endeavor. She pitied them for the unending disappointments that lay ahead. She had seen it before. It was far more expedient for officials to paint Jim as a meddler, and a radical activist who should have stayed home, than as a hero of the downtrodden. A part of her wanted to go back and travel the labyrinthine roads of deception and obfuscation, until her accusing finger could point dead center at the perpetrators, like a pin on a dirty map. A third of the way in she would be stopped. Guaranteed. It was a hard form of suicide with maybe a little satisfaction along the way. She knew that right now her small store of energy could only be spent on the story, using her insight and the photographs which counted for so much. She had to show the value of him, so that others would see not only something of Jim but those he had struggled to help.

Mahta found, however, that she could neither study the pictures and tapes nor write. It was too soon. A few friends and colleagues checked in by phone, including Jane, and told her that she should rest, but she didn't want rest. Moody, nervous, and perverse, her tumultuous nightmares were entangled now with Brehnt, Lemur, and Jim. Unless they were violent, she found her dreams oddly welcome. Although this preoccupation with the illusory set off a faint warning in her realistic practical side, the dreams put her in touch with those who had undeniable control over her. There was something she must grasp, and only in dreams did she feel herself near discovery. She checked in very briefly with her father, and spent her days sometimes pacing but more often sitting in her old chair, staring at the light on the water.

Indomitable Jane finally insinuated herself into a long Sunday afternoon with Mahta. Her concern was evidenced by a more circumspect manner and an unnatural restraint. She stepped into Mahta's houseboat with a tight little smile and, with golden-brown eyes searching the room, headed for the big floral chairs. It didn't escape Mahta's notice that Jane placed herself on the edge of the chair nearest the glass patio doors. There she could more easily direct her gaze outward if some portion of the conversation became difficult.

Once settled, Mahta felt uncomfortable and subdued by this altered Jane. Her usually glib and effortless friend was now hesitant, even deferential. This from a Jane who was always a little more interested in amusing others with a good line than in exploring their ponderous interior workings. At present, Mahta very much wanted the old Jane.

A mercurial and excitable creature, Jane was sometimes impatient, unassailable and hard as nails, but at other times soft and deep-throated and purring. "Come to mama and confess everything," Mahta once heard her murmur to an errant lover, dangerous. Petite like Mahta and pale-skinned, Jane often surprised the uninitiated with her larger-than-life animation and swift-tongued cleverness. At one of her shows a bargaining philistine collector had loudly announced that only a very small portion of Jane's work was interesting. Hearing the comment from afar, Jane called above the crowd, "That's because only a very small portion of you is alive." Mahta had spilled her wine laughing.

Jane could bare her soul with a facile thoroughness, but Mahta had concluded that many of her arch outpourings were a form of manic hyperbole, and had told her so. A genuine revealing of self, Jane explained, was prevented by her Asian blood, for there was such blood some generations back mingled with her English line. This rare Asian blood, she insisted with light-hearted irony, placed very discreet limitations on the discovery of her true nature -- thus the East and West mutually held at bay. Jane

loved the idea of it and attributed to it many of her intractable qualities. Her black hair curled around her oval face with a charming old-fashioned bob, her critical red mouth pursing beneath a snub nose. Her shaded eyes were tinted a smoky topaz.

"You don't look so hot, my dear. Your skin, while tan in places, is *not* healthy. And your weight...well, I thought you needed to lose a little but not quite this much. You've got a look...your eyes. When I read the news about you I was afraid. I had no idea what you were doing. God, baby girl, I'm glad you're still walking around. But you can't stay in this lonely little cocoon...sitting here with the lights off. I know you very well and--"

"Tell me about your last trip, your old Fiji stories, Jane. I never did hear much about your escapades. Just go on talking to me...anything. Whatever you can dredge up."

"You know neither of us is in the right mood. It's crazy stuff...and that doesn't fly right now."

"I can't talk about current events, Jane. Can't write about what I need to either. As you know I'm not crazy about jogging but I've always managed to get myself down to the waterfront and make myself do it anyway...just to get the juices flowing. Can't even do that...can't do much of *anything*...too tired."

"You've got to get out a little. Imagine me saying that to someone usually out lassoing the planet. But it's no good shut up in here...too much thinking."

"Yes...thinking...my God, I didn't do something right...a lot of things...that I could have...that I didn't--"

"A little self-reproach is okay, I guess, but only for a while. Mahta...will you please make an appointment with Doctor Grossmane?"

"Oh great! I'm glad you've gotten to *that*. Now I can stop expecting it. Sorry, Jane...can't...not old Doctor G. I have to do this my own way...got to work somehow."

"Have you seen your father?"

"I haven't *seen* him, no. We've talked on the phone. It's all right. It's enough. I don't have the energy, and he doesn't like to come here from his high-up place...*sea level* he calls this. He did offer to come but I said no."

"Look, how about if I bring Grossmane over here?"

Mahta gave a short unhappy laugh. "You seem to think I'm agoraphobic. I'm not afraid to walk out my door. I'm just tired...*tired*. Now tell me about Fiji...please."

"Maybe we should have a little Cuervo Gold first."

Mahta went into her kitchen and stood a minute staring at the cupboard, so tired, trying to remember why she had gone in there. Ah yes, it was to get Jane's stashed-away tequila.

Jane was frowning at her when she returned with a tray bearing a bottle, two shot glasses, and a little dish of salt and lime slices. Mahta knew precisely why the frown was forthcoming.

She had caught a glimpse of herself in the long hall mirror as she went into the kitchen: barefoot; baggy tan slacks -- she'd have to pick up a few smaller sizes, but how it tired her to think of it --; a wrinkled white shirt with unevenly rolled sleeves; no make-up, of course, and a frizzy little braid flopping over her shoulder. For some reason she had fastened a thin gold chain around her neck and put a bracelet over her damaged wrist. That was as far as she got. Too tired. She looked adolescent.

"Oh those amber eyes, honey. They're a prizewinning portrait of misery. Damn it, hand me that Mexican firewater if you want me funny."

They downed two shots. Mahta's stomach was empty and the liquor burned. Almost at once she could feel her cheeks flushing.

"It's the first I've had in quite a while...haven't even drunk any Scotch...sure can feel it."

"A nice Fiji man asked me to marry him...probably thought I had a big dowry."

"Are you serious?"

"I was getting serious."

"You would have stayed there and painted, I suppose."

Jane kicked off her backless wedged heels and tucked her white-slacked legs beneath her. "I would have stayed there and gone down the tube, but he was such a lot of fun. What a bitch of a decision. I'm hardly a woman anymore, nothing but a damned paint dauber. Can't help myself any more than you can help traipsing off to a fracas somewhere. We had our little fun -- in between canvases -- and then I came home. Maybe I'm crazy. Gauguin would have thought so. I was in paradise and I just came home. My depressive side won out."

Mahta uncoiled her body and laughed.

"I've made you laugh. That calls for another shot."

The afternoon drifted on into deeper shadows with Mahta's lessening sobriety occasionally arrested by laughter and Jane congratulating herself, dipping her tongue-wetted fingertip into the salt and throwing back another reward of tequila. She had plunged once again into the old story of her failed marriage, as she sometimes did when her tongue was loosened with ample lubricant. This time the story was somehow more humorous, welcome, even heartening for Mahta. It was always told with a different twist.

"...so never again. Once was enough. God, what a stupid arrangement. Luckily, I'm such a baby myself that I've never felt capable of producing offspring," Jane said. Just as she finished speaking they saw a tall dark figure across the room, a man standing beyond Mahta's open glass doors, which were often left that way in pleasant weather. Jane squinted, peering with shrewd interest, and Mahta stood up, trying to focus. Friends

hardly ever appeared at her door without calling first. They knew she didn't like to be yanked out of her dark room or interrupted at her word processor by someone banging on the door. On her way across the room she wondered how many shot glasses she had put away and decided considerably fewer than Jane, who loved this drink. Nevertheless, she felt a little unsteady, partly due to having scarcely flexed her body all afternoon and partly to a generous amount of Jane's wicked beverage. When she reached the doorway her sluggish torpor was shot through with the adrenaline of surprise.

There stood a scrutinizing Paul Carl in black slacks, white shirt, and black leather jacket. Still the black beard, all so menacing and somehow immediately critical, or was this reading merely one of alcohol-induced paranoia? She glanced at the uncased camera hanging from his shoulder.

"Sorry, I know this is bad form but you have an unlisted number." His leaning frame just cleared the door.

"I do...yes. How did you find me?"

"You left both your temporary L.A. post office box and this address at the Beirut mission."

She made a sluggish feeble attempt to stifle a fast-rising annoyance. "Oh...a...come in and meet...Jane Blake, this is Paul Carl from New York. Jane and I were just... Would you like a...well something? I have--"

His head dipped as he stepped over the sill. "Cuervo Gold. Haven't had that in ages." He did a quick study of her, taking in her bare feet and perhaps calculating her status by the level of Cuervo left in the bottle. "Maybe just a finger, thanks. Then I'll quit being an interloper...now that I know you're here. If you're free tomorrow--"

Mahta and Jane had made a simultaneous interruption, with Jane prevailing.

"No, listen, I've run through all my best stories, and besides I've got to--"

"Wait a minute, Jane. You and I were going to order dinner...or go out or something. I'm sure Paul doesn't mind. He's not--"

"Mahta, where are your manners? He's come all the way from New York."

"Oh, but not to see me," Mahta sang out, having lost all inhibition. She saw his jaw tighten, his head toss back wind-tousled hair, and added, "I mean, you probably--"

"Please." Paul laughed, extending his hand in protest. "I sure didn't mean to flutter the doves." He moved closer to Mahta, leaned in to recapture her averted eyes and said, "Just wanted to say hello and see how you--"

"And I'm really going now," Jane interrupted again, ignoring Mahta's anger and disappointment.

Jane was already backing out the open doors. "Nice meeting

you, Paul. By the way, I know who you are...like your photo work...it's really fine."

"Thanks." Paul glanced at Mahta.

"No, Mahta has never mentioned you, but she's never mentioned all sorts of the...all sorts of things -- sorry, I'm a little tight. I'm an artist...paint." She wiggled her fingers. "Bound to notice visual work like yours. She did show me the Beirut pictures, which I now...a...realize you took...amazing."

"Yes, she was," Paul said, again focusing on Mahta.

"Try to get her out of here, will you?" Jane suddenly added in mock secrecy.

Mahta followed her, hopping with bare feet out onto the boardwalk and leaving Paul to stand sipping his Cuervo.

"Jane, please don't leave me," she whispered. "I'm in no condition to deal with him."

"A big-shot photographer...hmm... Hey, that's a kind of pun. Well, I'll just have to trust him. He really seems concerned about you. I'm doing this for your own good."

"I'm angry with you, Jane...how're you getting home?"

"You'll get over it. I made you laugh, didn't I? Don't worry, I'll topple into a bus. Take care of the self, my old...old friend. Woo! Tequilaville. Hope I don't fall overboard here. Maybe I'll call you tomorrow...or maybe I won't. Maybe I'll show you my Fiji paintings soon."

They hugged and Mahta said, "I'd love to see them...I will see them. Thanks for coming anyway. Take care now, you...you deserter...traitor."

Mahta walked back inside with slow shaky steps and stood in awkward silence. She missed the lively support of her gregarious friend whose nonstop voice, after only a little hesitation, had deluged the afternoon with a much needed diversion of amusing twaddle.

"I didn't mean to do that," Paul apologized.

"Oh well, it's not that serious. Jane is...she's just a neat person. I was...her company was..." She stopped herself, angry that she had tried to explain anything.

"I understood her...innuendo, because I... Media folks never leave much to the imagination." He hesitated and went on. "I know most of the press who were hanging around when you...came out of there. Mahta, I think--"

"Please...I'd rather not talk about..." She didn't finish, merely walked away and busied her hands with refilling his shot glass. Why did he have to show up? Incredible. If Jane had stayed...but now she wanted to lie down and sleep and sleep. She was very tired, tipsy and on edge. When she finally ambled back into the room, this time with an accompanying lime slice and a little salt on a tidbit plate, she had to undergo an insolent scrutiny. The piercing blue eyes were hard at appraisal, fixing her in a regrettable but accurate frame of dishevelment.

"You're tired. I should go and let you sleep...but now I feel responsible. You need to eat...and Jane said to take you out."

"Never mind what Jane said. I'm not hungry at all."

He thought a moment and apparently decided to become more assertive. "When you've been drinking all afternoon you haven't enough function left to realize that you should eat. God, you've lost so much weight."

It was the wrong tack and her inflamed voice flew back at him. "This is too much. You waltz in here -- someone I hardly know -- telling me what I ought to be doing. What should you be doing? Why did you come?"

"Don't get angry. It's the alcohol."

"But I really don't understand. Did you want pictures, gro...grotesqueries of Mahta Lind? I'm not--"

"Jesus, this is going nowhere. I'll come back tomorrow when you're sober. I will come back because I really do respect you, Mahta...and your work. I had some things I wanted to talk about. I know you've been through hell. I'm damned sorry about that. Get some rest. Good night."

"Right," she said, slamming the doors at his vanishing back. She felt like crying and did.

Falling across her bed without removing her clothes, she drew her knees up to her chest, put her fingers in her mouth and bit the cuticles. "Liquor-sad...all kinds of sad...oh, good riddance," she muttered, dozing off.

Fortified with corrosive aspirin, Mahta was ambulatory by noon. She was hoping that Paul Carl would not return and, despite her malaise and stomachache, was preparing to flee when he reappeared. Jacket in hand, she was making a dash for the open doors when his persistent Wellingtoned foot transgressed her doorsill. Had she groaned out loud?

"Hello. Feeling better? Thought maybe we could have lunch," he offered with a carefully polite voice.

He lifted his hand from the pocket of a shearling jacket and ran his fingers over the corroded door frame.

She sighed and stepped past him out onto the boardwalk, squinting with blinded eyes at the sparkling water.

"Come along then," she said, sliding on her sunglasses and moving away. "I'm not good company and I'm not very hungry, but...God, you do persevere."

"That's what photographers do."

"I was just going over to a little place on the water and try to fuel my neglected frame."

Shouldering his camera he walked along beside her, taciturn and waiting she was certain for her to select a topic of conversation. She remained silent until they were seated in the dark green window booth of a waterside cafe.

"I'm a...a little embarrassed at my performance last night."

My conduct reflects poorly upon my father who brought me up to be courteous...well, without Jane's damned tequila sotting my brain." She glanced at his earnest face, then out at the boats dancing in their slips.

"I just showed up at the wrong time."

"Yes, you unwittingly did...but lately there is no right time," she admitted to a head bent over the menu.

"Better take a look at the menu," he suggested.

They ate seafood salads and drank lemonade.

"You ought to finish your salad; it's good."

She felt certain that he was coaxing her to be a good girl with the benefit of paternal experience.

"I'm through." Her look was final.

"This is good for you," he said taking a sip of his lemonade. "Liquor depletes your vitamin C."

"I've heard that."

"Mostly, I'm just making conversation."

He fell silent, his intense blue eyes boring through her careful façade. It was painful trespass.

"Why do you stare at me like that? It's...really uncomfortable."

"I thought looking would help me figure some of you out. You're quite interesting. Even last night, fairly drunk and barefoot...old clothes...you exuded a kind of...of lofty self-containment...a certain worldliness and...innocence. There's more than one person in there; the one in Beirut was the spitting image of a tough brat...but with the little boy you were... I haven't seen that combination before."

"Please don't start."

"Sorry...just a rough form of appreciation."

"I don't handle that sort of thing very well. I don't handle it at all. Thank you...I guess."

He grinned. "So careful. So cautious. You certainly don't trust me. I'm not to be let in, but you've probably let in some others who weren't altogether perfect, haven't you?"

"Even you once."

"All right." He laughed. "Why did you? If I recall anything, it's that you weren't even there...or hardly so. I don't think I was ever really let in, sweetheart."

"How dare you!" she cried, half rising. "How dare you toss your phony big-town familiarity at me. You just--"

"Jesus, forgive me. I'll try never to do that again. But ease up a little on the hometown, okay? There are still a few decent souls left in Calcutta...even if I'm out of the running. Come on now, can't we..." His light grasp of her arm across the table attempted to settle her back down.

"Hands off." With fingers extended, she sat down.

"Okay...okay. My God, you're angry. What about your father's careful upbringing?"

Feeling fragile and jittery, she drew her hand over her face and looked out the window. Some of this was the aftermath of the liquor, and the immediate discomfort compounded her sadness. Behaving badly was really quite an understatement. She glanced at him, her eyes brimming.

He was watching her with a wary pitying fascination. In one appraising glance she saw the straight offending nose, the high cheekbones beneath coolly penetrating eyes accented by arching brows of the same blue-black intensity as the very short and neatly trimmed beard; startling. Beneath the sloping black mustache the full decisive mouth, so brazen, so judgmental with its curling corners, made her think of a stylized jaguar snarl. This unavoidable looming physical presence, totally unfamiliar, shocked her. In her pathetic condition it was a terrible invasion. Having for the moment lost her shield of strength, she admitted to herself that she was not only still quite weary but also horribly vulnerable. She sighed and threw up her hands.

"Well, as you see I can't predict what the next minute holds. I'm surprising myself. Sorry. Really. I could have helped us into a polite conversation...agreeable but impersonal. Extreme emotions...personalize...they really... I regret that. Yesterday afternoon with Jane was a nice departure. I guess now I'm paying the price."

"At least be honest with yourself. It isn't just yesterday afternoon. I know you've been through hell. I'm still here, aren't I? I'll accept the...the flare-ups. Give me credit for some insight. I want to treat you well, with the concern you deserve...if you'll just let me."

"You're here to tell me...ask me something specific. I can see that...even in my miserable condition. I'm a means to some end. What is it?"

His brows furrowed and there was hesitation in his voice as he said, "Guess I shouldn't be surprised at the way you do that: hit the nail on the head, but you're not entirely accurate this time. About that past...blunder, please try to forget it. We change. You've changed."

"I certainly have," she agreed with a sigh.

The waitress returned with the check and his credit card. He signed then snatched up her jacket, forgotten in the booth. She refused help with it, grabbing it from him.

They walked back to her houseboat in an unhurried manner, once again with only minimal conversation. He read the names on the boats with amusement. "Why take a sleek looking job like that and call it 'Birdbath?'"

"Maybe it belongs to a modeling agency."

"Are you remembering that I took pictures of models? I still do on occasion...it costs them. That kind of work is an unusual art form...otherwise superfluous. Mahta...I haven't quite figured how to read you...but I will."

"It isn't necessary."

He remained quiet until they were inside and settled in her large old chairs.

"From the moment I saw you in Beirut I knew you had it in for me. I've got a stubborn streak, so instead of being off-putting that was a challenge. I'm really not so bad though. Even in New York there are a few people who think I have seizures of politeness."

"I don't want to be discourteous...I really don't, but I'm not seeking any new friendships now. I just can't handle it, platonic or...whatever. And as to the reason you came, you don't have to prove your character first. I'm just tired...careless enough to wish you'd get to the point."

"You're also very depressed, Mahta."

"I should be singing and dancing? So what?"

"Well anyway you've got a wonderful sense of humor."

"We've established that I'm sometimes wonderful and you're sometimes not. Now what?"

"Now we switch them around."

His answer produced resounding laughter from her, but it was enervating.

He planted his elbow on the chair's thick floral-patterned arm and leaned on his hand.

"You've come a long way from that hungry little mixed up kid I met so long ago."

"Here we go again."

"Why don't you just let me get this off my chest with a little self-respect intact."

"Why should I?"

"So callous...so vindictive. You must have loved me a hell of a lot to hurt this much...and all in five minutes."

"Don't flatter yourself. I just don't like your kind."

"What kind is that? What do you think you know about me anyway?"

"Enough. Lots. You were so full of yourself. All you seemed to care about were designer labels...and who was on the front of the rag sheets."

"I was young. I was in the business. Give me a break. God, I was hungry myself...and crazy. I was, at the time, incapable of identifying the inchoate you. I was a damned insufferable peacock...hardly noticed anything except my own professed genius. My poor wife had already left me...and for good reason...my God, eager young models flying in and out of various near and far-flung beds *prestissimo*."

"How very self-incriminating...and now you're St. Augustine, huh? Stop the personal stuff and get to the damned point."

He got up and stood over her with exasperation. "You're not going to allow me to apologize, are you?"

"Not if I can help it...no absolution from me."

"It seems out of character...this cruelty."

"Ah, you mean you don't love me anymore? Remember now, you have no idea what my character is. Perhaps you have fantasized an angelic personality." Her own hastily uncalculated choice of adjective taunted her with a sharp pain.

He waved his hand in the air. "Okay, you were someone *en passant* and you didn't enjoy me much. I remember that."

"Your gigantic ego remembers that part."

He ignored her remark and went on with his attempt to exculpate himself from the sparsely remembered damage he had caused. "You must have been hurt -- you're so creative, sensitive. I was off single-mindedly chasing the big time. For a while it got all fucked up with vanity...with a batch of misplaced values...ridiculous and superficial. I hurt you, of course, by not seeing an individual...by not respecting you even in passing briefly through your life."

"Is that it, the grand Eastern apologia?" She folded her arms. "Impressive. I'm almost ashamed of myself...but I really can't handle much more of this. You must want something really bad, right?"

She put her head back and closed her eyes. She could almost sleep. It was the food. Her eyelids flew open. He was taking pictures of her.

"For God's sake!" she exclaimed.

"Sorry, it's a way of getting educated...my method of study. If we worked together you'd find out that *working* looks somewhat different. You're not well yet, Mahta. You need--"

In leaping to her feet she found her leg was numb, and fell back into her chair. "Don't tell me what I am, what I need. I'm okay. I'm hanging in there. Who're you?"

"I'm glad you asked. I thought you knew it all." He took another picture of her as she rubbed her leg.

"Stop that. You slide in here and involve me in your tidy confession...insult me. I'm angry. You can see that. Please let me keep what control I have...you...you...you condescending, self-satisfied, presumptive bastard!" She had surprised herself, having kept no control at all, but it was too late to quit. "Why don't you leave?"

"I will, but I hope you'll calm down first. I learned to be presumptive early or I'd have starved to death trying to make it on my own. I'm not all that satisfied with myself, and I sure as hell don't want to condescend. Why is it so hard for you to accept a little help?"

"You're helping me?" She threw up her hands.

"I'd like to stay a little longer and try...or I may never get to the point you're so persistent in demanding."

"But why...after what I've said?"

"Christ, I'm feeling generous...and maybe I had it coming."

"Maybe you did."

"I hope we can overcome that. You're too valuable to lose this way. It's my contention that I discovered you through my camera lens. What I saw...unbelievable. Look at you now. You haven't combed your hair much; your clothes are falling off your emaciated body; you've been through hell and yet you're..." He was silent a moment and then switched to a new subject.

"Billy Sackes...you know who he is? Sure you do. Our very possible nemesis. He's infamous...maybe a competitor. Far worse than I am...respects nothing but his faultless lens. If you think the papers were bad...he had indecent close-ups of you when you came out of that sad business. You were in no shape to notice, and Billy getting it all with his fucking macro lens: barefoot, half-clothed, the bleeding wrist...and total miserable distraction. That wrist...let me see." He reached for her hand, careful in lifting the bracelet. "Do you have to cover it up with a goddamned irritating bracelet? It's a wonder you've got a hand left."

Mahta pulled herself out of the chair but hung onto its back, unable to interpret most of what she was hearing, her brain fuzzy with the interminable exhaustion.

"What do you mean...indecent?"

"I mean you standing barefoot by a coffin with your soul exposed. For once it struck me as indecent to be that invasive. I happened to be at Billy's while he was noisily adding you to his latest dubious achievements. That's what I call fortuitous. He owed me one and I got the negatives from him. They were the worst of the lot -- that's how very good they were. Sometimes we can bribe each other a little. It was my turn with Billy...but no mean feat. And by the way, I did come out here to see you...for several reasons."

She drew herself forward as the chilling realization of Jim's loss swept over her, a dark, dark river of cold. Jim, Jim North...so alive...so alive. In an instant she was back standing with her hand on the coffin, crying from so deep a place it felt like vomiting her insides. She knew it would be unstoppable if her body started shaking with the same deep racking grief, even more debilitating because she was struggling to hold it in. The struggle ended as she sank back down into her chair. "Oh Jesus, God! I...get...people...killed. They die...die...die all around me...the important ones." It wasn't directed at him, fully an outraged cry to herself, more frequent now, usually silent.

He loomed above her, standing a minute in silence. She awakened to his hand reaching toward her and almost ducked. Her body quivered as his fingers stroked through her hair. "No, Mahta. Not you. You're a good very useful person. Selfless."

Kneeling down trying to look at her, he held her arm just below her shoulder, but she turned her head away. "I'm really sorry...maybe you needed to do some of this. Haven't got any Vals but I can fix you some warm milk. Okay?"

She nodded agreement, but only to have him away, out of her miserable loathsome sight.

"Get tucked into bed and I'll bring it to you."

"I won't sleep."

"Yes, you will...expect to and you will."

When she had forced down some of the milk, he removed his boots and lay atop the bed, stroking her neck and back until she began to feel sleepy. His long-fingered surprisingly agile hands were soothing, rather comforting.

#

Mahta opened her eyes and had coffee thrust at her, or perhaps it only seemed so abrupt. She checked the clock: 9 a.m.

"Is this your concession to charity?" she asked, and then regretted her quick tongue. The coffee was good.

She was embarrassed. Should she say so, or was it so obvious it wasn't necessary? Once so long ago when they were apparently both other people, he had made a hasty assault on her body and she had somehow responded; now she had not even a blurred memory of the act. The man before her was wholly a stranger, a curious stranger. Yet there persisted a vague feeling of something more that was wanted, not her but something.

Paul sat in her ladder-back chair with his long legs stretched out before him and his feet crossed, sipping his own coffee from another of her blue mugs.

"Have you been here since yesterday?"

"I went out...took your house key and came back in the evening. When you finally sleep you really hang it on."

"Where did you...where were you last night?"

"Just dozed off on your sofa. Was it a good sleep?"

"Must have been. I don't remember anything. Usually I..." She shouldn't bring up her dreams; that would certainly open a private door. "Usually I...I dream.

"But now I've got to get to work." With the subject quickly changed, she wondered if she was at all convincing. The truth was she had no desire to do anything at all.

"Pretty unrealistic, Mahta. You're right in the middle of post-traumatic depression...barely functional...not surprising, but you can do something about it."

The urge to offer a sarcastic comment left her silent. The rage again. How swiftly it came, swarming like a hot red die just beneath the surface of her skin. She put the cup down and dropped her head into her hands, rubbing her eyes. "You don't want to be my nursemaid," she muttered soft-voiced through her fingers, "I'm too ungrateful."

"It's hard for a normally aggressive person like yourself to admit that you need fixing."

"I need to get to work."

"It takes a while to heal. I clicked my way through the end

of Nam like a shock absorber, then came home and went to rot in a shack in the mountains for an entire summer. A raw kid with a messed up head. Not a single aspect of life seemed normal to me. I just hung out there, twisting between rage and stupor. Mostly I slept and woke up long enough to eat a little and knock the furniture around."

She studied him for a moment and thought she perceived a measure of something until recently present in herself: realistic consideration born of experience, possibly beneficial, but she was too tired to search for it. I don't want to be helped, she thought. That's how pathetic I am. She lay back and closed her eyes, so tired she didn't even mind being stared at.

"Can we go for a drive?" Paul asked. "Stevens Pass? It's not a New England autumn but I still remember how beautiful it is in your mountains this time of year."

She was about to explain that she hadn't the strength when he added, "Of course I'll drive and you can sleep or at least rest. Want me to fix breakfast while you dress?"

"No...thank you," she answered, admitting to herself that she had finally allowed him to take control simply by answering at all. She didn't mind. For now, heedless flotsam...drifting along...drifting...drifting.

#

He laughed as he folded his long body behind the wheel of her old Beetle, pushing back the seat. "I'm wearing this car. Thought you'd have some kind of big turf grinder."

"What do you mean?" She had responded with a too quick defensiveness, then laughed herself. "Never mind. This baby Beetle has plowed through many a snowdrift."

She watched him as he searched for a gear. "Aren't you too busy to be doing this? The accelerated information crunch...all kinds of people making demands on you. How can you just cut yourself free like this?"

"Priorities," he answered, backing down the street.

Her limp investigative antennae went up. There was something of a serious nature on his mind. The word intrigue leapt into her paranoiac head. Nonsense, she thought, this man came west on his own business and is just presently looking for a little R and R. She plumped the pillow she had brought along and lay back. "I'm assuming a clever traveler like yourself knows how to get where he's going."

"Uh-huh, I studied your road atlas this morning while you were sleeping."

"It would take us three hours to get to Leavenworth. Do you know it? Charming alpine village. Probably aren't as many tourists now. Last week was the Autumn Leaf Festival: Beer and sausage...fudge...lace shops...local artists...peppy braces of accordions...folks milling around under flower baskets hanging

from the lampposts...dancing to the oom-pah-pah--"

"We're spared. I was thinking of going to Lake Wenatchee."

"One of my favorite swimming lakes. Breezy. Wind surfers like it. A jewel of a mountain lake."

"A friend of mine has a cabin there."

She sat up straight and scrutinized his profile.

"Don't worry, you're not in any condition for that." He offered a broad grin that had probably fluttered some hearts.

"You sometimes have what I think is called a winsome smile." Her serious voice had sounded almost clinical.

"Sorry. It won't happen again."

What the devil did he want? He didn't look at her very often and seemed to be concentrating on something far removed from her or the road or the mountains. A small fear stroked her shaky peace of mind as she glanced at the solemn profile of this unknown entity manhandling her car. Of course there was a woman somewhere, or women, who were thinking of him. He had caused them miseries and pleasures and they wanted attention, love, apology, devotion from him, but she here and now wanted nothing. She smiled and closed her eyes.

"Can a woman have a winsome smile?"

"Why not?" she said with her eyes still closed.

"Then you have one."

From the 405 Freeway they had taken Highway 522, which passed over the sometimes flooding silvery Snohomish River and linked up with Highway 2 near the mushrooming community of Monroe. The environs were woods and small farms and platted land with improvements of motley construction. Highway 2 ran east, winding along the Skykomish River most of the way to Stevens Pass in the rugged North Cascade Mountain Range.

Mahta opened her eyes and found that Paul was just glancing at her. "Wonderful all of these sibilant rivers," he said. "The Skagit, the Stillaguamish, the Snohomish, the Skykomish, the Snoqualmie and some others I can't remember."

"Pretty good." She loved the names, loved to say them. "Indian names that teasethe tongue...mysterious and wild. Alas, they really belong to another time," she lamented.

The winding drive along the river had always been a soothing pastime. Worries diminished in the peaceful solace of the lush fir forests and fern-lined riverbanks. She gazed down upon a scene of fast-moving water. Looking like strewn dice flung by a giant, huge squarish boulders were tumbled mid-river, channeling the rushing water into foaming white rapids followed by still sky-filled pools. A large pool was sliding by as her hooded eyes signaled an urgent desire to close. Sleep...more sleep...there could never be enough, deep as the calming eddies of the swift river. Just as her heavy lids shut down over the green depths Jim North's pale face came floating to the surface, his chert eyes open and staring. She sat bolt upright, a cry tearing out

of her throat. "Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh God, please, no!"

"What?" Paul asked, slowing the car.

"Stop, oh please, please, stop!"

The car had hardly stopped rolling when she wrenched open the door and ran. Her clumsy uninformed legs moved over the loose gravel of the road shoulder as she ran from a vision that decimated her path. Feet accelerating, faster, faster, bounding off the crunching gravel. But it was no use; nothing was left behind. She twisted mid-air and crouched down, shaking her head. "He looked up at me...he *looked* up at me...there was nothing I could do. *Nothing!* Nothing I could do," her broken voice cried out to an empty sky, a silent forest, the taunting river.

Paul crouched beside her. "You got him. You brought him home. My God, what an astonishing feat that was. He knew who you were. He knew what his actions meant. His pain is over now. It wasn't your fault. You did so well."

"Oh, I did so well but he's dead. Someone so...incredibly valuable. We're all to blame for that. Aren't we? My God."

"Maybe. Come on." He lifted her up and held her against him, lingering a moment. "Want to find a cafe?...coffee?"

"No." She stepped away from him and put her hands in her pockets, still shaking badly. "Keep going. Just keep going. Wherever you're headed."

Her shoulders drooped as she propelled herself back to the car and got in.

They went on for another hour and a half. Paul drew her attention to a camel grazing in the middle of a field of llamas. "They're related," he said. "You think the camel knows he's with relatives?" Mahta shrugged. A little later he touched her shoulder with the back of his hand, pointing out an old carpenter gothic slate blue house which had been turned into a restaurant. "Yes, I've eaten there," she said. He was not a loquacious traveler and she sensed that he was talking mainly to keep her from dredging up further emotional flashbacks. Sleep was all she wanted, to sleep as though anesthetized.

The uplifted earth continued to build in volume and elevation until they sped through the 4,061 foot high gap of Stevens Pass. Above them the sun-dazzled red and gold veins of deciduous forest and brush spilled off the rocky range's broad crevices in cascading ribbons of brilliance. At the Ole junction they turned north off Highway 2 onto 207, and in a few curving miles reached the southeastern end of Lake Wenatchee. They moved over a narrow but smooth-paved road winding through a needled-floored woods of fir and pine. The steady wind hummed through the forest, whipping up rough whitecaps visible beyond the dark tree limbs and trunks which stood between the road and the lake. Beneath the white froth the roiling lake was a deep viridian.

"Now the tricky part. I haven't been here in a long while," he said, but his memory served him well and he hesitated only

seconds at a few half obscured cabins before entering a gravel driveway. It circled around in front of a dark brown log cabin, rustic and old-fashioned.

There were just four rooms and a loft, but two of the rooms were quite spacious. A railed deck overlooking the lake ran along the west side of the cabin. Mahta planted herself there in the middle of the deck in a slatted Cape Cod style chair. Wind surfers were skittering along about half a mile's distance. She looked out, not dreaming, simply absent, sipping now and then from the sweating glass of ginger ale Paul had brought her.

"I'm warming some stew and rolls I found in the freezer," he said, dragging a matching chair over and joining her with his Scotch in hand.

"Very resourceful." She watched him drink with his hand over the glass top. "I haven't made any attempt to help."

"No help needed."

"You're drinking Scotch and I'm drinking ginger ale."

"Liquor isn't good for you when you're depressed. The drinking yesterday wasn't good for you. Jane should have known better. No progress if you do that."

"It isn't up to Jane to monitor my progress."

He drained his glass. "Sorry, this isn't polite."

"How did you manage all this?"

"Just called my friend this morning and she told me where the key was. She's a journalism professor at the University. A good head...a good woman."

Looking straight out at a bobbing wind surfer skimming over the water at about 30 miles an hour, she asked a question, hearing her voice as both foolish and quavering but so in need of an answer her sense of privacy was overcome. "Am I having a sort of nervous breakdown?"

"I think you're trying to avoid one, aren't you?"

"This condition is getting all too familiar. Something like it has happened before: trauma...loss of purpose; tiredness. God, tiredness nigh unto death; obviously, anger...terrible anger...and...and dreams."

"Depression. The dreams are an escape valve...maybe instructive if you can tolerate them."

He left his chair and stood in front of her, leaning back on the deck railing with both elbows and crossing one long leg over the other. "What happened to you in the car, Mahta...that's going to go on for a while; it'll come back at you, unexpected. Eventually you'll figure out the sorts of images and incidents that can trigger it; sometimes you can see it coming."

In relating her feelings it occurred to her that Paul must have gone through the same kind of experience after Vietnam, and perhaps in other situations. "I don't want to be so damned self-indulgent; if I know this why can't I stop it?"

"You haven't got control yet. You're healing. When you

break a leg you can't walk until the bone mends...like that.
Stress breaks things too."

"Am I mending...do you think?"

"How were you last week?"

"I sat in a dark room...tired...slept."

"And here you are."

"But I'd be there still if Jane and you hadn't been so insinuating."

"You complied. That's encouraging."

"Maybe I was too helpless to resist."

"Take the positive approach...say you participated, that you made a decision to go on making them."

"I once swore I'd never drift again...that I'd be very definite about everything under my control."

"You haven't done too badly, but a lot of the life you lead *isn't* under your control. Beirut didn't help either. That was a bad business...pretty brutal. The tough part of you was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen...but you can't go through something like that without it exacting a toll. If you keep putting yourself in those situations you don't get much chance to heal."

"It's what I do, Paul," she said with a steady voice, feeling her own stubbornness rising to her defense.

"Yeah...you're a real surprise. You don't look like you could be that strong. Sometimes you're...well, incredibly shy, but then you're so determined...so damn... You know you were laughing in that hellish barrage, *laughing*, Mahta...of course, the little boy... Anyway, I think you get a kind of exhilaration out of those ordeals. That's dangerous. I need to talk to you about that sometime."

"No, I don't get high on that. God, no. Regardless of how bad it was there, for once I was in the right place. The exhilaration was Lemur."

"Maybe you can do something about your Lemur."

"Oh even if by some miracle I managed to have...but with my inclination to wander I might not be very good at...staying home. No...no, I wouldn't be. I can't. I won't."

"He needs a mother. A wandering mother who provides well and loves well is better than none."

"I don't know about that. I think it's out of reach now. If I have a destiny -- how epical *that* sounds -- it's this immutable road I've paved for myself. Probably a short road." Regretful of that remark, she gave a little dismissive laugh.

The wind blew her hair in her eyes and she pushed it back, staring at her legs stretched out in baggy pants and old cowgirl boots.

"You're right. I'm a mess. I haven't a shred of vanity left."

"I don't recall saying you were a mess."

"Well you should have."

The question of destiny and Lemur floated through her mind again as she forked steaming hot stew into her willful mouth and chewed and swallowed without tasting. Perhaps to care for all children was to have none, to worry over all mankind was to help no one in a substantial way. There seemed no exit from her fateful road. Was she almost to the point of engaging again? Something stirred within her and she felt a sudden need to be at her writing. Still, her arms felt too heavy to lift even to feed herself.

When they had pushed back their plates and were sipping hot chocolate, she thought of how Paul had found her in Lebanon and said, "Why were you there in Beirut?"

He snatched up the plates and set them in the sink, returning to sprawl in his tilted-back chair. "Actually I was photographing superstructures...or what's left of them. The infrastructure has gone to hell in Beirut but there are large construction companies looking to the future. They're making plans to rebuild...paid me a tidy sum to stick my neck out for a pictorial status report."

"While people are dying."

"There's a terrible irony in that, you're right, but at least a kind of optimism prevails -- the nature of short memory. And I was photographing some of those other things too, Mahta. Some of the things you were aiming at in Beirut."

"It's cold in here," she said, hugging her shoulders.

"Think I can do something about that."

Paul made a fire in the large basalt-slabbed fireplace while she remained idle, mesmerized. Entertainingly methodical, he took a small silver jackknife from his pocket and sliced at a round chunk of pine until he had a nice pile of shavings. Crushed paper, shavings, branches, larger pieces of wood, positioned so that they wouldn't smother the fire, were all deftly assembled -- an economy of movement she found soothing. He pushed a few fallen pieces together as the fire caught, then leaned back on his Wellingtons, whacking his hands together. He stood up and continued to study the fire's progress. Mahta watched him slide his hands along lank thighs and stick his thumbs in the tight back pockets of his Levi's. As the fire climbed, the light flickered over his black hair and beard, crimsoning his beige wool shirt.

"I could have used you at Saltspring," she said in a low voice half to herself.

"Saltspring?" he asked with a little interest but still watching the fire. "Isn't that one of the Canadian Gulf Islands?"

"Yes, an island where I go to...to get away. When I was there after Beirut, I couldn't get my fire to burn."

"Oh, no punk wood," he said, pushing a small log with the

tip of his boot. "Well, you must have figured it out."

"Yes, with pine cones."

"They work fine...resin." He turned around and said, "I think you're alone too much."

"Could be, but I need that place...and I love it. It's where I first saw the pictures you took in Beirut...sitting at the kitchen table in the evening...staring at myself and Lemur. There in all that quiet the memory was so loud...those incredible pictures...thank you for them. They're very good."

"How could they not be?" he said, now looking hard at her with a direct gaze. "The subject was...one of a kind."

"Why didn't you...use them?"

"One of these days I will." He turned back to check the fire, then set the fire screen before snapping flames. "Right now I don't want to. I just want them for myself."

Mahta sat with her hands folded over a blue afghan, rocking gently in the comfortable old rocker she had chosen.

"You are so New York -- right now the Adirondacks," she observed, quite amused. "I imagine everything you're wearing has the right label. I do remember that much about you. I guess it annoyed me. This old red sweater I have on...I've no idea who made it, and my slacks are just old slacks. I suppose you think I'm frumpy...provincial."

"If I've thought of anything it's that you seem to be disappearing," he answered, turning around then dropping down and stretching out on his side on the wool hearth rug. "You're very good to photograph, though, but a person hardly thinks of clothes...looking at you."

Mahta stifled a laugh, then thought of saying something sharp but sealed her mouth and stared at the fire.

"I think what I meant," Paul said, with a chuckle at his unintentional double-entendre, "was that clothes are unimportant because there's depth. You're a soulful person. Most people really need material embellishments."

His voice grew serious. "You're on about the past. Is that still a sore point? That weekend... I probably didn't come back when promised; is that it?"

"I just have a wee bit of an ego myself," she answered.

"You should feed your ego a little more. But labels." He laughed. "I swam among them, and then later they just got to be a habit...still are somewhat. Certain reliable objects become friendly. Back then I'd just gotten my New York booster shot: recognition, and thought everyone out West was...hmm, crude? Come on, can't you overlook my incurable sin? I don't impose it on others. Your old red sweater is fine with me."

"There was a time when...I had it thrown in my face." Kenneth had driven her mad with labels, style, colors, his angry hands even wiping off the *wrong* lipstick. "I got fed up."

"Okay."

She threw off the afghan and stood up. "Somehow I'm feeling that you're akin to the psychiatrist Jane is always so eager to foist on me. I'm revealing things to you and I don't even know you."

"Yes, you know me a little now, don't you? More than you would a psychiatrist anyway."

"And there's something else. Call it a sense I have about things hidden. Lately I've been a little slow but I think there's something you want to tell me...ask me. Isn't there? Something has peaked your interest and led you here, a piece of work...something. Maybe you're holding back because you think I can't handle it now."

Paul sprang up and stood facing her before the fire. "My God, you're good at that, aren't you?...using that very keen investigative nose. And you're absolutely right. I was planning on feeding you mulberry leaves for a while, so to speak, until you were healthy enough to spin your silk."

"You see me as a worm then, maybe to catch a fish?"

"Amazing." He laughed and walked across the room, grabbing up their jackets. "Just now I see you as a rare moth, very rare...but too close to the flame. Let's go for a walk by the lake. There's a moon."

"I'm not romantic."

"Well if true that's kind of unfortunate for you, but I just meant that it's easier to see walking at night when there's a moon."

"Why do we have to walk?"

"It clears the head."

"Yours or mine? Mine is getting clearer by the minute."

"So I see. Maybe it'll get so clear you'll be able to read my mind, but unless that happens I'm not going to talk about this until I think you're ready."

"How will you know when that is?"

They stepped off the deck, both determined, trudging forward and speaking a little sharply to each other. He's not going to be intimidated by me, Mahta thought, nor I by him. Her head was aflame with curiosity, mingled with an unpleasant dose of anxiety and suspicion.

"So were you a Boy Scout?" she asked, kicking a moonlit blue pebble into the lake with the scuffed toe of her cowgirl boot. The rocks made her steps wobble.

"A Scout? Sure." He caught her arm as she stumbled.

"Where did you grow? New York?"

"I grew in Minnesota first, for just a short while."

"Oh no, another Minnesota escapee. What is it about that place? It must be all those dreamy lakes."

"Sure makes a hell of a canoer out of a person."

A chilling breeze insisted on returning a wisp of hair to her eyes, a few annoying strands that she kept pushing away. She

was laughing over Paul's comment.

"I've made you laugh." He seemed proud of himself as he turned up the collar of her old black P-jacket.

"Yes," Mahta answered. "It displaces anger very well. I like doing it."

"Did you tell me once you'd been married?"

"Did I?" she asked, cooling again.

"Truthfully, I don't remember," he answered.

Here it comes, Mahta thought. Inquiries. Soft inquiries working up to something and then, bam!...right in the solar plexus.

"What do you need to know about me to get to the point?"

"Anger again," he said. "Damn it."

"The anger of impatience."

"You're a little too direct."

"Oh, God. Let's just pussyfoot around all night." Mahta turned away and stalked off toward the cabin.

"Wait, damn it! Now I'm getting angry."

"No. I'm cold."

His footsteps came crunching and clattering over sand and stones, and then his hand caught her arm. "It is cold. Here." He opened his sheepskin jacket and held her against him. "Let's get close a minute. Sometimes you --"

"Oh no. Don't say that. I do remember that. You must have said it a thousand times to a thousand--"

He had bent down and kissed her open mouth, probably to end her wildness. She couldn't stop the anger but then was almost moved to respond, instead turning her head away.

"Don't, Mahta." He leaned around her, his mouth finding hers again, and this time she did respond.

Inclining against him in an awkward moment, she tried to assess her shifting feelings then stepped back and moved away toward the cabin. The moon danced on the black water. He strode up beside her and they were silent for a while.

"I didn't think I was going to do that. It isn't why I brought you here...but things were--"

"You thought you'd just turn on the charm."

"This anger--"

"Yes, I do have anger. Yes, yes, yes! It's been building, building for years and years. And lucky you, you get to see the explosion!" She was shouting, raging against a rising and fitful wind urging her on. Just ahead was the cabin. She ran up on the deck, flinging herself through the door and grabbing her car keys from the kitchen counter.

"Hey, wait a minute. Just a minute. You're not leaving here like this."

He reached out to snatch the keys and she struggled against him, trying to get through the door. He held her from behind, unfortunately unaware that she could not stand to be restrained

in any way. She struck his arm again and again with her fist, screaming, "Let me go! Let me go!" It must have hurt. She was horrified, unable to stop. He was very tall and powerful, had much more strength at his disposal, and easily spun her around with a sudden fury. He hesitated a moment while she fought on, then gave her a quick slap across the face, not very hard, but hard enough to make her leap back against the wall. She slid down to the floor as he was removing his coat. There was no pain at all, only astonishment and a vivid shame.

He knelt beside her, took off her coat, then scooped her up and carried her to the rug by the fire. The flames were dying. He left her for a moment to throw on another log. She sat with her arms wrapped around herself and her head bent. There was a painless tingle in her cheek and she lifted her hand to rub it. Turning from the fire he caught her gesture and slid his arms around her. "I'm sorry, Mahta...sorry, baby." His voice had a softness she'd never heard from him and there was remorse. "You know I didn't want to. You've been through so much. They hurt you. I can't stand to have you think of me like that."

"Some...not much," she said with a slow voice.

"Christ, I slapped you. What the hell...I never hit women. I was afraid you'd get away and hurt yourself. God, you have so much anger. Take a few deep breaths and try to calm down. Please, Mahta."

She thought she had probably hurt him far more with her angry fists. The explosive rage which had taken possession of her was a demoralizing thing she couldn't understand. She took a few surreptitious deep breaths, but she didn't want to seem too obedient, even if his suggestion was a good idea. When she thought about it his words sounded as if he were talking to a child, a mere child who had been soothed after a tantrum. The anger left her. "What do you want to know?" she asked in a controlled and level voice.

"Nothing. Nothing now," he answered, rubbing her back. "I think we'll stay here. You need to sleep."

"You're expecting to sleep with me?"

"No."

Her head lifted and rested back on her shoulders, her eyes searching his face. His eyes did conceal something.

"God, I want to but I can't do that. It might be dangerous for us both...and it isn't why I came here. But I really do respect you, I really do care for you."

"How could you? Lately, I don't even like myself. How could you? What if I'd been nice?"

"You are, Mahta. I don't know; that's how it goes."

"How does it go...really?"

"I wanted to gain your confidence not to... I know you well enough to know that just a little of us now wouldn't be good for you. Look what happened last time. With you it could really

be...serious...for me. You in Beirut...you in Latin America. You're quite a human being. There's just so much to you. But now there's something that I..."

Her head was still tilted back above his arm and she saw that he was looking at her mouth.

"You've got a scar on your lip." He touched the small rough place on her lower lip with his ring finger.

"Compliments of the Salvadoran Army." She looked up at him with what she hoped was an unconcerned smile.

"It'll go away," he said, leaning down and kissing the scarred lip, a light kiss that quickly became more intense.

"I thought you weren't interested in this."

He was still holding onto her, slow to let go. Pulling his boots off he tossed them aside with quick frustration. "That isn't what I said at all." He gave a long perturbed sigh. "I didn't intend to talk about personal matters but let's...let's get something out of the way...then maybe get on with what you're waiting to hear." The newly inserted log fell with a shower of sparks. He swore, grabbed the poker and thrust it back onto the coals then leaned back staring at the flames. "Jesus, Mahta, I...I'm...a... I'm going to marry someone. I can't let myself have you and you have me because once or twice wouldn't be enough. You called me a bastard. I've got to try not to be one, don't I?"

Mahta jumped up. "This is unbelievable! What am I doing? You're so right, I need sleep." It was difficult to admit that what she really needed was someone to hold onto.

His presence burned into her and she had to get out of the room. She fled into a bedroom where she threw herself across the bed. Lying there for what seemed a long time she began to feel drowsy, but her eyelids flew open when Paul slipped into the darkened room. In the merciful shadows she pretended to be in a state of exhausted sleep while he inched off her boots and pulled the covers over her. The touch of his hands made her very confused bones ache. As he tiptoed away she lay trying to deal with an old loneliness and an aching new desire to be held.

What irony, she thought. What pathetic irony that she couldn't remember what they had once done together, that she had so disliked him for not caring enough to go on, for his careless self-absorption, and that she now wanted him, no matter how inconsistent or humiliating the reversal. A physical need that would pass just as all the other events of her life had come and gone and left her still breathing. She was forever learning that everything passed, but to what avail?

#

Mahta had searched out ingredients and utensils and was making pancakes when Paul slouched into the kitchen. Following the aroma of his morning caffeine he told her.

He held the knife in his left hand, the fork in his right, cutting and eating with a purposeful agility. She noticed that his fingers were somewhat tapered, the nails even and clean. The unusual ring on his right ring finger glinted, a jet stone carved into the head of a lion and set in gold. His hands were smooth taut-skinned tan flesh branched over with prominent veins, their supple strength conveying an image of deft and constant use. She imagined those hands working with cameras and lenses in places that required speed and precision. She imagined those hands caressing the woman he was going to marry.

"I'm glad to see you're eating. Really good pancakes," he said after finishing a short stack.

"Thanks," she answered with a cheerful voice that startled her. She stirred a little sugar into her coffee and took a sip. "My culinary skills make a very short list. Five easy recipes." His laughter pleased her too much.

She had scrubbed her face and braided her hair, but short lighter-colored and very fine strands curled away from her hairline, tickling her cheeks and forehead. She twisted these wisps in her fingers while gazing out at a deer at the edge of the lake. It looked far too thin to make it through the winter. She finished eating but went on sipping her coffee and watching the deer. The poor creature's ribs were showing. She felt an affinity.

"You look a lot better today. Rest is good for you. And food," Paul said, giving her an approving glance.

"Yes. I guess all of this crazy turbulence has been of some benefit." She hesitated and cleared her throat. "I'm very sorry I pounded on you. Lately I have to apologize a lot."

Paul stacked their plates and put them in the sink then returned to the table and stood beside her a minute. She felt his hand on her shoulder like a dull pain, and dropped her head back and to the side to look at the fingers laid against her red sweater. He touched with ease but it wasn't easy for her because she was so unstrung, so in need of consideration.

"I thought it the lesser evil when I slapped you, Mahta...a fast way to get your attention before you... You did surprise me...the rage. In no way did I want to hurt you. I just wanted it to stop. As a child I didn't learn to hit until I went to school. No one in my family did it. In some homes it's the only way children get noticed."

The message was clear. He sat down, watching her all the while, she noted, to see what her reaction would be.

"I may have gotten some attention that way as a child, from my mother, but I certainly don't recommend it. When Kenneth did it..." She stopped herself but it was too late. Paul looked as if he understood all too well what she had only touched upon.

"Oh, damn," she remonstrated. "Now you're going to think that I allowed..." She fell silent.

He didn't say anything for quite a while and then said, "What the hell does it matter what I think? I'm certainly not thinking anything bad about you. Maybe I'm just thinking I'm sorry. Maybe I'm thinking I'd like to have punched the guy's lights out...for you and for making it tough on his successors. And now we're back to hitting."

She laughed. "Well, never mind. I didn't stand for very much. Not me. It just slipped out because we were talking about... Anyway...I can't seem to stop this. My temper is just uncontrollable. My chemistry must really be...off. I guess you found out I can't stand to...to be restrained...anything that looks like domination."

She gazed at the lake, thinking of her childhood in school and of a teacher who often punished her for things she hadn't said or done, she being suspect mainly because she was so nervous and a little belligerent, unfounded guilt creating mistrust. She had wanted to pound on that teacher so great was her rage at being unjustly accused. When she turned from the window back to Paul she realized that he was waiting for her to go on. She had no intention of incriminating herself further.

"I'm really better now though...and I'm eager to get to work."

"You aren't just--"

"No, I'm not *just*," she interrupted, "and," she paused to sigh and laugh a little, "I'm sorry about...about the other thing that happened last night. I think after her confusing tantrum the baby just wanted a cuddly bear."

Paul focused on her over his cup, blue flames in a serious face, burning deep, unamused. Did she imagine some regret? Although she kept her hands clenched beneath the table, she offered him a nicely done casual smile, without flinching.

"A cuddly bear?" he said after a moment.

She grinned at his late-arriving perplexity, considered her flippant figure of speech and, satisfied with it, moved on. "Now that breakfast is over I guess you should tell me why you came."

He leaned on his hands, the knuckles pressed into the close-cropped startling jet beard, and again studied her face while apparently coming to a decision.

"Let's go over there," he pointed to the couch. "I made a fire."

They began by holding to a restrained politeness, sitting at opposite ends of the couch, half turned towards one another like small-talking strangers in a neutral waiting room.

"You're going to find this surprising but the events of life are...are often that."

"Marcus Aurelius said that only the fool is surprised at anything," Mahta offered, with an encouraging shrug.

"Brehnt Ghilde," Paul said, slipping his fingers beneath unbuttoned shirtsleeves and rubbing his forearms. The smoky

morning air of the cabin was still chilly.

She inched her arms against her sides and dug her hidden fingertips into her thighs. She was locked on to that unknown quantity which the veiled eyes had not yet revealed. *He wants that to soak in, to summon up everything it will and then he'll go on.* She waited, heart crashing.

"I was photographing for a reporter friend of mine. He was writing a piece on Brehnt Ghilde when Brehnt was...was suddenly killed."

Why are you doing this? she thought. Why do this to me? Emotions quickly fluxed but she swore that she had held her last tantrum before this man, made her last violent protest, uttered her last bitter sarcasm. Her short nails almost piercing through the cloth of her slacks, she waited.

"Brehnt had a picture of you -- I never connected it at all with the you I met so long ago in Portland. Your hair, your expressions...all of you so different. Anyway, Brehnt couldn't have met the same disturbed young woman I met in my selfish years. She was very nice, very attractive...not at all shallow but still unformed. I'm sorry, but in truth...turned inward and disoriented...not nearly ready to share the valuable part of herself with anyone...especially that me."

Was there, is there a valuable part? she wondered with more pain, clinging to her silent pose and waiting.

"The picture was taken at Tikal, the two of you there before a stele. He was very proud of you...called you Angelica. When I finally recognized you in Beirut I knew I couldn't call you that...and Mahta Lind wasn't immediately forthcoming, but at last I managed to pass the test. If I'm insistent enough memory tends to give me what I want. My usually dependable eyes were totally incredulous -- Angelica."

Not for you, none of that for you. She waited, still in control if her heart didn't explode.

"Are you all right, Mahta?"

"Yes." It was a huge but necessary lie.

"I got to know Brehnt through a mutual friend, a foreign correspondent. It was nearly time for Brehnt to go public. A lot of people were becoming aware of what he was doing...serious enemies. In order to keep doing it he needed wider support. He was becoming rather conspicuous with his extraordinary work."

Now I understand, she thought; now I know what I've always suspected...never admitted.

"That work with the Indians...trying to switch them to another subsistence...getting them to burn the coca crops and stop the cocaine flow... God, it was a death warrant. Moreover, he knew it was like trying to bail out the ocean."

Now she was thinking of Jim North as well as Brehnt, and was glad she hadn't eaten much breakfast. Her lover, her spiritual brother, they were alike. She tried to hold her trembling hand

against her aching stomach -- there were all-to-familiar shooting pains --, hunching over to hide her nausea. Perhaps an incipient ulcer or maybe the old amoebas had her again. Yes, that must be it; they thrived on any sign of weakness.

Paul had stopped talking and was leaning toward her. She glanced at him and away, knew that she was perspiring and took a deep breath.

"You're sweating and it's not even warm in here. Mahta, what is it? Are you sick? You lied to me. You're not well at all." He moved closer to her and wiped her forehead with his hand, his fingers sliding down with the thumb curving over her cheek. The intense compassion in his face -- certainly he had no idea how it worked -- almost tipped her over the edge.

"No, don't. That only makes it worse. Just go on...go on. Please...tell me. I can do this...and I want to hear."

"All right. I was there the day the plane was supposed to have slammed into the mountain in the fog...the way government sources said it did. Only it didn't. We went down there in a chopper almost immediately, under a clear blue afternoon sky. We were ninety-nine percent certain the plane had been blown up. I had intended to be on it, but I made my friend wait for me while I repaired one of my cameras. We were late and Brehnt had to get in and out of where he was headed before darkness."

No longer able to sit, she stood up and went outside, leaning on the railing and staring at the water. When Paul came out she could only glance at him without speaking, because the words would have choked her. The terrible waste that ate up her heart, the longing to turn back and back until there was none of this...the helplessness. When he reached for her she turned away at once, walked back in and sat down before the fire, shaking her head. Intervening memory alive, knife thrusts of sweet hot pain.

Paul joined her. His face was grave. "Mahta, let me... Brehnt had the names of U.S. kingpins at the other end of the supply line. We're still writing this story. It'll be accompanied by photographs that I trudged over mountains and through jungles with Brehnt to get. But the story won't be finished...cannot be finished until we get those names. If you have them you're in danger. Central America certainly isn't a good place for you."

"If I thought that...if I knew they were aiming at me and killed Jim--"

"I doubt that. They were after him and the one hand more often doesn't know what the other is doing. They'd have finished the job. But even if it were true you couldn't blame yourself. You're innocent of any harm...so well-intended...*innocent*."

"Am I? I don't think so. And what about you? If you do reveal those names you and your friend could be in danger too."

"No. It'll look like they came from the government's ongoing investigation. But we can't print them until we get the

names to the right authorities -- if we were that reckless they'd vanish. We can, however, break the story near the time they're apprehended. Actually, if we could get our hands on the names we'd give them to a senator, a man who's involved with this and can get them confirmed. You never really know whom you can trust but we trust this man. I won't tell you his name. The less you know the better."

"You want a scoop?"

"Jesus Christ! When Brehnt was killed that was *it*. We weren't ever going to quit. My reporter friend's name is Jay Guerle-Finde."

"Guerle-Finde? Oh. Once Brehnt introduced me to him."

"Then you must know he's a serious writer...no matter what you think of me. You couldn't know of him, his work, without being aware of his integrity."

"Brehnt was very impressed with him. I liked him."

"Those names...did Brehnt ever tell you or write you...?"
He waited, hard-focused on the answer to his prodding question.

She was silent and when she stood up Paul stood up, but she waved him away and went into the bedroom to be alone with an emotion she was unable to share. Standing in the middle of the shadowy log-walled room, she thought of the unopened last letter from Brehnt which she couldn't bring herself to read. It was locked away out of her sight in a safety deposit box at the bank. She just didn't have the fortitude to read it. There was no point. Sadness heaped upon sadness. She went to the window and stared out. A light mist was roiling off the lake; it might be Lake Amatitlán, Brehnt reaching for her with outstretched arms. *Angelica?* She heard the soft rich voice that could so easily drive her heart: *Angelica?* Her ears were ringing and the top of her head felt as if a thousand icy needles were assailing her scalp. Her knees grew weak; there was a bitter taste in her mouth and again nausea in her stomach. Stepping back reaching for the lamp, her hand knocked over a glass on the night table. Her outstretched fingers never reached the lamp.

When she opened her eyes she was in the living room, lying beneath the afghan on the davenport, and Paul was kneeling beside her holding a cool towel on her forehead. She tried to sit up but he pushed her gently down.

"Don't get up too quickly." He lifted the wet towel and flung it onto a chair. "Damn it. I'm so sorry, Mahta. I've made a bad mistake."

"I'm all right...this happens." Her voice was slow and groggy. "I've still got the bug in my stomach from down south. It was just that and...all this remembering."

"You didn't know what he was doing," he said, stroking her dampened hair away from her brow.

"He was trying to protect me, of course, but there were signs. I suspected something even in my dreams. There was

always something unresolved. By the time he was doing that I was starting to write and travel with my camera. It was one of my stories...comparing the Mayan history to present conditions that got me started. I just kept going...going everywhere, faster and faster. We were both so involved but we never stopped believing that one day we'd... When it happened it was the one thing I was unable to investigate. I was far worse than this...a lot of guilt...I could have been there, *should* have been there. Maybe I could have... Oh God, why am I going on and on? You don't need to hear any of this."

"It's all right...but...don't take the blame, Mahta."

"I guess I have to take some, even though it doesn't change anything. I don't feel comfortable here. Let me get up. I've got to go home and check into something and then I'll let you know what I find."

"All right. Just take it easy. Let me straighten up a few things and we'll get out."

On the way home she hardly spoke. She had insisted on driving and did it with forced concentration and skill, employing every shortcut she could recall, even joking a little at Paul's watchful eyes. When occasional pains shot through her stomach she gripped the steering wheel, turned her head aside and bit her lip. Back at her desk she jotted her unlisted number on note paper, handed it to Paul and said, "Call me tomorrow evening. I may know something then."

In a while Paul's taxi came. Standing on the ramp to her houseboat he took her arm and said, "You don't hate me anymore?"

"I didn't ever hate you. You've helped...helped me a lot. I'm grateful. Anyway, I think you've earned your happiness. You seem to have found someone worth loyalty."

"Yes," he agreed, bending and kissing her cheek. "I have. Please get some rest."

#

She didn't sleep well but took an antacid in the middle of the night and arose early. For the first time in a long while she wanted to run. Thoughts, speculations, ideas whirled through her head; she needed to shake them down and let the chaff blow away. She drove to Elliott Bay Park on the waterfront. It was only a short drive, easy to reach, and there were plenty of empty spaces for her car in the lot at the end of the streetcar tracks. Half a minute of stretching and running in place by her car and she was off. Soon she picked up speed, jogging down the paved footpath that ran along the edge of the pink-tinged Sound, almost in the shadow of Seattle's burgeoning skyline of Space Needle and tall buildings. Pink Mount Rainier, the spacious green lawns and the open Sound, where massive cargo ships lay at anchor, made her feel as if she were floating over the pavement in a hard lofty unassailable freedom. There were a few dedicated joggers out in

the distance but she had the nearby space all to herself. The water glowed in a rippling rose light, stretching to dark-treed Bainbridge Island and beyond. Gradually her breathing fell into a steady rhythm and she relaxed into an even gait. The muscles in her legs extended and contracted over and over as she pounded along, burning up stress until she could feel the familiar tingle of exaltation spreading across her taut brain.

She finished quite winded but pleased, even though it was only four miles down and back. At her car she pulled her warm-up clothes over her shorts and blouse, then drove up the hill to bustling Pike Market. The crowded multilevel market on the hillside was always a great theater of activity: street-level rows of fresh ripe fruit and vegetable stalls, masses of flowers, abundant crafts, glittering banks of fish -- the fêted Pacific salmon, endangered but still reigning supreme, with other more exotic fish its winking iridescent retainers. From time to time she came here simply to take pictures -- like the ever-present tourists. The bountiful variety of edibles harvested from the sea was lush, tempting, and displayed as if for an artist; the various clams, crinkled oysters, pink shrimp, and bright orange Dungeness crabs evenly piled on snowy beds of crushed ice.

Sitting in her favorite corner she sipped a steaming cup of cappuccino, watched the shoppers and listened to the vaudeville routines of the fishmongers. They stood in front of their loaded and colorful stalls, performing for the customers, rocketing fish selections through the air to a catch-man behind the counter. The catch-man bellowed out repeated orders, his words couched in such amusing metaphors that passersby, especially awed tourists, always crowded around to see if they could decipher the showy argot of the white-aproned salesman.

The ceaselessly onrushing world once again sent her tentative invitations to its stage as she sat, feeling somewhat displaced but slowly reclaiming her old territory. For a while her endorphin-charged mind drifted in peace, until she came to the letter with an awakening jolt. The memory of her promised dispatch was followed by an overwhelming desire for avoidance, which had to be dealt with at once. Putting down her cup she pushed back her chair and merged with the restless milling crowd surging past the resplendent counters.

After a quick dash to the bank and a search through her safety deposit box, she retrieved the letter in nervous hands and went home to shower. Her damp hair was left to hang in soft waves, drying as she dressed in a now loose silver-plum sweater and slacks. Her scarred wrist was tender. Wincing with a searing pain each time she became aware of it was not the result of the lesion itself, but because in its place she saw the scars of Jim North's back. It was a disabling vision which could shut down every sense but grief. She stood a moment with her eyes closed tight. Paul had scolded her for the self-inflicted pain

of her bracelet. She pulled her sleeve down over the scar. Too anxious to think of eating she tossed down a glass of milk, and went straight to the letter on her desk.

The last letter was to be read, the formidable task as transitional as a rite of passage. She must try to abolish a loving union into which she had been breathing artificial life. Sometimes she told herself that Brehnt still functioned in a distant place, still held within his consciousness the image of her body and the sound of her voice, as she held his. Now this sweet unreined pretense had to end, to cease before it crippled her beyond repair.

The long oversized Manila envelope shook within her grasp. When she saw the clean handwriting addressed to her, so alive and expectant, she was stunned at the power of it. Just as she had feared, the envelope grew hot and resonated in her unsteady hand, insisting upon the existence of a living sender. She carried it to her bed and lay back, holding it on her lap for a moment with eyes closed, the better to see. Into this interior vision ambled her fated lion, so careless with that prepossessing dynamic body she had once foolishly believed invincible. With one quick action she tore open the envelope and drew out the contents, five hand-written pages and a smaller sealed envelope with a note clipped over it that read: "Do not open." She took a long breath, exhaling, then lifted the pages and began to read.

My Darling Angelica,

I'm sitting in my musty old hut with the lantern flickering in a whirligig of humid vapors while the night rain comes down in torrents. Nevertheless, I'm sweating -- the eternal infernal bug. The deluge is driving the snakes and lizards and spiders in to ponder me, with their bright little eyes peering out of cracks and corners.

Sometimes I get a bit depressed, and so in those moments I turn to you, my sunlight and laughter---Angel. I've read your last letter until I know it by heart. Altogether, you are so eminently sensible and so very genuine. Christ in heaven, I miss your warm body. I'm self-torturing in remembering how I make you come wild in my arms. For want, I'm depressing myself beyond your sweet influence. Forgive my insolence because I love you. I love you.

I'm late out of the fields tonight, still damp from working in this early rain and my clothes smelling of smoke. The things I do. Alone in the dark feeling very small on the planet, one wonders. But there's a light I follow, yes, that pure amber reassurance coming from your trusting eyes.

So you were in China. How I wish I could have shared that with you. If luck is with us we'll go there together. Remember how we talked of those Chinese motifs found in the Mayan culture? God, I'm so far from that now, adrift, and I can't turn back however much I want to. Excuse this. I'm rambling, a little

feverish and tired. Just put up with me because I'm happy here to think that I have you with me.

I see from your letters that neither of us will ever harden to the horror and grimness with which we've chosen to come in contact. And, sadly, that's the only acceptable attitude, sometimes fostering the right actions. Often I see incredibly degrading things from which I would shield you, and yet I know you see them too, going to those places where a cruel early death is more often the common denominator. I know who you are, how strong, how sensitive, how very courageous, and yet I would shield you from some things, as I've done and will continue to do for both of us. I've always been (sometimes painfully) honest with you, and if you should find that I've withheld certain of my actions from you it was only because I love you. I think, as you know me so well, you must know some things I haven't said. Now can you bear this candor, please: Sometimes I have a feeling I won't see you again. We have to face this too. I've seen lovers brutally torn apart, and why should fortune favor us above them? It's all chance, although we can tamper a little with the odds.

Lately, I've had a recurring dream in which I'm on a swaying rope walk stretched over a dark chasm. At either end people I know have set these fragile coils on fire and I'm running very fast, but with each dream I seem to be further from the end. Then, blessed redemption, I wake up. Angel, I don't mean to be sinister. I'll call and inundate you with love words the next time I get near a phone that works. I need your voice -- Oh God, and your body.

I have to guard against cynicism despite all I've said. Daily I go about my work with growing evidence that the surfeit of humanity signals the final chapter of this infected planet. The idea of man so magnificent, the actuality often so pitiful. What possible rationale is there for this highly evolved creature who befouls his nest and kills off his potential helpmates? Well, how morose I wax tonight. Forgive me, darling. Perhaps I'd better stop. I can't seem to lighten up in this damned rain.

You're wondering what the enclosed envelope is and I dread asking you to be a little afraid, but I have to rely on you for this one important request. If something should happen to me, please give it unopened to one of the men whose names appear on the front. One of them you've met and admired; the other is a good and brave photographer who is also helping me in an important way. They'll know what to do. The following is just an extra precaution, so don't spend much time thinking about it: Please do burn this letter and do lock the envelope away in a secure place, then tell just one old friend, whom you trust implicitly, how to get to it in case something should happen to both of us. That's the best I can do. The rest we must trust to fate and the overtaxed mail service. Enough said.

Yes, I received both books: Vincent Van Gogh's letters to

his brother Theo. Thank you. I'd forgotten what a treasure they were. His earnest insightful saintly mind. Clarity and truth became his suffering and madness. What a sorrow that he couldn't even afford pigments and that philistines now buy his work for vast sums and lock it away in vaults, like gold bricks.

And Marcus Aurelius, praise be! whose apposite words speak to me, so relevant on nights like this one. The noble war-ridden Roman emperor and I sit alone, sharing troubled hearts and stoic precepts. He encourages: '...if thou art pained because thou art not doing some particular thing which seems to be right, why dost thou not rather act than complain?' Thank you, my Angelica, for sharing this old friend with me. I love you all the more.

And what is love? Can you tell me? A marvelous puzzle. A complete mystery. Brazen. It goes on and on, turning every which way but never showing all of itself, like those now overworked intricate ivory balls carved one inside the other. I think we don't really want to know all of it -- too powerful a magic -- but only to explore those intricate chambers little by little. Whatever it is I have it for you always, and each time I'm with you we discover a startling new space.

The work goes on and I can't get out of here just yet, so until the next eagerly anticipated revelation (or at least a letter), I love you and daydream of you.

All yours,
Brehnt

Still holding the letter Mahta lay back and closed her eyes. Her heart was beating too fast. Brehnt sat by the lamp, reading Marcus Aurelius...rain drumming against the water tank; air thick and moist, smelling of damp earth and moldering bamboo; a lizard scuttling over the packed dirt floor; palm fronds rasping against the roof. Her heart slowed and slowed until every sensuous aspect of the hut, from its deep violet corners to the sphere of gold light on Brehnt's face, began to fade. She waited and breathed, gradually sliding into an assuaging peacefulness, then turned over and slept on her stomach with one arm flung above her head and the letter crushed beneath her breast.

Far off, her ears perceived the irregular mezzo tone of a bell...many bells, the echoing slightly off kilter wind-hollowed bells of Mérida. Together, she and Brehnt were laughing on the hotel terrace. Beneath her closed lids danced erratic flashes, quick as sparks rising on a tropic wind.

The phone was ringing. Mahta leapt for it, and found the room in darkness. The receiver slipped out of her clumsy grasp and she swore, groping for it under the edge of the bed.

"Oh, damn...hello?"

"Mahta, it's Paul."

"Oh...yes?"

"I'm sorry, you were asleep."

"I...yes."

"You asked me to call and--"

"Oh...what time is it?"

"Seven-thirty."

"Really? I was...I fell asleep hours ago."

"Well good. Should I let you go back to it then?"

"No. No. Can you come over? I have...well, just come over," she said, afraid even of talking on the phone.

When she hung up Mahta went to the mirror, brushed her hair and straightened her clothes then wandered into the living room, yawning and wiping away the resultant tears. Intending to make coffee she sat down for a moment on the davenport and stared at the lights across the lake. She was still sitting there when Paul tapped on her glass doors.

"I suppose you haven't eaten." His chaffing voice was startling to her in her mood of dazed inattentiveness.

"Eaten? Let's see. There was coffee this morning at Pike Market -- I went jogging --, lots of water and a glass of milk when I got home and...I guess that's it."

Paul shook his head with strong disapproval. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Not very."

"I'll take you to dinner."

"No thank you, Paul. Let me get you the envelope and then you can go on to your dinner."

"Mahta, I was thinking of you...that you should eat."

She didn't answer but went into her bedroom and returned with the unopened envelope and the crushed letter. A throbbing pain was starting up in her wrists and then her ankles.

"Here." She held out the sealed envelope and looked at the crumpled letter. "I guess you don't need to read this," she said. How could she have thought to sever the past in such a drastic manner? His eyes fastened on the letter in silence.

"Well, I won't give it to you but you can read it now, that is if you need to, if there's something helpful to your work." She smoothed it a little then held it out and turned away, wanting to snatch it back. It was so very private.

"Are you sure you can...that you want to do this, Mahta?"

Oh God, no! I don't want you to, not for you, not for you ever. "It doesn't matter," she managed.

He stood beside her green floor lamp, reading with his head bent near the blown glass, his tall body motionless.

She slipped away to the far window at the shadowy end of the dimly lit room. With her arms dangling at her sides and her head inclined to one shoulder, she watched the light-strung motor launches racing over the water; they were merrily laden with hungry restaurant-bound partyers and tourists.

In a while Paul touched her trembling arm, handing her the letter. Spangles of water-reflected light played over his face, and she could just make out his dilated pupils. His eyes had

gone limpid black. He seemed reluctant to speak but finally said in an unusually restrained voice, "May I take you to dinner? I would like your company. I don't want to eat alone."

"All right," she conceded, "but I don't think I'll be very good company. The thought of eating seems enervating."

"Well I can't chew for you but I can feed you if necessary," he said in a lightened voice, sliding into his leather jacket.

She offered a limp smile and said, "Oh, but just let me dash into the bedroom a minute."

Dressing in a hurry, she brushed her hair away from her temples and slipped a pair of diamond earrings into her pierced ears, a half carat each. They had belonged to her mother, her father's gift. Each time she slipped the posts into her ears she remembered how, in their room at a hotel in Mérida, Brehnt had pierced her ears. He had done it at her request after he mistakenly bought her a pair of elegant silver earrings for pierced ears. They had bought a thick needle in the market and doused it with gin. Brehnt poured her an ice-filled glass of that gin, drinking from the glass and then watching her drink, his fingers stroking her neck. He took a piece of ice from the glass and held it against her ear for a minute, then inserted the needle and next the earring. He kissed her and repeated the piercing.

As she came into the living room Paul snapped her picture. She had swiftly donned her father's favorite rose dress. The dress was no longer tight but, because it was made of a stretch-knit fabric, it still clung to her slender body. She settled a long camel's hair cape over her shoulders and locked her door. They set off walking to a nearby lakeside restaurant, a good deal nicer than the cafe in which they had eaten salads. The salty air was heavy with a seasonal addition: the pungent scent of moldering leaves, a sweet nutty aroma which nearly always quickened her senses.

"Nice dress with you in it...a rose in candlelight," Paul said when the cape was gone. He clicked off a few more frames from the high-backed booth seat across from her.

By this time she had come to accept the incessant camera clicking as just something that Paul did at will, and there was no reason at the moment to be concerned or even appear to notice. Perhaps it provided a facile excuse for satisfying his curiosity while retaining an unchallenged proximity, a camera tactic that she had sometimes used.

How aggressive, pragmatic, and indifferent she thought him compared to her self-sacrificing and humane Brehnt, who had come down from his hard-won academic ivory tower and devoted himself to a near hopeless cause.

"Does that bother you?" Paul asked, laying aside his camera.

"Not anymore. I'm hardly..."

"Aware of me."

"No." She laughed a little and lied with adeptness. "I was going to say...hardly in a position to complain."

The smallest things within her range of vision suddenly brought her joy, the set table, for instance -- the flatware and cut glass candleholder sparkled in a lambent candle flame. A fragrant pink spray of freesia in a crystal vase induced a ripple of pleasure. She couldn't seem to help that she was still basking in the warm conveyance of love in Brehnt's letter. It had been a little like falling in love all over again. Still, she ignored the menu, unenticed.

When the waiter arrived Mahta observed Paul with sudden curiosity, realizing that she was, as he had remarked, hardly aware of his presence. A few more moments of selfish drifting and her rudeness would be blatant. She blinked and tried to muster a sharper attention.

Paul had an affable ease with the waiter which made the man emerge from his role and take on a separate personality. She knew this facility was an excellent tool of the photographer's trade. Then in his adopted eastern inflection -- strange that she had never considered it before but that's what it was, an eastern inflection --, he praised the rich abundance and variety of Northwest seafood, done in a manner which made Mahta, and probably the waiter, feel personally responsible. This simple and effortless conversation sounded especially splendid to her because she, in her removed state, was undesirous of requesting even a crust of bread. When the waiter attempted to take her order she said, "Really, I don't think I want--"

"My friend will have lobster thermidor and a spinach salad with vinaigrette sauce," Paul interrupted, ordering for himself poached salmon and another spinach salad. He glanced at the wine list and added, "I think we'll attempt a bottle of this white burgundy."

As the waiter departed Paul winked at Mahta and said, "Everyone likes lobster, right?"

Once again she felt that she was being handled in the same gently prodding manner that a clever father employs with a fussy child. With an impulsive curiosity she asked, "Do you have children?"

He was buttering a French roll and looked up suddenly, standing the knife on its end against the pale pink tablecloth. "Yes. An eleven-year-old son and a twelve-year-old daughter."

"One of each. That's nice."

"Dan and Berit live with their mother, who's remarried. They spend as much time with me as I can squeeze out of my unpredictable work schedule. They're beautiful and well-mannered because of their mother, of course...but I've given them a little devilishness that's refreshing."

"You take pride in being contrary?"

"When I have a good reason...sometimes a generous dose of

unorthodoxy...sure. It's what keeps me going. Orthodoxy in this world is a killer. But you're quite a handful, you know, Ms. Lind...and pretty unorthodox yourself."

"Is that a compliment?"

"I hope so."

When the waiter poured the wine she asked, "Is this permitted, papa?"

"If you'll allow yourself forgetfulness...a little more laughter...and promise never to get so angry at me again."

"That's easy," she said, clinking her glass against his and tasting with pleasure.

"Ah, because you think you'll never see me again. Not so fast, my friend. I like what you write and shoot...and I have endless resources."

"I don't think so, Paul. Under the circumstances, I don't think that would be wise."

"Because we're attracted to each other?"

The food arrived and Mahta didn't have to answer. She was thankful that she had something on which to concentrate. The wine had loosened her inhibitions and possibly improved her appetite. The spinach salad with bacon and cheese slivers was perfect, and the succulent lobster chunks in sauce juicy tender. Upon finishing their entrées they went on sipping the wine.

"So you were hungry. Maybe I'm learning to read between the lines."

"I didn't know I was. The wine encouraged my palate. Imported," she said, running her fingertips over the label, "but our local wine is good. We make some very good wine in my north country."

"Avid chauvinism...so you must be a native."

Mahta was silent a moment, warning herself about her loss of inhibitions. Something had leapt out of the past and was eroding her fragile pleasure to a dangerous degree.

"It seems amusing that I once, so long ago, spent an evening pouring out my history to you while you were only thinking of bed. Amusing because I don't remember the lying down part, only afterward when you said you would meet me in the lobby of my apartment building the following weekend and we would drive to the beach. I remember that because when Saturday rolled around I packed my little canvas bag and waited all afternoon. I worried that something had happened to you. I can't believe that I was ever that naïve."

Paul was frowning, his dark brows drawn together above eyes both defensive and beseeching. His voice was low and level, held down by the certainty of ensuing emotion. "Mahta, somehow we've come around to making me feel like a bad character again. Shall I apologize more profusely? Will it do any good? Will you go on zapping me with these sudden reversals until we part company? What can I do? You've said I was a bastard and I certainly

agree. What more can I say...do? Tell me."

"God, I surprised myself that time," she admitted.

"Subconscious hostility? Something touched a sore spot. I was actually feeling better. I don't want to blame the wine because the wine is nice...very nice.

"Yes, I'm a native," she said, determined to start over. "I was born in Seattle...a father from German roots, a mother from French -- mother and grandparents dead. We inherited a lovely farm, and for a while my father was a sort of gentleman farmer who leased most of the land and worked dutifully in government administration. My...my mother was an on-and-off alcoholic who sometimes helped my father garden. I grew up always wandering off in nature, usually with a book...my solace...my escape."

There, she thought and stopped talking, sipping her wine. She could see that Paul was disturbed, and hoped her perfunctory recitation hadn't been tinged with the sarcasm she was apparently unable to suppress. He was silent for a while, looking out the window and revolving his wine glass. His solemn profile was quite punishing.

"Shall I apologize for something?" she asked.

"No, but I will again if it'll do any good. I've had run-ins with my past before and haven't felt great about them...but when you hit me with that reprehensible me...it feels like a punch in the gut. And, dammit, it's almost like apologizing for the foul-ups of a little known relative." He turned back from the window and laid his white-shirted arm over the back of the black booth. "I wish to hell I'd never met you that many years ago, that I'd never seen you until Beirut. You might have liked me."

Mahta clamped her hands together and put the tips of her fingers under her chin, leaning on the table and smiling. "Just think if I could still like you, knowing what I know. That would give you an awful lot of power."

He gave her a quizzical look and said with brightening eyes, "All right, I *will* think about that."

After a reflective moment he said, "I'd like to fish here sometime. It's a great pastime. When I was a kid and I was disturbed about something I'd go fishing."

"Sometimes I did that but I always put my fishes back."

"I guess I'm not surprised."

The waiter appeared, asking if they wanted dessert and coffee. Mahta shook her head from side to side with polite refusal. Paul said, "I think we'll just finish the wine."

Feeling quite relaxed now from the good food and drink, Mahta eased back in her seat and thought of asking Paul a question about his work. She wanted to hear him talk about it, to see the aspect of the professional, the teacher, to learn the depth of this important side and of his convictions.

"Tell me about you and your cameras. Why are you a

photographer?"

"Why am I a photographer?" he responded. He slid his hand across his face and arched his shoulders back, closing his eyes and turning his head to relax his neck, then leaned forward. "I guess...let's see, when I was a kid my father gave me a far too expensive camera for Christmas. When I realized that I didn't know how to use it I was pretty intimidated. Mainly because my father clearly expected me to turn that camera into an instant hobby...reporting in with Stieglitz-like results."

"That's no way to come to love something. Seems more likely you'd have wanted to accidentally -- quote unquote -- drop it into a Minnesota lake."

Paul laughed. "No, as I said I'm stubborn. I was fully determined to make that camera my useful friend. And so I did. Guess I have my father to thank...in a way."

"So why do we need photography anyway?" Mahta asked, delving still further, encouraged by his engaged and earnest turn of voice and alert expression. An incisive interviewer, she could learn about him this way. She smiled at her provocative question and saw Paul looking at her mouth. He started to say something but then the lapis gaze shifted away from her again, out to the lighted moored boats dancing on motor-launch chop.

"Well, my rhetorical friend, maybe you want a course in the uses of photography but I doubt it. You hardly need it." He turned back to her.

"I don't think it would be too self-serving to say that photographs have changed our world. Photography is both a sublime art and a workhorse with results unapproachable by any other means. I could cite a lot of examples...but I won't because you already know this. You know what a form of personal expression it is...the subjects you select, the way you look at them and the way you keep them. You expose things -- a tired pun. You make universals through your own personal frame of reference...by selection and by what you do in the darkroom. You stop time and motion, reveal hidden objects, or those taken for granted and therefore not seen; you close in on chosen form and substance, from a photograph on Mars right down to the level of an electron microscope. You make something particular out of something general...and the other way around. You provide something aesthetically pleasing...uplifting, arousing; sometimes you incite high emotions. You portray the family of man in all his beauty and ugliness. Perhaps you keep historians a little more honest...possibly you prevent some evil. Like that."

"I do like that, very much." Her laughter was soft. "I've just had the essentials of an entire class from Paul Carl." And some of the essentials of Paul Carl, she thought. "Should I pay at the door?"

"No, this goes with the dinner...for dining with me.

"Does your hair just naturally wave like that?"

"Yes, such as it is," she said, touching a wayward wisp of hair at her temple.

"Were you an only child, Mahta?"

"Yes. Were you?"

"Uh-huh, often a very spoiled one. It was almost the ruination of me...as you've seen."

"I wasn't a very spoiled one," she said, "but, with a few exceptions, my parents were as good to me as they knew how to be."

"My father was a doctor. He urged me never to become one because there was no time for anything else. A very tall pale reserved Swede married to a wild dark Italian, my mother. Sounds combustible...worked out fine."

"Your blue eyes from the Swede, your very dark hair from the Italian," Mahta said. "And you were close to your father?"

"Not really. The poor guilty man lavished attention on me at infrequent, unexpected and awkward intervals. I actually came to resent it, but he was also a powerful exemplar when he was around. We made our peace long before the traditional coronary of his profession."

"Is your mother still alive?"

"Very much so. The brains beauty and wit of the entire extended family. She's fun...high energy...a little crazy. I take after her somewhat in temperament...but its skewed with a bit of my father's serious nature."

"Are you quick-tempered?"

"Not seriously...although, I kind of thought I might be sometimes...until I met you."

"A lot of that's a new aspect of me...I hope a passing one," she said, hearing her own wistfulness.

"I know that. I was teasing."

"And your father lives alone?"

"Yes, he does. He's a nice man. I wish..."

"What?"

"Nothing." She had almost wished aloud that Paul could meet her father. Whatever for? She felt her face flushing but went on. "He has a condominium in a high-rise uptown, plays cards with his cronies and follows my work far too closely. I don't know how he ferrets some of it out. I don't show him much. He would like me to stay put."

"But you won't, will you?"

"No. I did try the most conventional of conventional lives once: the distaff side rounding out the husband's career -- not for long. I was too young and my husband tried to...to take control of me. I let him for a while, trying to save...then I was...suffocated...and it came to an end."

"Lucky you had no children...or do you think so?"

"Oh yes, I do. I didn't know at the time that I couldn't ever have any, but it turned out to be a fortunate thing...I mean

because of the way I live."

The sapphire eyes lowered without comment. He picked up the check and studied it a moment then laid it down and tossed his credit card on top. When he had signed and tipped they left.

The walk back to the houseboat was quiet with only Mahta's thanks for dinner and a remark from Paul on the balminess of the smoky-sweet fall evening. When they reached her door he said, "I need to call a taxi."

"Of course. Come in. Do you want coffee?" she asked, unlocking her door.

"No thank you. Keeps me awake."

"Me too."

They walked inside and Paul went straight to the telephone. When he returned they stood in the middle of the living room without removing coat or cloak. Paul walked over to her wall of photographs and began to study them. Perhaps he had looked at them while she was sleeping. One of his photographs of her with Lemur hung there. But he stopped before one of a youthful Mahta and a very handsome bronze-skinned young man with his arm over her shoulder.

"Your...husband?"

"No." She laughed. "I wouldn't have him on my wall. Interesting that you stopped there, though. It's a college picture with my classmate, Rafael Almeida. We always studied together...argued so productively...shared a lot of ideas...were just...really there for each other. If you're very lucky you find a friend like that. He was good for me and I loved him like a brother. I still do. He's rich and powerful now...at least as the fluky winds blow in Manila."

"He looks like a man in love, to me...with a very pretty and smart young girl...couldn't blame him."

She studied the photograph. "I don't know. Can you tell that? We're close. Back then we thought of using our careful studies of history and philosophy for humanitarian endeavors...so idealistic...as serious young students are."

"Why did you think it interesting that I singled out this photograph?"

"Because I'm going to Manila soon...actually sooner than I expected...some work I've just promised. I'll see Rafael."

"Have you seen much of him since college?"

"Oh, many times," she said with the happy memories obvious in her voice. "Usually at one of his homes...generally in San Francisco...a few times in Manila."

"Should I worry about you?"

"Why on earth would you?"

"Are you well enough do you think to dash off to another uncertain imbroglio?"

"Well, I'm not dashing off that fast. I have to finish the...the Jim North story. But yes, I think I'm getting

better...for which you get some of the credit."

"How so?"

"Just being here...putting up with me -- not so easy. And you...you caused me to...confront something."

His eyes took on the dark limpid quality she had seen earlier in the same shadows of her living room, and she knew precisely that he was thinking of Brehnt, as she was. She hurried on with her explanation.

"Oh, I know you had a very definite purpose in coming, but anyway you were kind to this cranky burned-out case."

"You'll never believe that I wanted very much to see you...see how you were...will you?"

"I might. You're not such a bad boy."

"That's what my mother tells me."

She laughed a little and thought of his mother. "How strange it all is...the way things happen...strange."

"I'll be glad to finish this business." There was a wary impatience in his voice. He hesitated then said, "You've had no indication of anything suspicious here?"

"Yes. Thank you for reminding me. Once during this day I did make a mental note to tell you that my place had been ransacked not long after Brehnt... I wonder. Nothing was taken...just everything a mess. I didn't have the letter then. I couldn't...didn't want to come across it for a while and I put it, along with all the other letters, in a safety deposit box at the bank."

"What a stroke of luck. Dammit, I don't like this at all." The wary eyes looked at her with a disturbing covert knowledge. "They're dangerous, totally immoral, ruthless."

"Well, they found nothing and they've probably gone away forever, so you can stop worrying. You might, however, concentrate on watching your own back...please."

"I'm on it. Put that letter back in the safety deposit box." His loose-fisted knuckles slid over her arm.

The taxi driver knocked and they both stepped out into the crisp air. "I'll be right there," he called, turning back to offer an unreadable face, but with a rallying grin.

"I've really enjoyed this time with you. No, don't shake your head. And don't look at me like that. I mean it. I know how bad it's been. I understand. Please take care of yourself, Mahta. I'll call you. I *will* call you."

He wouldn't. Her cold feet danced her away from the tall body of heat then back. "Don't bother. I'm okay."

"I want to. And I want to kiss you good-bye."

She turned her face up at an angle so that he could kiss her cheek, thinking it was to be an offering of sympathy, but he leaned to the side with a persevering mouth. While she was trying to recover, his arms encircled her, tightened. They had entered into a seriously ruinous kiss from which she almost

waited too long to withdraw, her body weak and shaking.

"Mahta? God, I can't just let you go..." His vagrant fingers tugged at her collar. "I think we better--"

"Thank you so very much for what you've done for me and for Brehnt." Her controlled voice helped propel her from the rising equivocation. She well understood the incurable pain of strong physical attraction, the ache of denial, and wondered if he felt the hurt of it as she did, hoped he could share a little of it. It would be so easy to invite him in. He would come briefly inside her life then they would part. She turned around and reached for the door without looking back, only waving her limp dismissive hand above her shoulder. The generous mouth, so very effective in speaking his commitment to another, had for a few moments taken possession of her, its lingering impression not yet forfeited. But he was the wrong man.

VIII

"The story and photographs are very much to our liking," Sidney Gaffenough, an editor at *Worldwide Press* in New York, told Mahta on the telephone. "Are you ready for all the attention?"

"I've already had it," Mahta replied.

"A few fairly spectacular photographs and conjecture, but this is different. It's your story."

"No, it's Jim North's story. When I set out to write it I never meant for it to become a eulogy."

"It's an incredibly moving story with amazing pictures. Very well written. The closer you come to death without succumbing -- especially in an heroic situation -- the more people want to get at you, Mahta."

"Repugnant," she answered.

"Like it or not, you'd better prepare yourself. Things are going to change," Gaffenough responded with a kind but harried voice. "Of course," he added, "there are always the detractors who believe that you and the Jim Norths of this world should stay out of those hostile places and not stir things up. And you know even they want to get at you."

"I've encountered them before. They don't bother me unless they get close enough to tangle my hair," she answered.

Still, the more she thought of Gaffenough's admonishing words concerning notoriety the more inclined she was to hasten her already imminent departure. She had no wish to incur a celebrity style profile, however minimal the length of attention. In the next few days she would fly off to Manila.

"The Philippine News," with affiliates in other large cities, wanted firsthand information on what was happening to Marcos supporters in the business world under the Aquino government. The paper had liked her earlier coverage of the Aquino election and asked her for another report more finely

tuned on business. The problem wouldn't be in getting a story but in getting precisely the right story. Over the years she had enjoyed a sustaining friendship with Rafael Almeida, and had a number of times visited him and his wife in temporary residence at their San Francisco home, the last time having been during the election in the Philippines. Rafael had wanted to stay away from the election turmoil. In the matter of her election story, he had insisted on remaining out of the picture himself but his advice had saved her a good deal of misplaced effort. She was hoping that he would once again come to her rescue with the specific hook needed for a compelling report. Almeida was a senior partner in an old and well established investment firm in Manila, which had supported Marcos out of necessity, although she knew that her friend privately disliked this powerful overlord. She intended to explore the problems arising from the precarious transitional support of political leaders, and hoped she could induce her friend to confide in her. Her letter to Almeida was brief, not explaining too much so as not to jeopardize his position or cause unease. No reply was forthcoming but this was not unusual. Acting upon another of her uncanny hunches that things would sort themselves out as she went along, she decided to go ahead without waiting for a reply. She merely telephoned, leaving a message of her arrival time with his secretary.

#

Seething Manila was hot, humid, and crowded. In the streets the harried faces looked more uncertain than ever at the outcome of their inadvertently politicized lives. "A person simply rots overnight in this sweet fungal stench," a jaded correspondent had told Mahta on her first trip to the Philippines. Descending upon Ninoy Aquino International Airport, she again pondered how and *if* one truly governed such a scattered dominion of feudal warlords ruling over more than seven thousand islands. Looking down from the air one saw the countless rough and polished terrestrial gems of warring pirates' loot spilling over the Pacific and into the South China Sea. Corazon Aquino was holding a tiger by the tail, at best a surly tiger whose mercurial body was sometimes hidden in jungle camouflage and sometimes slinking boldly down the streets of Manila and Quezon City.

The temperature was a sticky 82 degrees and steamy slate-blue thunderheads hung above the horizon in great threatening billows. The typhoon season still had over a month to send its angry lashings of wind beating across the sensuous unruly islands.

While still at the airport Mahta again telephoned Almeida, this time at his residence, leaving a message with his housekeeper. She then instructed her taxi driver to take her directly to his house, not presumptuous behavior as her friend had insisted she stay there whenever she came to Manila.

"How is your president doing?" she asked the driver with a casual display of interest.

He shrugged and shook his head, not wishing to commit himself to an opinion; but in a sudden and tacit response, he drove Mahta down a street which crossed the heavily guarded Arlegui Street, and as they crossed it he waved his hand at President Aquino's whitewashed residence. It was far down the street and set back in a verdant-branched park behind a high wall. The area, only a couple of blocks from lovely Malacañang Palace where Marcos had lived, and in the guest house of which President Aquino had her office, was off limits and well secured. Mahta snapped photographs from the rolled-down car window and felt herself under uncomfortable scrutiny even at such a distance.

The elegant Almeida residence in exclusive Forbes Park was in the Chinese style, tile-roofed and walled in by light stone overspread with brilliant bougainvillea and jade vine. The fern-like leaves of a jacaranda hung down over the entrance gate leading into the first courtyard.

The Spanish housekeeper remembered her very well and lodged her in the third guest court, informing her in Spanish that Señora Almeida was in her San Francisco home. Rafael's wife, Eugenia, was Filipino-Spanish like Rafael but also half Chinese. She was a very beautiful delicate and gregarious woman, often laughing with a soft musical laughter which Mahta could hear even as she thought of her. She was sorry to miss Eugenia's always stimulating company, and smiled with appreciation as she passed a new and startling black and white photograph of her friend in a smartly cut black and white striped dress. Liquid-bright eyes gleamed beneath a crown of glowing black hair and the clever dark-painted lips were pursed in an artful and fetching smile. Her graceful hands with enameled fingertips bore her two prized gold-filigreed rings, one of ruby the other dark sapphire -- gifts from Rafael. To Mahta, the exquisite hands in their refined pose looked as if they had been carved from alabaster, the fingertips delicate and flawless. Her own hands with short plain nails and ragged nibbled cuticles would never approach such elegance. Eugenia's widely touted business sense, generosity and sophisticated wit, all of which Mahta had often experienced firsthand, bore the validating stamp of Rafael's laudable discernment.

The guest room in the third court gave off a fresh and pungent sandalwood fragrance; it was wafted down by a slowly turning ceiling fan, which offered this sensuous welcome the moment she stepped into the shadowed interior. Hemp fiber matting called abacá was spread over a portion of the polished dun tile floor. The room was appointed in a comfortable mixture of thick-padded rattan and bamboo furniture of a unique, very streamlined design -- large sumptuous pieces done up with pale

beige and copper-threaded textiles. The bed was also large and full of linen pillows. Rafael's court, she remembered, contained lustrous blue and white silk Chinese carpets and shining ebony furniture, the select wood finely carved and inlaid with delicate mother-of-pearl designs. She wanted very much to revisit his magnificent jade and porcelain collections. Sought after by visiting museum curators, a few exquisite pieces leapt from her memory.

Outside two of the tall and narrow exterior windows grew a small jambu tree, the rose apple under which Buddha was often depicted sitting in peaceful repose. The Almeida residence was called Jambu House after this fabled tree, *Eugenia jambos*. Offering her silent obeisance to the tree, with a little smile for Eugenia, she turned from the window and her eyes fell upon another lovely vision. Rising from a tall celadon vase on a low table between the windows was a thick stalk of pink, yellow, and green-sheathed heliconia, accompanied by one flaming cutting of ostrich plume ginger with its tiny white flowers just popping out of bright red bracts. At least these beauties greeted my arrival at Jambu House, she thought as she turned back to the windows and gazed out at the warm moist day. Her sticky travel-weary skin begged to be purged.

A cleansing with fragrant soap in the spacious etched-glass shower brought temporary relief. She stood on the green marble shower floor, scrubbing her fingers with a soft little brush and sighing at the cuticles. "Stop agonizing over it," Rafael had told her so many years ago. "You will always bite your fingers." She had never been able to prove him wrong. After the shower she lay down to rest, soothed by cool palmy sheets and slow-turning fan blades. No sound penetrated the sea-green walls or tinted windows muting the chrome yellow light as it slanted through exterior cross-weavings of tropical foliage. Erratic images slowing, she lay on her side with one knee drawn up, drifting into a wondrous quiet place with bare skin exposed to little puffs of breeze. An hour and a half later she awoke to a soft tapping at her door. The sheets were a little damp. Clumsy movements located and got her sluggish body inside a navy guest kimono printed with white bamboo. Cinching the tie she called out for the knocker to enter.

The door opened and her happy eyes took in her friend of many years, Rafael Almeida. He was of medium height and slender, with blue-glinting black hair and a bronzed and handsome face of smooth flawless skin set with very expressive Asian-Spanish eyes. She was always astonished to encounter those eyes, so long and brimming with dark passion they made her heart leap. For a brief moment she was taken aback by his reserved demeanor. This very very soigné, knowledgeable and cultured man standing before her was Rafe, her old school friend, she reminded herself. When she had first met him she told him she would think of him as Rafael

but call him Rafe. "Please not *Rafael*," she had laughingly insisted. "It's too exalted for my tongue," and thereafter Mahta and *only* Mahta spoke to him as Rafe. The two had fondly laughed, teased, pondered the world together. It was deeply gratifying to find him in full possession of life, to have their continued friendship after all these years. She knew his precise age, thirty-four, and the date of his birth, June the ninth, for her birthday was the tenth of a later year and in college they had celebrated together. Very lucid and heartwarming memories: their exclusive picnicking high on the green slopes of the North Cascade Mountains; alongside presumptuous chatter, they ate with their fingers cool and delicately compressed little balls of translucent rice and morsels of spiced chicken cooked with lemon grass. Sipping rice wine they had toasted their good fortune at being alive. One specific memory was of Rafael, with his wry sense of karma, describing their futures, very much as they had turned out. She had insisted that his prediction was incorrect. In those days they were a little like brother and sister, comfortable and complementary in disposition, Mahta wild and fiery and far too definite, and Rafael quiet and imperturbable but with an already cynical and lightning-fast barbed wit. Now, although he smiled at her in polite and solicitous welcome, his dark eyes held a certain brooding unrest and wariness.

"Hello, my friend. It's very nice to see you again. I'm so sorry I couldn't meet you sooner -- something unavoidable," he said, accepting Mahta's enthusiastic Western embrace with warming pleasure. "You're thinner. Very nice though. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat, but not *balut*," she said with resumed teasing laughter. Noticing his quizzical expression, she reminded him that he had already initiated her into the eating of *balut*, a gently boiled duck egg with embryo inside almost fully developed and to be chewed and swallowed newly formed little feathers and all. In the Luzon countryside *balut* was considered a delicacy. Filipinos loved to feast and always, as in all of Asia, upon meeting friends it was considered good manners to invite one to dine as part of the greeting.

"Have you brought clothes?" Rafael asked, meaning suitable clothes. He was one of the few people of her acquaintance who got away with considering the proper clothes of exceeding importance. "I'll take you to a club for dinner and a show."

"But can we talk?" Mahta asked, then realizing that her hastiness was in bad taste, added, "I haven't seen you in so long, Rafe."

"Yes of course," he answered with noticeable caution.

Although she hadn't implied as much in her letter, she sensed that he suspected she was going to try using him as copy. He seemed far too wary, his quicksilver mind probably wandering back and forth among the conflicting cultures that possessed him. She thought of the spectrum of languages his mind played upon:

English and Tagalog (the official tongues chosen above 87 different languages and dialects of the Philippines) as well as Chinese, French, Spanish, and Malay, which he could speak with familiarity. Reflecting quickly, she tried to seize upon something which would lift him from the guarded speculation which she must have caused.

"I'll do you proud. Knowing what importance you place on our silly artificial skins, I brought something new for your Manila night life."

"Ah, then I'll wear my *barong Tagalog* for you," he offered, surprising her with a pleased and mellow riff of laughter almost playful, and easing for a moment the rather threatening aspect of his gleaming dark eyes.

"I'll ask Maria to do my hair the way she does Eugenia's. Oh, Rafe, those gorgeous coils of shining hair crowning that pretty skull. I'm sorry to miss her."

"She'll be sorry too, but there are always demands, the large family...many demands. I'll send Maria to you and meet you in the foyer in...shall we say forty-five minutes?" He glanced at his gold wristwatch in his old punctilious manner and departed with his graceful fingers already loosening the knot of his tie.

Mahta dressed swiftly and hurried not to the foyer but the gallery, where closed glass shelves of porcelain and jade lined the glowing mahogany walls. The circular room was dimly lit, but she found the switch that illuminated the shelves arrayed with splendid treasures. Walking slowly around the room enthralled, she came to a stunning new collection, a wondrous assemblage of very old netsuke, small and elegant carved pieces of jade, ivory, and stone. In frissons of delight, she clasped her hands behind her back and concentrated on the precision and beauty of these tiny animals and people, comical genre, and myths.

"Which one do you like best?" Rafael asked, having quietly slipped in behind her.

"Oh, hello," she said, turning and smiling. "Let's see. They're all wonderful but I think...yes, I like the two cranes. What a delicate piece...palest green jade, and cranes are very loyal...mate for life. I know they're a symbol for eternity and longevity."

"Well, you're familiar with them."

"Rafe, this is really an exquisite collection."

"Yes, a nice little batch of stories. Many of the subjects were known in a way no longer fully understood."

"I'm glad you have this," she said, lifting her hands palms up to indicate the entire roomful of objects.

"In many respects it isn't a good idea to collect things...but there is a certain responsibility. I wanted to save the few objects in this room from oblivion."

"Why not a good idea, Rafe?"

"I think you know, Mahta. I don't think you've ever wanted

to possess objects, have you?"

"No, not even if I could afford them, but I'm glad these are here with you...someone who can preserve them and appreciate them in the right way."

"I do...very much. They're both a pleasure and an ancient connection. Of course it's far too easy for material objects to crowd your life...hinder your ability to move simply through the world...discovering how to best use yourself."

"I imagine self-knowledge is what some materialists want to avoid. I'm sure collectors are different animals. I think you know quite a bit of who you are...as I do." She said it with a gentle touch of his arm.

"Probably you do." His sparkling smile rippled over her heart. He glanced at his watch. "Shall we go now?"

#

The Club Pavo Real was off the north end of spacious Roxas Boulevard. Many nightclubs in Manila were of another era, perhaps an ideal one which never existed anywhere. They were overwhelmingly glamorous, and Mahta knew that nothing in rather conservative Seattle -- or hardly any other major city for that matter -- could approach them. This quiet high-toned dinner club was just two blocks from the Manila Hotel and overlooked Manila Bay, famous for its dazzling sunsets. The Pavo Real had a mirror-shiny dance floor and tables bearing lamps with glowing peach satin shades and small silver vases of sweet-scented Arabian jasmine. The flower was known in Hawaii as pikake which means peacock, and peacock, Mahta reminded herself as she inhaled the heavenly fragrance, was the Spanish name of the club.

Rafael ordered an expensive champagne and Mahta expressed her appreciation by touching her glass to his and offering the Tagalog toast *mabuhay*, a versatile word that could mean welcome, good luck, or good-bye. It sounded far more mellifluous and endearing repeated by Rafael.

"Once you told me that Filipinos were the world's greatest dancers," she said, sipping her champagne and eyeing the dance floor. "I've never danced with you."

Rafael leaned toward her with surprise, his eyes intent upon the promise of her carefree suggestion. "We dance on water...no walking for us...with the best dance bands in Southeast Asia. In a while I'll prove all of this to you."

The club specialized in popular Filipino dishes, and Mahta ate her *pancit* with a savoring pleasure, the bright shrimp and vegetables having been seasoned with the tangy *kalamansi* citrus fruit that she especially liked. Rafael ate spiced roast pork, handling the knife and fork so well with his graceful fingers that Mahta stopped eating to watch him, while his head was tipped unaware over his plate. He wore no wedding ring but the dark wink of light from the bronzed fingers of his left hand was a

large flat-cut ruby set in a thick gold band; perhaps it was a gift from Eugenia. For dessert they ate a variation of *bibingka*, a delicious cake made of rice, coconut milk, sugar, and eggs, and baked in a local clay oven over charcoal. It was topped with sweet grated coconut. After coffee Rafael suggested a liqueur but Mahta wanted to continue sipping her superb champagne. Rafael at once ordered another bottle.

"Don't let me drink too much of this irresistible nectar," Mahta implored upon returning from a visit to the sumptuous powder room -- it was staffed with a ministering bevy of petite satin dolls, one of whom had offered to do her nonexistent nails. "I love good champagne but I never quite know when to quit. At a certain point I become sad."

Rafael relinquished the phone he had been using and waved it away from the table. "But if you pass that point don't you become happy again?" His brown eyes flashed encouragement.

"Hmm, it could happen," Mahta answered, turning her crystal goblet around on the pale peach cloth and offering a giddy smile.

"You look very handsome in your beautiful *barong*. How can this gauzy white shirt with its sweet little patterns of lace so enhance masculinity?" She touched his sleeve with the teasing fingertips of her free right hand while holding her champagne glass to her lips.

"How is it that a woman in black silk trousers can so excite a man?" Rafael countered with fawn lips curled in innuendo.

Mahta briefly wondered if the champagne could be making her seem a silly ingenue. And what if she did seem so? Rafael would forgive her. She slid her finger along the rhinestone strap of what she thought of as rather daring evening attire. The strap had been cutting into her shoulder just a bit, but she knew the costume did fit her well. "Oh, you like my black silk trousers?"

"You know I do. You know you're lovely, but I like to tell you anyway. Maria had sense enough not to try and do your wild hair like Eugenia's obedient black coils."

Mahta touched her hair, a soft cloud gathered up around her head but cascading down around her face in fine unruly tendrils. "I don't know what she did, that amazing woman. Am I peering out of a nest?" She laughed and shook her head.

"I would remove those diamond studs from your perfect ears and give you strung diamonds, almost touching your shoulders."

"Rafe? Can you afford such conspicuous consumption?" She had meant the adjective to be the important part of her question, for she knew that Rafael could easily afford a great deal whether displayed or not.

He answered in a low guarded voice, understanding precisely. "Yes...but perhaps not forever. You know conspicuity is thought of differently here; it isn't so maligned just coveted." One furtive glance at her assessed the significance of her criticism. He stared off at the dancers, then his full attention was turned

back to her, his eyes shining with a faint sardonic mixture of self-restraint and a confidence she could admire, almost envy.

"As to all these changes in the radical wind, I know you're clever enough to prepare for any eventuality," Mahta went on, hoping to lead into a serious discussion.

"Do you know that?" he said, smiling with a fetching raised eyebrow. He was silent a moment. "Yes, Eugenia's family has a great deal of property in the United States, and if I lose mine here I have some there too. Your devalued dollar currently makes it a buyer's market. I've bought more...will continue to do so.

"But you. Let's talk of you for a while." He picked up her wrist and pushed her rhinestone bracelet away from the scar, ran his caressing fingertip over the healed lesion, then slid the bracelet back, shaking his head. "Just this morning I read something of your story in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. How incredible. Why am I always so surprised? I strongly suspect you underplayed your role. You're thinner. When I woke you your face was revealing...your eyes too sleepy to hide deep tiredness and...you've been ill."

Mahta felt a stirring in her stomach, a pitching melancholy, and knew the champagne had come to call with a ready-made batch of woes. It would be nice to draw her old friend to her as if he were a benign and soothing brother, a caring brother with far more understanding than she had any right to expect from even her own father. Yet he was a caring brother to her. He understood her. At the moment she wanted to exude coolness and control, but the unavoidable emotional stress must have registered in her crumbling expression, for Rafael was instantly remorseful.

"Forgive me, Mahta," he pleaded. "In my damned haste to steer attention from myself I've intruded."

His admission had opened a hairline crack in his own stony reluctance to speak of himself with candor. She laughed, finally more relieved than remorseful, waving aside his concern and attempting to extract herself from a dark place.

"I warned you about the champagne. It's true I've been a little..." She stopped, floundering where she didn't want to be but where Rafael had landed her. Still, she had to be fair. She intended to grill Rafael, and perhaps it was beginning to look painful for him too. How had he gotten so rich? Or had fortune always been at the periphery of his life? -- all the existing interconnected, interdependent threads of influence and affluence that, in an opaque manner, furnished opportunity: relatives and friends as generous conduits for his talent and shrewdness. As a student he had lived a comparatively sparse and ascetic life, but there had always been a certain unique style, an abbreviated form of elegance. In those days she had sensed that if he wanted something he could have it, that he had practiced self-denial to hone his concentration and focus his efforts. She knew that in the clamoring social structure of the Philippines success and its

resultant manifestations was everything. Sometimes it seemed to her that the fear of being poor was worse than poverty itself, although in the Philippines the sharp dichotomy of the striving haves and have-nots was a hellish thing.

Rafael took her hand and held it tight, so that she shrugged off the rest of whatever she had been about to gloss over about herself, instead giving him a thoughtful smile of appreciation and understanding which went all the way back to their college days. They had been willing pariahs of a sort because they were and continued to make themselves independent of common dogma. They had cherished aesthetics and ethics and humanitarianism when these were no longer fashionable subjects and when, as the industrial revolution jumped its tracks, a newly evolving and unrelenting competition was pulling the young American work force far away from the earlier dreams of the soulful flower children. She was reluctant now to remind Rafael of those intensely high-minded conversations, fearing he would refute them, and yet reminding herself that she had been ridiculous with idealism, much more so than he. Perhaps she still was.

"I really hope you'll give up this ongoing belief in the perfectibility of mankind...my poor tired meliorist. You'll self-destruct...to no effect," Rafael admonished.

They were sitting at a rather cozy table a little higher than and away from the suddenly rambunctious movement of the dancers. Mahta waited a moment to give her answer, avoiding Rafael's intense focus. They watched a stunning Filipino couple dressed in tony black and white evening clothes as the two experts whirled over the pearly glass floor.

The music stopped and the lights dimmed. A jazz band appeared under a spreading blue light, and a lone female singer began a mournful passionate rendition of "The Man That Got Away." A large-boned American woman in a bright foulard dress began to sing along in low key, her ample sentimental breast swelling on a surfeit of gin and tonics. Her dark wiry Filipino husband stared at her in astonishment then applied a firm grip, tightening his fingers on her shoulder. She fell silent, only to revive herself with loud clapping at the song's final note.

Rafael and Mahta exchanged amused glances.

"You see, we aren't perfectible," Rafael said, causing her to burst into a rushing trill of laughter, which took a little more effort to control because of the champagne.

"Rafe, was I ever so young and foolish that I meant to reform the world? We steal land and possessions from each other which nobody owns for very long. We kill and kill. There's a frightening hole in our atmosphere. I no longer believe there's a clean place left on earth. It took me years to learn how much evil is afoot in the world...and years more to admit that it's a natural human condition. Perfectible? -- pardon me while I take that word seriously -- God no. I only hope for effectors with

social awareness...a few astringent measures before the window closes. I've become a cynical observer."

"But in your writing your heart still beats."

"It shouldn't," she whispered, apologetic, staring into the lovely almond-shaped eyes that seemed on the verge of tears but were far from it. She saw a glimmer of approval there and thus did not try to defend her frequent inability to disengage opinion from her work, although whenever required her journalistic scrupulousness prevailed. Ultimately she knew that real opinion remained stridently in her head, and that what she wrote merely looked like opinion, because world affairs had grown so lopsided that one had only to report the facts to appear partial to the disenfranchised and downtrodden.

"When will it end, Rafe, this beautiful teeming old planet's manufactured strife?"

"When we're all the same." His low tone was cutting, his eyes penetrating so deep they might have been working inside her own head, sharing the same repugnant vision.

"Then I guess...I'd have to choose never."

"That's soon enough."

His hard look faded. "Mother of the world, have you ever wanted to adopt children?"

"Sometimes...in weak moments. How are your two?"

"Away at school...intelligent...promising."

She thought of Lemur, saw his eyes, his small reaching fingers, but didn't speak of him. While his importance hadn't diminished in her heart, the remote possibility of having him had evaporated. She gave a swift wave of her hand, indicating there was no more to say on this subject.

Cradling her hand in his, Rafael then asked in the most solicitous tone, so that she could not possibly be offended, "Have you recovered a little from your loss?" He was one of the few with whom she had shared Brehnt Ghilde's death.

"Dear Rafe," she responded in a rush of gratitude for the warmth of his compassion, "this very expensive champagne is turning me into a maudlin case...is that why you're holding my hand? How do I answer? Oh, Lord...my...loss." She sighed. "I'm...is there recovery? I guess as more life gets heaped on me... If only there weren't such continual tragic...but of course... Oh, I think that second bottle of champagne is sending me sad bouquets. I don't want to--"

"Let's dance," Rafael invited with distracting voice. The singer had disappeared; the jazz band was playing an unhurried seductive rhythm and the floor was less crowded.

For a moment she thought that her silver-high-heeled feet were merely dangling from her ankles and that Rafael was carrying her in an airy Luzon ballet, then she realized, putting back her head to laugh, that the champagne was dancing too. Very soon his agile footwork turned the hard floor into a smooth wave rolling

beneath their feet. He had spoken the truth. Rafael could dance across the China Sea.

He held her close, inducing in her a warm feeling of preciousness, and whispered encouraging and amusing words against her ear, nice things like, "Yes, sweet flower," or funny things like, "My God, firebird, we've split your trousers." Mahta's silk trousers were slit to her thighs at the sides and held together by tiny rhinestones at the hems. They billowed out as she danced. Laughter spilled from her throat as she tried to maintain some shred of dignity. She had never danced with such a fluid body, an effortless one which held her in its arousing sway, all the soft and amusing words, the aura of tenderness, the nimble flexing of the pliant limbs and supporting torso flowing together in a rising meld of ecstatic pleasure.

"Lord, how good you are," she said, wondering why they had never danced together. "We should have danced in college. We'd have found a new career."

"You make it easy."

"That's what I mean...not just wonderful dancing but the things you say, the way you are. And I've been given nominal treats all evening...one clever little name tag after another. I remember that...how you enjoy doing that."

"With you, yes."

"You give name-calling a positive definition, Rafe. I always thought it kind of fun...meeting my many new selves."

"Mostly it's sublimation. We have to trim your wick, *ma flamme*...or you'll burn us up...with heat you don't even realize. Forgive me but I know what's needed."

"What?"

He held her away, his expressive mouth forming an ironic curl, his striking eyes and flawless skin glowing in a moving spangle of dusky rose light. She looked back at him, at his slender Spanish-inspired nose, full sensual lips, at his dark eyes now assessing her, and felt emotion stir as if by a sudden frolicsome breeze.

"You're tired...hungry. You need a few gentle words, a little coddling...but explicit love -- don't you understand that?--, and you crave liberation...hell breaking loose. Encouraging...from my position."

"Rafe?" Her head was floating in champagne dry as the stubble dust of summer. "Are you making love to me?"

He laughed, tossing back a glossy shock of black hair which had fallen over his forehead as he whirled her around. "I'm offering *my* version of Rafe and Mahta; idealized, by the way -- something you prefer. It's your call, my friend. I'll do whatever you want...and if you let me what *I* want...probably better for you."

"I think we're both drunk. Will you ravish me, my old pal?" she teased, feeling a luscious dizziness.

"I'll feed you bites of high-energy food...for the starving sparrow that you are. Come with me and get fed."

She felt herself slipping into a giddy euphoria, taking short breaths in between laughter without gaining the needed equilibrium. Her slowing speech required more control.

"Rafe...? All of my worldliness has sunk to the bottom of my champagne glass. Oh, please don't let me disgrace myself. I feel so...so crazy happy. I'm like...like a schoolgirl with a sudden rosy crush on the boy who's been sitting in front of her all year. How can I have a serious discussion in this...this ridiculous besotted condition?"

"Luckily you can't...not in either condition, love or inebriation."

"But I intend to," she said with just enough breath left, imagining that somehow they would sit up all night talking. Hadn't they done it so many times?

"You've far too much sense -- however blitzed with good booze -- to believe that. Come on, Cinderella."

He took her by the arm and walked her out to the brass doors, nodding at the doorman. In seconds the big Silver Cloud hummed up to the steps where they waited. She stood swaying against Rafael and breathing in the sweet scent of frangipani floating along on the drifting night air. His chauffeur held the door while Rafael guided a pliant Mahta into the back seat.

She snuggled in Rafael's reciprocating arms, feeling no threat at all, only peace, knowing in a warm tingling blur that Rafael knew exactly what he was doing, that he had ambushed her intent of the evening, but also that he found her well-remembered straightforwardness compelling, and that he was very much attracted to her.

"I think we'll stop and get some clothes and go to my place on the beach. It would be nice to wake up late there on a Saturday morning and be idle."

"And then I'll have my talk," Mahta insisted. Had she said *talk* or *walk*? She felt so at ease, drowsy.

"So you shall," Rafael agreed in a humoring voice.

"Don't get out of the car. I'll have Maria get your things," Rafael told her when they reached the house. She nodded her head and snuggled groggily against the upholstery.

When Rafael returned he was carrying his wide-eyed Siamese cat Ling under one arm and a large snifter of brandy in the other hand. A servant followed behind with the luggage. Mahta whirled up from her brief nap to find Ling sniffing at her with an indignant but investigative nose, as a tiny bell tinkled on her gold-chained collar.

"Ling wanted to go to the beach," Rafael said with an ironic grin. He slipped his hand beneath Mahta's head and fed her a little brandy while the chauffeur put away the luggage. Very soon there was only the quiet humming of excessive comfort as

they rolled along in the darkness.

Mahta stroked Ling with exploratory caution. The cat gave her a single lap of acceptance with its tickling rough tongue, then curled up in the far corner of the seat and resumed its interrupted sleep.

"You had a Siamese cat at college. Do you remember very much of those studious years in academia?"

"Everything," Rafael said in thoughtful recollection. "I studied you with unrequited lust. You were too busy hanging the dean in effigy over some political blunder to notice."

"I seem to recall in my fuzzy brain that you had some political inclinations."

"Only in a speculative idealistic sense."

"And now?"

"Even less so in the way you mean, but very much so in the way things work here."

"Tell me how they work."

Rafael fed her more brandy and spoke with a highly amused voice. "Is this a tipsy interview, my prickly cactus flower? That's an apt description, you know. You're like the night-blooming Cereus. I have them in my garden -- magnificent after eight in the evening, like you, but closed and spiny sharp in the daytime. However, this is night and you'll have to bloom with no other purpose or shut up."

"Spiny sharp?"

"Yes...I remember school. You were spiny sharp even then, but so lovely. We two ivory-towered intellectuals read too many books side by side, fornicating in our heads, at least half of us did. All I ever got from you was a hasty kiss on my cheek at our graduation. Then, unfortunately, you married that perversion who thought he knew how to buy you clothes. Ah, how well I could see to that, and you wouldn't object; you'd be too pleased with the results. I'd never assault your ego...much less *insult* it."

"You want to dress me and most men want the reverse. Very amusing."

"Undressing, pleasing sexually is, I suppose, a kind of art, but very easy. The other is more difficult, requires some time and observation...requires a certain intuition. I know you well enough to put the right clothes on you."

He drained the big snifter and shoved it into a holder.

"That might end up on the floor...even with this killer suspension."

"Let it."

"Hmm...clothes and sex...which do you like best?"

"Are you kidding?" he said with a low insinuating voice, then kissed her surprised mouth.

When he withdrew to gaze quite differently at her in the darkness, she chuckled, a little dizzy, but stayed in his arms. "What a puzzle you are, Rafe. What on earth goes on in there?"

She touched the clean thick black hair at his temple.

His answer was to kiss her again.

She felt a warm gathering in of her whole self against him, with such a natural offering of his caressing hands and attentive mouth that for an instant he seemed thoroughly known to her as a lover. Arousal swept over her as she touched his shadowy cheek with searching fingertips.

"*Querida*, Mathilda." A voice heretofore unknown.

"Wait a minute. I...I've drunk too much," she cried, pulling away at last and clasping her hand to her hot forehead in astonishment. "I've just thought of Eugenia."

"She'd be pleased, I think, doubly so. She likes to approve my interests but she also likes you...would be proud that her mate could stir the...the nobly solitary animal Mathilda Lind."

"Does she...does she go in for this sort of thing?" Her alcohol-loosened tongue sounded tactless in her ears. Worse yet, she was astonished to find that she was holding Rafael's arm against her waist and twining her fingers through his with a most tactile delight.

The question seemed to amuse him. He put his head back and closed his eyes for a moment. "I'd like to think that I alone fulfill all of her needs...but of course she has her varied little cravings. Once she was excited with the idea of being handled roughly in love. While I've been able to do that in the required way for some women -- I won't deny it can be arousing -- I found I didn't enjoy even the idea of violating her delicate flesh. She then informed me that she knew of someone who would, and she was so enthusiastic that I conceded. But I warned her that if I found extraordinary bruising I would cripple the man in question. After a while the practice lost its appeal."

Now floating without a care she heard herself attempt a line of sexual banter. "If I'd been Eugenia I would have preferred that you do the roughhousing."

"That is something I already sense about you, my schoolgirl-cum-woman...you want a little hard loving."

"You'll love me?"

"I always have."

"What about Eugenia? Isn't love a commitment?"

"Of course, but two people can agree on the length and breadth of that commitment. It doesn't have to *choke* them. Ah, you Americans. I like you but you are such hypocrites and so illiberal and self-righteous."

Mahta shrank back in the darkness of the car, her hand reaching out to stroke the annoyed cat. "I too?...Am I illiberal and self-righteous?" she asked.

With no answer forthcoming, she leaned in close to Rafael's face cast in blue shadow, and stared hard into what she could discern of his eyes until he responded.

"No, my white orchid, my lovely topaz eyes, you are nothing

of those. It was a generalization. Your skin is too damned thin. But you are more desirable than you realize, especially when you're teasing me."

"Am I teasing? I rarely if ever tease like that."

"No, it isn't intentional, not in the likes of you," he agreed and kissed her in a very satisfying way.

She marveled at his understanding of what she hardly understood herself -- the craving and loneliness --, and at his intuitive sense of what aroused her and drew her without hesitation to a familiar refuge where for a brief moment in time there was no sense of time at all.

Kissing in the car in a heated urgent manner and yet with a certain restraining point in mind, made her think of high school boyfriends, double dates and car back seats. Perhaps because she was happily intoxicated, this thought made her giggle and then suppose that they must be acting a little like aroused college students. It was what they still were to each other, young students. Rafael was wrong if he thought that she had never desired him. Her extreme shyness and restraint prevented a great deal from happening to her in college, but she always felt strongly attracted to Rafael. When they studied together she had wondered what it would be like to lie in his arms; she was prevented from discovering by the fear that such a liaison would destroy their apparent familial relationship, far more valuable to her than sex soon followed by disinterest and abandonment. Their other relationships weren't discussed, although he had aired his opinion of Kenneth. She knew very well that Rafael's college sexual experiences far exceeded her own.

Ignored Ling jumped onto Rafael's knee, demanding instant gratification. He laughed and cupped his hands around her head, forcing her ears back. Her elegant eyes bulged, gleaming an intense azure in the faint light. Then her playful growl ascended to a high-pitched cry and she nipped at his fingers. "Twice bitten," he said, looking long at Mahta.

She tried to see out the window, then let her head rest on his shoulder and asked how many rooms the beach house had.

"More than we'll need," he answered in his frank way.

He scooted Ling back to her corner and picked up Mahta's hand. "I'm so glad you came. I myself was lonely...for you! I had no idea until I stepped into the guest court and saw my longed-for salad days waking up. You looked bone-weary. Do you know you've come alive now, even in your fizzed condition?" His voice held satisfaction.

"Polite, wasn't I, emptying your bottles? But your brand of champagne is hard to refuse. You have to share the blame."

"I wanted to prove to you that you could get a little *borracho* and not be sad. You aren't, are you?"

"No, I'm happy...happy and spoiled. Imagine that."

"Haven't you found any good love, Mahta?"

"Is there any good love left?"

"This," he said, his mouth pressed against her temple.
"Always...and right to the end."

Although he too had drunk a lot, she felt that what he said must be true. He couldn't really know nor was she ready to tell him how much she needed to hear it.

"Aside from me have you any kind of love at all?"

"Hmm, just recently there was a man I thought... But I think it was...yes, really more of a temporary physical attraction than anything else." A bit inaccurate but she settled on that explanation. "Actually, it's an amusing story. If I tell you, you might decide I'm a hypocrite."

Rafael insisted he would withhold even unvoiced opinion until some future time, and she offered a brief account, leaving out both Paul's knowledge of Brehnt and the letter.

"Can this man take care of you financially?" Rafael asked with a swift and annoying paternal concern.

"I can take care of myself. I really don't understand why people -- you for instance -- need so much."

"I have many responsibilities, a very large complicated family...but we were speaking of you. Has he any money and what about his family?" This was not her old Rafael.

She couldn't help laughing at his inability to cast off his Asian paternalism. Far too often men seemed almost genetically bound to treat women, especially small women, this way; it only resulted in a fierce protection of her independence. "It doesn't matter really. His late father was a prominent physician. Well, he's quite successful -- whatever that implies -- does beautiful creative work... He has a highly rated photography school...all the usual lucre, I'm sure...and a couple of children. He does run around the world...sometimes endangering himself."

"Like you. But enough money? One of you needs it."

"Oh, Rafe, I suppose he's very comfortable but hardly as rich as you. What does it matter? I don't care about that at all...but it's a moot point. He's not my kind of person. And please don't ask me what my kind of person is. What could my kind of person be with the life I lead?"

"That's very easy, Mahta: someone who accepts you as you are and loves you for what you are. And you, my friend, are quite a lot: independent, smart...a bit farouche, wild."

"Quite a lot of trouble. Anyway, I won't see him again, except by accident. Our professional paths can now cross more easily -- I do more and more tearing around to flash points. But he's marrying someone...end of story."

"Oh yes?" Rafael said, frowning. "Unless she's in the same business it won't do her much good. He must have discovered that you have an exceptional mind, useful in a partnership; what more could he want? Unless of course the woman is rich," he added with a pragmatic finish.

"Oh he's discovered me all right...in the very worst possible state...a little out of my head.

"This is very strange and sort of wonderful, Rafe, our rolling along in the darkness talking like this. I'm still finding out things about you. But I always will, won't I? And you're certainly finding out more things about me."

Ignoring her comment, he went on. "It might be good for you. You could work together. You need something like that...the sort of relationship that would extend you and hold you together at the same time."

"I've been extended. It's too painful. I can't do that again...ever. You promised to withhold opinion."

"Well, you can't wither too soon, night flower." He kissed the top of her head. Soon they were sleeping an inebriated sleep through the rest of the journey, content to drowse in each other's arms until Rafael touched her cheek. "We've arrived, Cereus. You must bloom."

She lay in his arms with her eyes closed, still sleepy. Rafael began to search for the shoes they had kicked off. While he was out and stretching she dawdled to consider the journey they had just taken, recalling in rapid flashes what her first trip over the mountains to Baguio had been like.

Baguio was called the summer capital, a mountain resort, lovely and cool with peaceful green parks. It was reached by climbing 5,000 feet over the same zigzagging road they had just traveled, passing through steep gorges with silver ribbons of falling water. Contrasted with the hot flat rice lands below, the climb into such a rarefied pine-scented atmosphere was even more dramatic. All of this she had missed in the darkness and more: the dense jungle of broad-leafed banana plants, giant ferns, vines, and orchids oddly mixed with northern pine and oak trees; the plateaus covered with calla lilies; the Igorot wood-carving villages; the Baguio marketplace ablaze with fruits and vegetables. She remembered eating roast suckling pig in sweet garlic sauce, *carabao* -- the fattened water buffalo, and goat meat cooked in lime juice, all prepared at the wedding feast of head-hunter descendants still wearing G-strings. In those mountain pockets of the primeval one was danced far back in time. The present still held the long epic of an old lost order with tattooed loin-clothed sparse-tasseled bodies trading their produce for rum, salt, and gambling. The women displayed fine tattoo patterns on their hands and forearms and wore short bright hand-woven skirts striped in red, yellow, or blue. Through their very straight black hair they twisted strands of beads or snake vertebrae. She had followed them over the dusty streets with her camera and with great interest, varied scenes pulling her along as the villagers walked to their open-air *ato*, a multipurpose Igorot meeting pavilion with its fire always kept burning.

From Baguio she had traveled seven hours by Jeep just to see

the magnificent Banaue Rice Terraces, each terrace twenty feet high, 2,000 years of ingeniously engineered paddies climbing 5,000 feet into the thunderheads. Her camera had eaten up reflections of those eternal rivers of life, sometimes of day-glow green and sometimes of the sky, flowing in narrow layers across the mountains as if into infinity. Only an hour away from Baguio one dropped from the sheer cliffs with their deep haunting gorges down to Bauang and the black sand beaches of La Union, looking out on the South China Sea.

"Wake up, my potted flower. We'll finish our nap in a comfortable bed," Rafael said, lifting Mahta against him.

Mahta stretched and yawned, tapping her fingers across her mouth. One of her arms was still asleep, a prickling dead weight, and her complaint brought the soothing relief of Rafael's massaging fingers.

"Everything you do seems perfectly natural."

"Yes...so is deceit," he answered. "Come inside."

Ling made a stunning and effortless leap, draping her lank self over Rafael's shoulder and establishing her demanded position of importance.

The beach house was open and airy. She could hear the sea wind coming through the palm trees. The polished tile floors were strewn with woven hemp mats and a few handsome assemblages of rattan and bamboo furniture. There were also clever groupings of singular native art: sculpture, pottery, paintings, and weavings; some strange and humorous mythical figures carved from the native pantheon of the Ifugao men, the rice farmers who made rice wine called *baya*, lived in stilted houses and carved or tapped out gold and silver jewelry when the rains came.

These things Brehnt would have enjoyed, she thought, and felt disheartened at the sudden jolt of sadness. Champagne aftermath, she reminded herself. Along with this she was experiencing a sluggish torpor from the fatigue of travel and the hot moist air. Her listless head drooped.

Rafael was quick to intuit her condition, grasping her arm and leading her across the room and down a hall hung with narrow sumi panels.

"The shower?" she said, with raised brows, having thought he intended to send her to bed.

"Yes." He smiled at her surprise. "We'll take a warm shower. It will open our pores and let our skins breathe better in this enervating climate."

He jerked his head to the side, motioning her into the dressing room adjoining the spacious shower.

"Does it bother you too?"

"Not really but I want a shower."

She stood in a dazed torpor as Rafael unzipped her costume and slipped it down. Her obedient arms rose as he disrobed her to her moist irritated skin.

"There. In you go. I'll scrub your back in a minute. Be right back."

The shower was cozy even though large, with tile benches, high-ledged windows holding trailing plants, and mosaic walls of colored birds and jungle fowl.

Rafael returned undressed, carrying a large rum coconut drink which he held up to her lips. It was cool, tangy and sweet. Widening her eyes she swallowed several times and then gave an appreciative laugh, feeling completely at ease. His resourceful manner was subtly knowing and exciting, his palpating hands wonderful implements of relief and arousal.

"We used to rub each other's stiff necks when we studied late," he said in a thoughtful voice. "Your incredible shyness made you so delicious."

They sat on the bench in the spray and steam, his fingers over the back of her neck and twined in her hair, his other hand holding the rum coconut up to her lips.

"Your skin is white as milk but your throat...hands, face somewhat tan and...tan sandal marks on your feet. You can have a little more flesh on your ribs...but such lovely breasts." His dark eyes examined her through dripping black strands of hair. "You have the remains of a large bruise here. I noticed it when we were dancing. That must have hurt." His fingertips traced the bruise on her shoulder.

"It's fading," she said, feeling the rum. "I was pitched off a mule. Nothing broken. Surprising I guess, considering that I landed in a ravine full of rocks."

"Jesus Christ, woman. How can this little body take that sort of punishment?"

"Oh let's not talk about that, Rafe...please."

"Here, swallow a little more of this." He tilted the glass between her lips.

He set the glass down, lathered and massaged her back with sandalwood soap, then handed her the bar. "Do me."

She soaped a sponge and worked in a slow languorous daze, enjoying the smooth skin and hard muscle of his back. They stood up, rinsed their backs and lifted their faces, reaching out to the needles of water. Rafael threw his head back and curving strings of beaded water flew from his hair. He closed his eyes and let the water pelt his face, a noble profile of taut-carved flesh, stirring in its beauty. She studied him as though looking at a piece of sculpture.

"You seem more slender with your clothes on but your body is so well-toned and muscular. I've never seen quite all of you before."

"You like the rest?"

"Oh, Rafe, you know I'm dangerously drunk...but you're entirely...you are stunning everywhere."

"Your sleek little legs are very slightly bowed," he said

with teasing voice, "and of course you still have that very innocent space in your front teeth."

"You know, you sound as if you're contemplating the purchase of a horse."

"I'm contemplating something...hardly that. I always thought that space so...your smile drives me crazy."

"What was in the drink besides rum and fruit juices?" she asked, shaking her head and swaying against the wall.

"Just rum." He laughed. "Lots, but I drank half."

"Hard muscle," she said, running her fingers over his solid shoulders. "So nice." She slid forward in the warm steam and felt his wet mouth open against her cheek. Her body quivered against his slippery taut skin. He was thoroughly aroused and arousing her.

"We must get out now," he muttered against her lips. "Christ, I don't want you here the first time." His voice was thick with urgency as he led her into the dressing room.

Reaching around the corner he dragged a huge towel over her, rubbing her briskly as she attempted to grasp a corner of the same towel. She hung onto him with one hand, dabbing the water from his hair and his shining smooth chest.

"You've told me you can't conceive, but you mustn't worry about me either -- an entire clinic of U.S. doctors have just pronounced me clean and fit -- annual checkup."

She leaned against the wall, silent, staring with wide-eyed uninhibited pleasure at his close body and burning eyes.

"Can you get over there on your own two feet?" he asked, gesturing toward the bedroom.

"Well of course," she said, letting her head roll forward against his chest. "When do you want me to do it?"

His quick laughter flowed over her as he lifted her without the least effort and carried her to the bed.

"Satin sheets...how ridiculous," she said, giggling and rolling onto her stomach, hilariously dizzy. Tossing her hair from her eyes, she smoothed her fingers over the pale jade satin.

He grasped her damp hair and twisted it around his hand, making a fist. "*À la tête bouclée*," he exclaimed in warm-voiced French. He pulled her head back by her hair and kissed her into oblivion. "Your hair curls even more when it's wet."

Lifting his hand to her mouth, she rolled against him, then swiftly drew back in the astonishment of delicious arousal.

"No, come here...come, my curly-headed cloud-skinned woman. *Ángel femenino ven*," he coaxed. "*Tu amor quiero gozar*."

"Yes," she answered. "I too. I want to enjoy you."

"After all these years...my God, I'll turn you inside out." His few remaining words were whispered against her throat in dulcet Spanish.

A gust of wind slapped the house, awakening her. Nervous, her chemistry gone awry from the alcohol, she felt as though her clammy flesh would ignite in a sudden flash of heat. Altogether sluggish and exhausted and still a bit dizzy, she thought she had been asleep a short time in her Seattle bed but the light said it must be late morning. Her brain whirled. Another strange place. Where was she and with whom? Beside her a dark head lay turned away.

"Paul?" Her startled voice was tentative and groggy. She heard the sea wind in clicking palm fronds. The body beside her turned over. Rafael's incredible eyes stunned her with their dark beauty.

"Rafe," she whispered, feeling a deep flush sweep over her already heated face.

Supine and with her eyes open, the previous hours began to reenter her memory, and her soft moan melted into a mixture of concern, pleasure, astonishment.

Rafael gathered her against him. "Shhh, little bird. God, we haven't slept enough. Aren't you tired from all of that? Sleep now...we'll wake up later...start over."

"Rafe, I feel so... I need to talk," she pleaded.

"Shut up, darling. Not now, woman. Shh, shh, *calle*," he said, kissing away some of her depression. Eyes closed, he threw one inert hand above his pillow and was still.

Sleep had left her abandoned, like death, and her insistent voice reopened his eyes: "Kind of sad...Rafe."

"Sorry, sweetness...it's alcohol." He came against her with slow thorough loving, until she gasped and sighed. "Perfect," he whispered with a final soft caress. "Now go to sleep."

Exclusive fatigue carried her off at last, nestled against his chest with his hand slowly stroking her head.

Later she sat curled in a thick-pillowed bamboo chair in the large front room facing the beach. Once again she was sipping coconut milk laced with a drop of rum, which she had insisted was better for her than breakfast. Rafael had given her one of Eugenia's thin silk sleeveless robes, all that she could bear against her flushed skin. A cooling intermittent breeze carried in the sweet smell of the large white Singapore plumeria blossoms across the patio. *You must work now in this lush life*, her conscience asserted. A note pad was balanced on her lap and her tape recorder stood at her elbow on the empty glass-topped end table.

Rafael was lying on the plump pale green cushions of the bamboo couch, wearing only the bottom of his navy blue silk pajamas. Sprawled out above him on the couch back, Ling snoozed with a soft purring. Rafael leaned on his elbow, staring at Mahta with a thoughtful grin.

"We've loved like wildly insatiable children. That's how we are together because we see ourselves as we were then...naïve

young students with impossible aims for ourselves and impossible propositions for the world."

"And how do you see yourself now?" Mahta asked with serious intent.

"My darling, I can hardly keep a straight face. I'm too full of playfulness. I've become your completed student lover."

"Rafe?"

"No, too difficult a question from my soft night bloom. Or is the spiny cactus back with us?"

"Oh come on. You know I've got to do this. I have an expense account."

His laughter was dismissive. "I'll pay your expense account."

"You promised me."

"All right, I'll make a hard bargain here: you can have your story if you let me take you shopping."

"What? You mean buy me things like a silly mistress?" Mahta shrieked. "Oh my God...how insulting."

"No, no. We're beyond that, aren't we?...aren't we? That sort of misunderstanding. Just some clothes..."

"That's what Kenneth liked to do...hang clothes on me," she said, disappointed.

"That fraud knew *merde* about clothes. He thought if he paid enough he'd have the right things.

"But what's this frown?" he asked, jumping up with leopard agility. He crossed the room and tossed her note pad aside, putting his head in her lap and his arms around her waist. "I don't want to *keep* you, goddamn it. I want to give you things, a lot of things...I've always wanted to...it's little enough of me. Can't you indulge me, a feather in my beak? Do you care for me?"

"I'm afraid so," she said, running her fingers through his glossy hair and listening to an unusual bird song.

"Then let me do it."

"I'm sorry...you're too tempting...in every way. It's really too much like being kept."

"What shit!" He jerked his head up with his eyes flashing in anger. "You're above that...all that conventional shit. You're not trading your flesh for a story. Is that what you think? *Por amor de Dios!* You can't. It's painful. I can go to a flower house for that."

"Is that why you keep calling me your flower?"

"Ahhh!" Rafael shouted, and pulled her down to the floor atop him, her hair tangled in his fingers.

"Stop, Rafe, stop! You're scaring me," she begged, shivering with excitement at his ferocious expression.

He began to laugh, displaying his even snow-white teeth and threading his fingers through her hair. "My wild thing...you're so anxious and you look so...so damned spooked. Can't I even call you my wildflower anymore?"

"Rafe," she scolded with moist eyes, "don't you remember what an emotional little crazy I was?"

"Yes I remember...I *remember*, of course. You pretended to be invulnerable...very nearly pulled it off...leather boots stomping over those cold wet sidewalks...but I took no notice. You were so shy...and you cried at movies."

"I still do. And I'm still shy...only now I have explosions of anger and yes, I'm wild and I'm stubborn. It's an impossible combination." Remaining on the floor she put her head back on the couch and rubbed her cheeks with extended fingers. Her own flesh felt unreal.

He kissed her closed eyes and pressed one of her nervous hands against his chest. "Just let me."

It was easier to give in, allowing her heart to inform her voice. "You'll have your way, won't you? Take me shopping then if you think you can improve my appearance."

"No. No. That isn't it. It's you who improve the clothes -- not even art unworn. They're wasting right now as you lie around here without them...poor neglected clothes."

"Okay...all right...but please use some restraint. And you can't ever hold this...this indulgence against me. I care nothing for clothes. I'm doing you the favor."

"Never...never, you little bluenose," he said, leaping up and returning to the couch. In one agile motion he settled in the lotus position and threw his head back.

"Incredible. You move just like Ling. You do karate, don't you?...tai chi or some such thing?"

"Martial arts...defense of self. Honorable warfare. May I teach you ways to defend that vulnerable body?"

"But how shall I defend myself against you?"

"That I won't teach. Really," he said, growing serious, "you damn well ought to know some of these things if you keep going where men have no respect for you."

"I don't think it would help much. They can just shoot me if they want."

"Maybe they don't want to shoot you but to... Shit!"

"Perhaps you could teach me a few things."

"Right now I'll teach you a few things...about love not fighting...and you can teach me...you who love so well."

"What if I wear your clothes with another man?"

"What can I do about that? At least you'll think of me sometimes. You might even find them useful. They'll be *your* clothes. No strings. Hmm...good pun."

"I'll wear them only with you."

"Good God, wear them wherever you wish, with *whomever* you wish. Wear them out and throw them away."

"I feel so sad all at once...what is it?...sad."

"There's entirely too much of that." He dropped down beside her. "You just don't realize how lonely you are. Let me help."

We'll try this."

"If I do that I'll never get up."

"Good. A ménage à trois." He kissed her, holding her hands against the floor.

"Rafe? Oh, you can help me now. The floor hurts...my...my back. It's bad. Ah! I can't move."

"My God, I'm sorry. Here, let me correct that." He lifted her up to the couch, still face down. "We'll put this pillow under your stomach. I'll fix you."

"Oh that's better," she muttered while his agile fingers kneaded away the pain in the small of her back.

"Now I know how to please you," he said. Supporting her middle with one hand he pulled her up to a sitting position and wrapped his arms and legs around her. He held her tight, tight against him until she could hear her vertebrae cracking, then placed his hands at her waist with thumbs pressed to her spine and jerked hard.

"Ahhh!" she screamed. "Oh. What did you do? How amazing. The pain is gone."

He nuzzled her with his chin over her shoulder and kissed her neck. "See how useful I am?"

Rafael left her sitting in contemplation while he went to make a phone call and fetch a servant. The sober young attendant appeared very soon with Keemun tea poured over ice and a plate of *suman*, oblong glutinous rice cakes wrapped in coconut leaves and stacked beside chunks of sweet mango.

They sat on large pillows on the patio, beneath the yellow-flowered trellis of a Hau tree. Below, the sea roared its blue-green mysteries, spilling on the jet sands.

She picked up a dripping slice of mango and slipped it into Rafael's mouth. He licked her fingers then fed her. The yellow Philippine mango was smaller, milder, less resinous tasting than the plump Hawaiian mangoes she was used to. Delicious and sweet.

Above their heads the leaves fluttered in the warm breeze. Mahta looked up. The blushing yellow flowers with their dark-eyed centers were nodding at her. A Chinese dove rustled through the leaves, fluffing its rosy breast and displaying its handsome spotted neck band. "Am I in heaven?" she asked with languorous voice. As she was staring up, a sudden opening in the leaves sluiced her face with bright sunlight.

"How beautiful you are, *querida*...all light in patterns of color...Matisse...but more wonderful, this sensual flesh. What a long time I've thought of us together. It's much better that it happened now...more enjoyable...precious cumshaw."

He stood up and picked a Hau flower, kneeling and tucking it gently behind her ear. "Did you know this too is a hibiscus? See...already turning apricot as it does in the afternoon. At nightfall just as it drops to the ground, it's blood red. Only one day of beauty...already we've had almost two days."

Together they moved over the strewn pillows, holding each other and loving until their need was entire. In one heated flash the sun-ruled flowers and sea disappeared beyond the powerfully seeking drive of their bodies. Finally they rested, holding hands and dreaming into space.

Somewhere a phone was ringing. A servant could be heard clearing his throat as he approached. Rafael got up and went inside. After a while he returned and sat looking at her, looking in stillness with only the rustling leaves as music.

"Rafe?" Her voice was a protest of her own joy.

She thought he was like Buddha, cross-legged and barefoot in his navy blue pajama bottom, his loving expression suddenly pensive and demurring. "Yes, you little huckster. Now you're panting not after me but after copy for an ephemeral piece of half-truths. What a waste of this exquisite here and now. I would rather go on making love to you...making love while reciting Baudelaire's *L'Invitation Au Voyage* against your equally ephemeral flesh."

He stood up and went inside, turning to call over his shoulder, "All right, come on, let's get this annoying interruption over with."

She sat a moment reflecting on the French words, deeply touched that he remembered how she loved that poem. He had read it to her so many years ago and then memorized it when he found how much she liked it...*Luxe, calme et volupté*. "Richness, quietness, and pleasure." Cruel to end this precious moment so soon, she thought, and yet I've done it myself. Why should such happiness end with remorse?

She found Rafael sitting up straight in a conventional position on the couch. He had put on his pajama top, denying her the great pleasure of looking at his body. His arms were folded with constraint, as if he were about to engage in an obligatory business conference.

"I wonder if you realize how extraordinary this is. I never mix business with...with you," he said with a sharp degree of unctuousness that revealed his wounded nature.

"You know for several days you've plied me with alcohol and seduced me...just to...I think just to prevent this."

"Well, my spiny cactus -- I didn't say flower -- at least you know verbal martial arts. That was a spinning back heel kick to the guts." He jerked his head to the side and looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Are you able to love at all anymore? You give a damned good imitation of it."

She had never seen Rafael so angry or hurt.

"Forgive me...forgive me," she begged. "I've grown so suspicious...untrusting. I know you don't want to do this, but I also know how you care for me. I couldn't feel this way if you didn't. You've made me so happy."

"Mahta, let me explain something. When I first found you

waking up in my home, I took one shocked look and thought: self-immolation...so thin...with dark circles under your eyes. I couldn't stand it. I've read the stories. I know your work. I know your *life*. I know how very determined you are...knew I'd never pry you from anything unless I poured alcohol down you and got you out of yourself. The alcohol was my only chance...a way to get ahold of you. You'll notice I've weaned you, that presently we're drinking tea."

"I have to keep going, Rafe. That's how I deal with my existence. It's when I stop that I get into trouble."

"Well, you're in trouble now if you *don't* stop. You need to rest, woman...to play a little. It's not my business to change you. I just want to save you...probably for my own selfishness. I want you in my world."

"Oh I'm grateful, Rafe...so grateful. But please, please don't mix me up right now...I need to do this job."

"All right do it."

"Just tell me a little of what's happened. Are you really in trouble here? Doesn't your firm handle a lot of shipping business?"

"We handle a lot of a lot of things. It makes us somewhat indispensable under any circumstances. The government has enough on its hands without unraveling its economic ties."

"But your firm heavily supported Marcos."

"Noticeably supported Marcos out of absolute necessity. This is a system whereby homage to the boss must be paid."

"Were the others as anti-Marcos as you?"

Rafael's expression, which had been guarded but accessible, now closed. He leaned back, throwing his arm over the couch. "I'm the major partner in a substantial investment firm. We aren't quislings, and I won't speak for the others...not for this."

"They could be a problem?"

"Well certainly. Greed will prevail. If no higher motives can be found that must do."

"But what of other motives?"

Rafael glanced out at the aqua sea then looked at her with hooded eyes almost closed. "Only a fool cuts off his hand to prevent writing cramp...unless, of course, the hand is diseased and he's ambidextrous."

"You're going cryptic on me, Rafe."

"Isn't what I'm saying apparent?"

"I know there are...well, what other sources indicate is that Marcos factions still have a great deal of strength here...enough force to have maintained an unbroken following among people of influence."

He turned his eyes on her now and she saw only black coal that would not ignite.

"Of course I know I'm stating what is...is so obvious,

because this has always been a feudal warlord system. Are you breaking away, then? Can you do that...take new paths and old clients without incurring hazard? If the...the undercurrent is so strong--"

"Mathilda, you're very good at what you do. You have no compunction at damaging this intimacy we share. I'm not surprised at that either." He was silent a moment. "Does it occur to you that one danger to me can be you?"

Mahta shut off her tape recorder.

"But I won't use your name."

"Oh Christ! I've been seen with you and you're suddenly a rather high-profile journalist."

"Then why did you do that?"

"Because I didn't understand that you would sacrifice me in your zeal for newsprint. An error. If I continue with this conversation I deserve what I get."

"Rafe, you know, don't you, I'd never do anything to cause problems or hurt you? I'll generalize...never mentioning your firm of course."

"You cannot be who you are and so naïve...it's totally inconsistent. We were photographed at the club. I'm your conduit. Perhaps you just haven't grasped the seriousness of that...do you now?"

"But how could you have thought--"

"By foolishly sadly underestimating your single-mindedness. I wanted to help you...you...the private you. You're so good to love. How fortunate for both of us that it's something you need very badly."

"Is this true? You thought that I wouldn't get what I came for? You thought--"

"Forgive my ego. I didn't want to consider what you'd come for. Not really...even though I know how zealous you are. Ah, old expectations and now...I've allowed all this long-awaited pleasure to cloud my perception. You're a part of my carefree past...that innocence held out whenever we meet. You've always had my respect. Your husband didn't give you that...didn't even realize what he'd lost. He was never capable of seeing what I saw...what I see now. If you manage to stay alive...much esteem...much success."

"You think so?" She got up and stood at the window. "I don't know what that means. *God*. At being human will I succeed? Rafe," she said, turning to him, "I'm terribly unstable except when I'm working. My life hasn't the least theme...or...or even a goal. I myself am not a readable story...just a fragmented creature with hopeless aims."

"Life hasn't a theme, for Christ's sake. I don't have to remind you of anything so trite. You are a profound story, a very moving one if I'm allowed a silly pun. You run around the world hurting badly, I suppose, and trying to keep that fierce

sentimentality out of your work. What a heavy task. I don't envy you that."

"Do you like me less, then, for being so aggressive...so ruthless...single-minded?"

Rafael's serious mouth spread into a chastising smile. "What a *chica* you are all of a sudden...so afraid of rejection. I've always known you were aggressive -- not many students, male or female, burned the dean in effigy. I can't help loving you, woman...*chica*. I can't turn that on and off. Anyway it's a fascinating combination: the private shyness and public audacity of Mathilda Lind.

"Are we going on with this crucifixion?" he asked with a weary sigh.

"That hurts me really...really."

"Not as much as it's going to hurt me."

"You wouldn't let me do that anyway. You're far too shrewd. I've got to get to work here. What can I do?"

"Jesus Christ, go out in the street and interview a taxi driver."

"So you don't respect me...just sweet talk."

"No, Mathilda, not true...haven't I just made that clear? Forgive my bad manners but you're sticking it to me. I want you off my back...and on yours."

"Right now you're terrible...aren't you?...really bad."

"I'm sorry. I forgot about your back. We'll avoid that position."

"Rafe...don't. It's just so frustrating."

"You want an interview? I'll get you one with someone who says business has never been better and Imelda Marcos has only one pair of shoes, if you like."

"I don't fabricate stories. Governments do that and that's why I'm here."

"Business is better for some people...and it will be for me too perhaps...if you leave me alone."

"I *will* leave you alone. I'm going to pack off to the Manila Hotel...sort things out and start over."

"No. No. Don't do that. Let us start over. I'll get you a good and true contact, I promise. You're looking healthier even in the short time you've been here. Don't think of leaving yet. We're so happy together."

"What about Eugenia?"

"Her sister in San Francisco is ill. She's helping with the family business...does a lot of that...isn't often home these days. She may return briefly and leave again."

"I shouldn't have done this." She paused in thought. "Has Eugenia come to Jambu House while we've been here?"

"Perhaps."

"Oh you inscrutable man. I cannot do this."

"Eugenia knows you intend her no harm. There's nothing more

for you to think about. Nothing. Eugenia is secure in my love. Just understand that. Please laugh again, *chica*."

"Why do you use Spanish with me? You never used to."

"I know that you're more fluent in it now...the simple language of love. My mother insisted I speak it well. She was both practical and romantic. You prefer French?"

"I love your voice, anything, even English." Her worried mouth broke into a smile at last.

"English is the language of commerce and technology."

"It also makes beautiful literature."

"So it does, little wordsmith. Remember how we used to read Shakespeare to each other?"

"I'm little this, little that...always creeping out of the past, isn't it? Why did I like being with you so much?"

"You trusted me...an intellectual with Eastern ideas."

"You like irony but you were always a bit mysterious."

"Disappointing...really disappointing. The *mysterious Oriental* is such an unenlightened...such a trite insult."

"I only know your endless mystery is wonderful to me."

"Why did you marry Kenneth?"

"I don't remember anymore. He was sweet and attentive, I think...and he wanted to so badly. And...and I'm ashamed to say I thought I was in love -- I don't handle that word very well anymore. I was simply too innocent."

"All right you were a naïf but, my God, you can't go through life giving yourself away as a favor."

"Oh I don't do that anymore...not at all. I do only what I want," she said with a steady gaze at Rafael.

"And you wanted this?"

"I must have. Oh I surely must have. I don't claim to always understand how your complicated head works but my complicated head is happy...surprised and happy."

"Let's go shopping. I want to give you things."

Mahta shook her head and folded her arms. "Haven't you forfeited the chance to become my...my dresser?"

"Why? I'm looking forward to it."

"You expect everything and I get nothing."

"I'm wounded...you get me and stunning clothes. But you've conceded. You *will* come with me? It was a challenge to be turned down. It's never happened before."

"Shopping? Shopping. Chernobyl is destroying our air." Mahta paced and pushed back her flying hair in exasperation while Rafael leaned against the sash of an open window, enjoying her colorful and flamboyant parade.

"As much as you'd like to be...to be omnipotent and omnipresent, it isn't going to happen, my honey-haired rebel. Come back to us...to here and now. It's going so fast. Remember, you came to me to get something you needed. Should I have been angry...disappointed?"

"Yes."

"I think even you didn't realize it was an erotic need, but it turned out to be. I'm happy that you trust me that much. So let go. Take a vacation. I just want to put beautiful things on you...then take them off."

"How do you get away with it, speaking to me like this?"

"I'm helping you...whether you realize it or not."

"I do realize it." She came up to him and stood at his side. "How could I not?" Now moody, he didn't respond. She moved away to a raku-potted orchid and touched the brilliant orange petals with her fingertips.

"Rafe, why don't you give all of your money to the poor and live a simple soulful life? This impoverished country's seams are splitting with indigence and misery."

He was silent a long time, and she knew she had caused deep offense and that her remark was shallow and cruel.

"The world is overpopulated. It will only get worse without a serious cataclysm. I try to do my part. If you checked you would find it so -- education...health care. You would find it so. But of course I piss into the ocean. I do envy your freedom. Once I might have lived some other life but this is the one I'm in. It's too late. And anyway too many people have always depended on me...very complex alliances...*embrouillement*. I'm forced to go on. I'd have to die now to follow your good advice...might anyway."

"Please don't say that," she implored with new fear. "Oh God, I can't imagine my world without you either." She returned to his side at the open window. "I'm sorry, Rafe. I sounded like a little narrow-minded student radical."

"If you can't love a man unless he's Christ-like what will happen to you, Mahta?...to your tremendous capacity to love? You know you won't get your damned impossible perfection that way...through another. No not ever."

He remained turned away, watching the sea as he yanked at his seldom worn pajama top with punishing fingers. "Help me get this straitjacket off," he said in a harried voice.

She moved to his front and reached for the buttons, her hands gliding over the luxurious dark silk, her forthright eyes subduing the anger in his, working at forgiveness. The blazing eyes softened, glazed with a chiding warmth, and the scowling lips smoothed in compassion then arousal as they parted over her mouth. When she laid her face against his chest she smelled again the wonderful erotic spice of his flesh. He opened her robe and let it flutter to the polished floor.

#

Cool, shut away from Manila's humidity, a sanguine Rafael sat reflecting upon style in the sumptuous salon of a Makati clothier. He reached for his half-finished glass of sherry and motioned for Mahta to turn around. She did a quick pirouette and

playfully pointed her toe then shook her fist at him. He laughed with surprise. Her special rewards were his lightheartedness and the masculine finesse of his bronze-skinned ecru-suited presence, in what she termed an expensive rag shop. Stretching one arm across the brocade settee back, he rubbed his chin with his thumb.

Mahta, clothed in a white silk suit of expert cut, was standing on a beige Persian carpet. "I'm having more fun watching you than I am parading around in this," she said.

"Yes, definitely that one. The *couturière* is an artist with small bodies," Rafael said, winking at her. "You couldn't look so good if you weren't enjoying it a little."

She smiled and came to sit beside him. "I *am* having fun showing off for you...but it makes me feel dangerous, sort of old-world powerful. Why was the model sent away?"

"Why do you think? Seeing you enter the room is like having my own stage production."

"Well anyway we've got to quit this. I'm tired."

"For now but perhaps more later. We'll stop at Jambu House and then drive out to a place you'll like. We'll dance a while, eat...maybe drink a little...and... But go put on the slender aquamarine evening dress. It made my eyes ache, shimmering around you. Go. I'll be back in a few minutes."

She could feel his eyes following her as she stepped across the long carpet and into the fitting room. His enjoyment was so pleasurable, and yet a preoccupation with clothing had always been anathema to her. But diverting Rafael's heavy ponderings of daily life now overrode the hypocrisy she felt. While she had paraded before him and a dark thought surfaced or a jab of guilt struck, some part of her would move involuntarily: a hand to her hair, fingers rubbing the back of her neck or toes curling tight in her shoe. Discovering that she had clenched her teeth, she would look to Rafael for the balm of his quick smile or his reassuring approval. That would suffice. The dressing room was another matter. With the shop owner standing by, two giggling seamstresses fluttered over her as though she were royalty and not merely -- she laughed at her capricious operatic parody -- an extravagantly indulged love goddess.

#

The sun was bleeding into the sea, the horizon slashed with ruby shards beyond dark palm fronds. A hesitant floral breeze teased Mahta's hair, which Maria had managed to gather up once again with her special legerdemain.

Rafael let go of her hand and reached up to remove the little diamond studs from her ears. Handing them to her he dipped into his pocket and drew out two delicate hanging leaf sprays of diamonds. He slipped them into her ears.

She inhaled and exhaled, a deep sighing breath of jasmine-

scented air, and said, "Rafe, you've got to stop this. I don't do this."

"Just this once, please. I am *enamorado*."

"So beautiful...but I beg you, not another peso."

"Don't spoil it."

"But *querido*, you're spoiling me."

"Say that again."

"*Querido*, you--"

"That, just that," he said. "Dance with me now."

She lifted her arms and said, "Two people put their arms around each other and move to a rhythm. Really...I've always thought it was such a strange thing to do...but now it seems...it feels all right...natural."

"Don't think about it, *querida*; it's not a mental exercise. Just move with me. It's better that way."

"It must be important, this strange act of dancing; it goes back a long, long way...to our primitive beginnings," she pondered in a low voice, laying her arm over his shoulder and inhaling the merest hint of his sylvan cologne.

"As Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy says, 'Every savage can dance.' You were really fond of clever Jane."

"Yes, still am," she agreed with enthusiasm, "because her social commentary of the quotidian is so revealing and true."

His fingers slid up to her neck, tilting her head back to assess his gift. "A good choice. They match the diamonds in your eyes."

"Those are only the tears of a skylark...one that's flown too high," she confessed, scolding herself.

"Mahta, love yourself. You're deserving...and so nice to love." He held her closer with his fingers caressing her bare back and her head on his shoulder. "Love your wild skylarking self, my little bird."

"You're the nice one...*cariñoso*...surprisingly tender," she whispered in his ear and heard his "Ah" of appreciation as his arms tightened around her.

As they danced over the palm-encircled terrace of this lovely old place, like a chic club of the forties, she lifted her head and glanced around the room, wondering how many of the people present knew Rafael.

"Isn't that Humphrey Bogart over there?"

Rafael chuckled. "He's the CEO of a Hong Kong based company. Can't help staring at us...a bit of well-placed envy. He'd like to meet you...but I'm selfish."

After a light supper of seafood and wine they went on dancing. Mahta was borne away, lifted up to a carefree height of simple spontaneity, where nothing but Rafael's arousing warmth and a dreamy sensuous rhythm prevailed. His skill had spun away all her inhibitions, along with the wooden manner of dancing that she had always endured. The absurdity was gone. This was why

people danced. She would never again discount the heady release of yielding to music, sublime therapy. Occasionally they exchanged soft words or laughed together, whirling under the shadows of the palms until the large swing band played its last mellow note.

Rafael had neither introduced her to nor spoken to anyone, but she thought he had acknowledged a few people while her head lay against his shoulder. Once, perhaps concerned over the aftermath of their intimacy, he looked into her eyes and said, "You know if you ever need me I'll be there, don't you?" "Yes," she replied, "and that remark is dearer than all the love words you could fling at me." In the car she drowsed beside him while Rafael spoke on the phone in Tagalog and then melodious Spanish. When he finished he said, "We're going to stop at Jambu House, rest and collect some things I've had Maria pack...then head for Baguio. I have a place there you might like. We'll have a picnic by a waterfall."

"I've promised to produce a story," she said, trying to explain how her reliability was key to her work. "Oh, I want to, Rafe, but I just can't play like this. You--"

"My concern wasn't all selfishness when I warned you about what is happening to you, Mahta. Don't ruin the little pleasure left to us. Allow yourself this, this and we'll say good-bye."

It was the first time she had ever let an assignment slide, ever given up her tight control. She couldn't say when she would see him again or what might transpire in the intervening time. Catching a glint of sadness in his aloof eyes, she offered a broad smile to induce the same response in him. For her this had seemed like giving in to luxury; but now it was for him too, this happiness snatched from a long spate of misery. Now her relieved conscience could bask in his generous gift of self.

#

Baguio was a fresh high place wrapped in a mysterious dazzle of green. On the way there gliding through fast spangles of sunlight, they did picnic beside a cascade of water falling from one of the precipitous gorge walls.

"What a charmed life you lead," she said, arranging a full crimson skirt out around her on the blanket as she sipped her wine. In the rush of the waterfall she at first thought she had misunderstood Rafael's answer, perhaps because it was delivered with an amused expression, however serious and irrevocable the message.

"Regardless of how it looks, I do work and there are, have been for some time, threats against this charmed life."

She watched his lips intoning beneath the roar of the falls. The sounds formed slowly in her ears, even as she asked him to repeat them. Upon seeing her face he refused.

"I did hear you," she insisted with growing anxiety.

"I'm sorry then," he said, careful of her alarm. "I thought I was speaking only to the hardened journalist."

"This foolish journalist never hardened." She had to shout. For seconds they watched a giant tree fern sway in the falls' moist wind, rhythmic fronds releasing sprays of diamond droplets. Gripping her glass in steeled hands she cried out frighteningly ominous words above the falls, "Is that how you expect to die?"

"Ah, not soft at all, a journalist's hard question." He swallowed the last of his wine. "Who knows?" He stood up. "None of us knows for certain until the moment. Why waste time on it? You and I have to crowd years into hours. Come on let's head back." He took her hand and called for his chauffeur to return their picnic things to the car.

They were ambling through a dense stand of high bamboo, their slow feet crunching in dry leaves. Looking up at the canopy of long narrow leaves, she said, "I'm sorry I've stolen your work from you...your valuable time, Rafe."

"You can't be sorry. Damn it! No, you're not...not for this. Didn't you need what I could give? Didn't I need you? We will always find each other at this picnic."

He turned to kiss her, holding her against a thick segmented trunk, one hand stroking down her side, catching up her skirt and blouse. The blanket she was carrying slipped to their feet.

"This is the best," he affirmed with caressing mouth. "Since the day you interviewed that wise-assed Filipino boy for the school paper. To have known you then...have you now, companion of all those easy days...my friend...my love...my loving friend. To go like this would be the best." She lifted his warm hand, the one without the ruby, placing small kisses on the veins of his wrist. His burning dark eyes narrowed, traveling to her offering mouth, to the question in her lifted eyes. "God, how you prove my point," he said, tossing the blanket over the fallen leaves.

#

Rafael's almost inaccessible mountain home was of the mountains supreme, but hardly rustic; it looked, Mahta thought, more Balinese. The main living room had a dun tile floor strewn with woven fibrous matting and massive bamboo and carved sandalwood furniture. The pieces were covered in thick-padded fabrics with geometric designs in cream and earth tones. In the bedroom a calamondin orange plant was fruiting in a large brass pot, placed near wide glass doors whose panoramic view displayed a dense and descending forest. She stopped for a moment at the open doors then flopped on the huge bed, kicking off her sandals and folding her hands behind her propped head. She stared out at the thick wild verdure rippling into the clouds.

In a while Rafael came in, barefoot and wearing only clean white denim jeans which enhanced his bronze skin. He settled on the fern decorated pillow of a carved wooden chair near the bed.

A young man in T-shirt and shorts soon followed with two tall drinks. She took hers from Rafael and drank without knowing or asking what it was -- sweet and fruity without much rum and perhaps only a dash of melon liqueur.

"It's going to rain hard," Rafael said, staring at the low and dark nimbus sky which had rolled in.

"Ling hasn't come with us."

"No, she'd be short work for the scavenging forest beasts.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"How could I be? I never do anything."

"Love-making is enervating."

"Yes...but I'm not tired of..." she stopped herself, actually blushing.

"Ahh," he said, setting down his glass and sprawling above her, propped on one elbow. "How delicious you are when you blush...blooded white skin. Can there be anyone else left in the world who blushes like that?"

"Don't laugh at me. I think I'm happy. I've always believed I was depressed at sea level and euphoric in the mountains. It's so nice here with you...peaceful."

"*Luxe, calme et volupté*," he said. "We should have come here sooner." His eyes traveled over her face in silence, accompanied by fingers tracing her profile, then his hand gripped the back of her neck in a deep kiss. In a while he sat up and reached for his drink, swallowing a third of it but remaining silent, only smiling.

"You smile at the most difficult times. I'm getting more and more worried...really worried."

"I'm flattered that my possible demise can so disturb you."

"Flattered?"

"Well...grateful."

"I've always thought of you tucked safely away in your own special kind of bliss, Rafe."

"Is that silly idle thought now replaced by a realistic one worthy of you? Just tedium, rough games and you at last."

"I feel now...that somehow it's up to me to save you."

His quick laughter fed upon itself. "Wasted effort," he finally admonished. "I'm a fatalist...even as I loathe such labels. If you live here, or lately anywhere, you have to be. Americans always fix it so that God has interceded. We here make a show of it but expect the norm: indifference.

"Do you want to visit the rice terraces?"

"I have a zillion photographs of them but I'd love to see them again...just to look...to look and look."

"We'll take a helicopter over tomorrow," he said, finishing his drink and falling back upon the bed. He clasped her waist and pulled her toward him.

"I like this blouse. Where did you get it?"

"Budapest...a Hungarian peasant blouse."

He sat up and grasped the red-stitched blouse hem, lifting it over her head. "Well, little peasant, I'm hungry again."

Gradually the room filled with shadows, and they lay in dimness, exhausted, twined together, listening to the pelting rain and the wild wind thrashing the dripping trees. She leaned on her elbow, surveying his bronze body glowing in a candle's soft flicker, then fell upon him, quivering against his flesh.

"How are you strong enough to do the things you do, my troubled heart, if this is how you are now?"

"Oh I come apart very fast when I fear for those I love," she said, sorry her dark mood was spilling over them.

"Stop this nonsense. I'll come out the other side. For me you are *talismanique* -- look how you survive.

"Now let me tell you a fairy tale about a little boy who was spanked by his priest."

"Oh God." She gave a high trill of laughter, sprung from her jail of fear. Her fingers ruffled his hair as his preoccupied mouth brushed against her ear. "What can I do with you, Rafe?"

"Anything you want."

#

Bodies locked together in peace, they had slipped into much needed sleep when a small tremor shook the wind chimes outside the open window. Mahta's head lifted: *Wind stilled but tinkling chimes?* The dead air had a certain pressure, a strange emptiness followed by eerie bleatings coming from some wild or domestic animal. There sounded the faint scraping of objects being pushed across the floor, rivulets of mud oozing over the patio, seeping under the doors. Then came a nascent quaver of displacing earth followed by a loud explosion of sound. The mountain house trembled with a fierce quasi-interminable shudder. Then it groaned and cracked. A heavy ceiling beam crashed down over the bed. The massive iron bedstead, which Rafael had had carted up the wooded bluff by a team of oxen, prevented a crushing fatal blow. Just as half of the huge splintered beam began to sag Rafael pushed Mahta onto the floor, himself caught beneath its weight. His legs were pinned for nearly an hour, the bloody right leg broken. Rafael's houseman fought through the rubble and managed to get morphine from a first aid stash in one of the bathrooms. Rafael lay talking to this servant, Claudio, while four men lifted the huge splintered beam from his legs. Finally he related to Mahta what information he had gleaned from fearful Claudio's excited babble. Assisted by the heavy rain the sudden earthquake had been severe and destructive, burying homes and people under tons of mud and debris. Rafael wanted Mahta to leave at once.

Again and again she refused. Her hair was filled with the grit of wreckage. She had put on a shirt and a pair of Rafael's jeans wrenched from the shattered closet. Dazed, dust in her

mouth and lungs, she fell into a spasm of coughing. She pushed her hair away from her eyes, looked at him lying in the rubble and blinked with increasingly watery vision.

"Damn it. Stop it. I don't feel a thing," he said, and began to laugh as further proof of his assertion. "They'll just cart me down the mountain and stow me in a cast. Alas, I'm finished having you for...for a while."

"I won't leave you," she insisted.

"Even if it would help me if you did?"

About to protest further, her reasoning mind took over and she asked, "Is my presence here difficult for you?"

His answer was evasive. "Mathilda...I'm sorry...but so thankful you're unhurt. I want you out of this trash. Claudio will take you down...by mule if necessary."

"You're in a...a great hurry to be...rid of me," she said with helpless coughing. She spied the strap of one of her sandals and then the other, pulling them both from beneath the debris and sitting on the cluttered floor to put them on.

"Skylark, please don't give me *beaucoup de peine*. This damned opiate is muddling my head. Claudio will get you out. You'll hear from me. I'll explain everything if I...when I'm able. Come on...you've got to stop coughing. When you find some decent air take a lot of deep breaths."

"It's...nothing...debris dust...got a lot in my..." A spasm of coughing brought her to her knees and with tears.

"Mahta? Mahta! Good God!" Rafael cried out.

"No, damn it, it's...nothing. If you go on like that I'll...I'll bawl my eyes out. Your...poor...leg."

"Jesus, woman, please get out of here. Your lungs can't take any more. Come kiss me good-bye and go...go."

Ending their feverish kiss she dragged her battered suitcase from beneath the pillows of the broken chair, while becalmed Rafael gave instructions to Claudio. The last part of Rafael she could see was his hand, the V of his fingers enduringly raised above his dusty hair as she scrambled out of the rubble.

When she considered the thorough devastation in which she found herself, she thought her extrication from the chaos and debris, and her gradual but fairly safe descent from their short-lived mountain paradise, an escape from hell, escape undeserved. Now in Claudio's hands, they moved along in cautious stages, skirting the murderous flows of mud. Her encased camera had survived inside her scarred valise, and she managed to click off several rolls of the misery she encountered along the way -- all life within a wide swath of the hillside was submerged in a gray viscous slime. Where there was a place to maneuver a Jeep came to meet Mahta and Claudio. They proceeded foot by foot, backing up and rocking out of treacherous areas of sinking earth. Once all four wheels began to disappear as they spun out mud, and Mahta started to get out of the Jeep to see if she could help.

She was politely ordered back, the explicit instructions for her safe delivery standing firm. She was photographing the Jeep's spinning tires when a faint barely visible circle formed in deep mud nearby; it was followed by the flat relief of a heavy-lidded death mask. She saw the mouth opening and closing as clawing fingers rose up from the tawny ooze. Cursing, Mahta shouted out for help, which precipitated another coughing spell. She pointed and waved her arms but no one moved fast enough. With a flaring impatience and before anyone could stop her, she leapt from the Jeep and sank into the already solidifying gray mud. "Help me!" she cried, coughing as she crawled in a swimming motion toward the extended fingers and gasping mouth. Working with furious hands she scooped out the mud and flung it away. Then Claudio and the driver were working beside her. They dug with shallow but rapid strokes, the driver working with the butt of a rifle he brought from the Jeep. Finally they pulled out the small gray body of a woman still alive clutching a tiny dead baby. Mahta snatched the baby from the gasping woman's weak grasp as Claudio supported her limp body. Gurgling and choking, unable to make any coherent sound, the woman was lifted up and carried to the Jeep. Mahta followed, struggling through the plastic flow of earth with the dead baby cradled in her arms. It was a newborn and light as a feather. With its body coated in pale mud it resembled a miniature stone grave figure, one which would never mark its wind-strewn ashes. Rummaging through her suitcase she found a silk scarf and wrapped the infant, shaking the mud from her fingers as she worked. Methodical and hardly aware of her own difficulty in breathing, she toiled on while an illusion of Lemur's deserted face hovered over the dead child.

Claudio finally left Mahta with the driver who was made to stop several more times. The Jeep was now crammed and overspread with rescued children who needed medical attention. One child still clutched his dead pig because she hadn't the heart to make him throw it down. The grieving mother had folded inward, a shriveling husk more dead than alive. Supporting the mud-caked woman and holding a crying child on her lap, Mahta insisted that her desperately clinging passengers must all receive treatment. "Drive to a hospital," she demanded. Only after the driver obeyed did she allow her tired mud-spattered body to reach the sound walls of the Manila Hotel. Her luggage was all there, awaiting her already arranged departure. Heavy-hearted, she set her muddy case alongside the others, which she later found included Rafael's handsome couture contributions.

She sighed with fatigue as she stood beneath the shower head, gazing in a trance as tawny silt streamed from her hair and body, coated the tiles and vanished into the floor drain. Her head fell back, dreaming of her incredible shower with Rafael. The stirring memory was at once supplanted by worry.

After only one night -- a nervous sleep with periods of

sudden wakefulness, during which she tried to no avail to locate Rafael -- she was flown by private jet to Honolulu where a ticket home on a commercial flight awaited her. This thoroughness was disturbing. Instead of finding Rafael's network of power and influence encouraging, she only worried that his position and wealth were considerable enough to remain a threat to any number of enemies.

On the last leg of her flight her mind was swinging like a pendulum, allowing her a moment of joyful intimacy with Rafael then assailing her with intense and painful fragments of the recent horror she had witnessed. Most disturbing and recurrent was a startling vision of the little suffocating mother: torn fingers clawing upward through sludge toward once gratuitous mountain air, while beneath the earth a dying arm clutched an already dead baby. And there were the ghostly images of so many tossed bodies encased in gray pyroclastic earth, their startled faces, their grasping limbs protruding from solidified rivers of mud and rubble. Smothered cattle and stiff smaller animals were tumbled among the bodies like discarded clay models.

Interspersed with this was the recurring vision of Rafael. The scene burned into her heart, his amazing calm as she stared in horror at his bloody leg pinned under a thick portion of the splintered beam. Extricating the broken leg produced only a soft groan. Then, soothed by medication he looked at her with a laughing reassuring face, dark sedated eyes moist and glowing. If he hadn't first pushed her off the bed he might have gotten off himself. But if not for her Rafael wouldn't have been there at all. She pulled the airline blanket over her face and hunched down in her seat, unable to eat and straining toward an oblivious sleep, which eluded her.

#

After turning away from her reels of astonishing earthquake photographs it was the few her camera recorded before this cataclysm -- prints capturing the happy hours with Rafael, the restorative melding of body and mind -- that she needed to see again and again to verify what had happened.

She stood in the dim red light of her Seattle darkroom, watching his striking face limn out in the film bath, pondering this new chapter in their long relationship. These pictures were proof of what had seemed like a dream. The moments of deeper discovery she had so begrudged him at first and later reveled in could never be duplicated, were all too soon relegated to the past. Even more than the passing of time she regretted her inability to deal with its passing. All was headlong motion, the earth's misbehavior joining in. They had touched and parted with ceaseless quantum motion dictating the suddenness. Where was Rafael? *Just be alive moving through time.* Now when she tried to reach him a guarded member of his staff told her only that he

was away. Whatever the cause, his eagerness to send her off left a sharp pain beneath her ribs. Her instinct that he had done the right thing still left her unable to assuage her need. Their long-shared familiarity, his generous love and fearless nature had begun to heal her. But she was wounded again, light-headed and jittery with remorse. Without waiting another day she wrote and mailed an importuning letter to Eugenia -- really a short grieving note -- and fretted over how it would be received. Eugenia would of course have known of her visit to Manila through friends or the society pages of the newspapers -- Mahta had seen pictures of herself dancing with Rafael --, or very likely Rafael had told Eugenia himself during one of his many phone calls; above all he was candid. The letter was certainly self-exposing:

Dear Eugenia:

Please forgive this intrusion, but I am so deeply worried over Rafael's condition and whereabouts that I can hardly work. If I can only learn that he's alive and well I will be thankful enough. That's all I need to know, just that he's alive, healing and busy. Of course I wouldn't ever need to see him again, if you're concerned by this.

I hope that you are well too, and have the peace of knowing of his good health.

Love as ever, Mahta

#

Returning from the post office, she grabbed up her ringing phone; it was Sidney Gaffenough with a bombshell of information. She had won the coveted Borleau Prize for her Jim North story. It was a disclosure which should not have been revealed to her until someone from the prize committee contacted her. The revelation had fallen upon her ears this way because no one could find her phone number. Gaffenough wanted to prepare her for the news, had even taken it as his prerogative to do so. He reminded her, with a proud voice, that the Borleau Prize Committee always took into account dedication and valor as well as expertise in reporting when they made their decision. The prize was announced and awarded near the end of each year, and her story had just managed to come under consideration before the deadline.

"Now you're in for it," he said, his chaffing voice filled with admiration. "Congratulations. You certainly deserved it...but your days of anonymity are over."

She replaced the receiver and stood with her hand on the phone, stunned, trying to think what the news meant. Her thoughts were flying in too many directions. *I can't handle this. I just can't handle this now.* It was never something she could even consider, repugnant in fact. "No prize for me," she said aloud, "but for Jim, yes." It seemed so far removed from

her, as if it were happening to someone else. Could they really mean her? This sort of amazed disbelief went back a long way. Often when she had received high marks and favorable commentary on her college papers she was convinced that the instructors had someone else in mind, had mistakenly written praise on her work. It came to her now that this persistent conclusion -- her woeful uncertainties in any achievement -- had prompted a stern lecture from Rafael on self-worth.

What the ensuing days would hold she couldn't imagine, but had enough presence of mind to turn on her message taker, speaking only to a member of the Borleau Prize Committee, her father, and Jane. The phone rang constantly, an increasing annoyance -- how on earth had so many people gotten her unlisted number? For a while she sat huddled in her chair listening to each voice, hoping that it would be Eugenia or Rafael. She was startled to hear Paul's friendly congratulations and sat fighting back a response with her hands gripping the chair arms: "Mahta, it's Paul. Are you there? How was Manila? I'd imagine that now you're inundated. The Borleau couldn't have landed in a better place. Very large congratulations. I want to say much more. Please call so I can. My number's beside your phone. Talk to you soon."

All of her blinds were closed and her drapes pulled to escape any local news hound. She had been home only a day and a half but it seemed more like a month things were happening so rapidly. Sitting quietly in the shadows she recalled the useless seclusion and fear of her mother. When still a young child, and whenever an unwanted visitor came knocking at the door, Mahta would suddenly be dragged off to hide in one of the large walk-in closets of their farm house.

"Mama, why are we in here?" she would ask, wrinkling her nose as she squatted under the heavy old fur and cloth coats which reeked of mothballs.

"Shh, not a sound," her mother answered in a harsh whisper. "Meddlers. They always have to come around meddling."

They would remain in the closet until they heard footsteps receding from the veranda and Mahta's mother, standing on tiptoes on a small stool and peeking through a tiny round window, had confirmed the visitor's departure. Then her mother would rush from the closet and hurry through the house, locking the doors and closing all the blinds. With no attempt at distinguishing the interlopers from the truly concerned, the caring friends who might have been were cast away, without ever having been given a chance to redeem themselves.

Thus driven from her chair by a longstanding hatred of avoidance, Mahta jumped up and switched on her computer. She stood over her keyboard while the ideas swarming in her head settled into a pattern. Then, hoping to alert the world to the need for assistance in the Luzon highlands, she sat down in her

darkened room and wrote a story about the earthquake disaster. It was quite different from the story she had gone after -- that assignment now on hold. The earthquake story was Air Expressed to Sidney Gaffenough very early the next day, along with a startling array of photographs. When it arrived he called back with surprise and praise, and with arrangements to meet her in New York before her appearance at the dreaded award ceremony.

#

After the Borleau was presented she returned in time to see her picture in *The New York Times*. She decided Mathilda Lind looked like something that had just been shot. Her eyes were large and open wide, resembling a surprised nocturnal animal wounded by a night hunter. The event was a blur. She had barely managed to speak of Jim North without tears but must have dug her nails into her palm -- later she found the marks. She wore one of the lovely suits Rafael had given her, an iridescent dark blue silk, and, upon seeing her sleeve by the microphone, a brief thought of him had intervened: *Communicate with me, Rafe; your suit is accepting this award*. With a few terse remarks, and with Gaffenough's help, she had fled from a crowd of her own reporting colleagues. Her self as subject was disturbing, robbing her of the precious anonymity which had always allowed her to move through the world unencumbered by attention.

The day after she flew home she still found no Manila message. The following day she boarded a flight to Honduras.

IX

In the mountainside home of a casual friend in Tegucigalpa and during a sleepless night of heavy rain, Mahta thought of Rafael. Where was he now, her link with an innocent past, her wounded dark-eyed *amante*? Whether she was at fault or not she would have no peace until she learned of his safety. Had a broken leg made him vulnerable to something more perilous? Perhaps she was overreacting, but there remained his pointed revelations of very private and sinister matters. She believed that he had also been concerned for her safety because of her proximity to him. The strain of his silence had gone with her and would drive her work. I'm always running, she allowed, most often toward something menacing enough to cancel the previous misery. She should have told Rafael when he asked her how she could live with fear that she lived *off* of it.

#

Sprinkled over the slopes of Mt. Picacho, the charming pastel adobe dwellings with their rose-tiled roofs belied the poverty of this city of over 600,000. Charming as the older

parts of the "city of silver" were, its entirety was nevertheless filled with nefarious characters of every stripe. The rampant scheming, subterfuge, and very often treachery, were in some cases precipitated by, and in others augmented by, U.S. covert activities presently flourishing in Honduras.

With U.S. involvement both applauded and reviled, the country was currently a hot spot for journalists. Most channels of information were expensive and the information network was as solid and sinister as any other burgeoning financial enterprise. Because Mahta was not financed in the same manner as salaried journalists, she had to rely on ideologues. A dangerous practice. Radical extremists took more chances, and were often more ruthless than politically disinterested street-smart vendors shrewdly getting rich in the clandestine world of information.

Mahta was looking for a certain underground radical who could either help her himself or put her in touch with someone else who would. This person was supposed to lead her to a grave site which held the bodies of protesters from the UNC, the National Union of *Campesinos*. The *Campesinos* had been bravely demonstrating against the confiscation and destruction of their lands for the purposes of constructing military airstrips. As they marched in opposition they were cut down, slaughtered in a bloodbath of brazen elimination by an unrestrained murder detail. The facts of the incident were twisted all around -- the blame shifting among countries --, and the unrecorded event itself even denied, but a missing American reporter was said to have been among the slain.

Given a choice, the search for and discovery of the reporter together with a portrayal of the *Campesinos* and the victims would have been Mahta's story, but the news service which had sent her didn't want that story. They wanted something more immediate, a pictorial exposé of the grave site. In a time without personal angst she would have turned this job down as too narrow in scope to justify the danger involved. Now, wired with the fear of Rafael's uncertain condition and the misery of the Luzon horrors, she counted on this work to distract her and deaden her nerves.

#

Two days after Mahta's arrival her host, a German artist named Ursula Schmidt, invited her to a German consulate party being given in a large private home further up the same green mountainside on which her house was perched.

"You will surely see someone you know this evening, Mahta. Media people are arriving in plane loads these days," Ursula said, stretching her long tan legs over the footrest of her patio chair and reaching for her ginger beer. She was a robust and lanky athletic woman with a classic head of thick dark blond hair, very scrupulously cared for skin, and clear intelligent eyes. Her house, yard, and car were immaculate and there were

always plenty of verbal instructions for her housekeeper. Mahta admired all of this with reservations. It was soon evident that Ursula, a very self-possessed individual, pursued even her casual hobbies with an almost annoying thoroughness. These observations at first left Mahta feeling her own unregimented life very much haphazard and disorganized. Household check lists were way beyond her comprehension. In a while she came to think of the need for such order as a form of neurosis, perhaps even a cultural neurosis. Unfortunately, some of Ursula's habits reminded her of her mother's late obsession with detail, the need to have control over small things. She was, however, far too preoccupied to dwell on Ursula's disturbing idiosyncrasies for long. Her professionalism had resumed its precedence.

Mahta made an agreeable response to Ursula's mention of the presence of media colleagues but had quite another objective in mind. She was hoping to find her contact who, for viable access as well as support, worked as a caterer for foreign parties. The news service had provided her with his photograph, taken with a surreptitious camera and forwarded by a reporter who had known him, the journalist subsequently slain. The caterer was of small stature with a thin black mustache beneath a short blunt nose. A jagged scar sliced across his cheek to his jaw. He should be easy to find. His eyes had a wild unfocused look that was rather disturbing. It was not a face which inspired trust, but neither had other disreputable though useful contacts through the years. She scrutinized the photograph one more time before departing, certain she would not fail to spot that marked malcontent face, if he happened to be working on this night.

#

The sprawling pink mansion with its glowing rose tile roof was a handsome attraction on the mountain slope. Its entrance drive was humming with activity when they arrived in Ursula's tenderly cared for old Mercedes coupe.

"Ja, busy," Ursula said. "People here love parties."

An attendant opened their doors and took charge of the car while they climbed the broad stairway to the entrance. Under the portico the heavy wrought-iron-covered glass doors flashed as they were opened, reflecting the last raspberry streaks of the vanishing sun.

Mahta wore the white silk suit which Rafael had taken such delight in watching her model. When she caught sight of herself in the huge foyer mirror she wondered if it had been a good idea. Rafael hovered so near that her mind at once slipped back to Manila, leaving her with a feeling of fragile sensuality. And this was a night demanding serious attention to business.

Heads turned toward them as she and Ursula entered the rather formal *sala*.

"The men are looking at you," Ursula quipped, fingering her

short feathery hair and smoothing her pale blue dress.

"Or at you," Mahta said as she gave a quick sideways glance at her towering friend's model-like proportions.

Mahta saw several media people whom she recognized at once, but she was hoping to avoid a conversation that would surely lead to the Borleau Prize and thus to a painful discussion. Two men from the world of the electronic press were sauntering toward her. She pretended not to notice and rushed off with Ursula to a cluster of women; there she met an old friend, a serious writer from São Paulo.

"Mahta, are you ready for another trip down the Amazon with me...while there are still some trees left?" her friend Julia inquired, gripping Mahta's arm in earnest greeting.

"How I'd love to do it again," Mahta said. "And I will...I will get to it. Another story is needed...many stories and many photographs. What an important treasure."

They chatted for a while, enjoying each other's company and making a tentative plan for another trip at some point in the near future when both were free.

"Don't wait too long," Julia warned when their like-minded conversation ended, "there will be nothing left but tears." Her fingers wriggling against her gaunt cheek enacted tears.

Mahta waited for the crowd at the buffet table to thin, and expose any discernible types who might impose upon her, then she ambled over to the punch bowl and picked up a silver cup. A tan well-formed male hand reached around her right shoulder, grasped the silver dipper and slid it into the pink punch. The sight of this familiar hand almost caused the cup to slip from her fingers. Without looking up she knew that it belonged to Paul Carl. When she raised her head she found his cool blue eyes as appraising as ever.

"I'm pleased as this punch to see you, Mahta, but not *here*." He steadied her tilting cup and filled it with the frothy liquid strongly infused with rum. She stood a moment in befuddled silence, gathering words to speak. *Something light, casual.*

"Well...hello." Jolted by the extent of her own shock she had a vague notion that he was assessing her clothing.

"You've gone from your nice generic clothes down -- I think you would say -- to the level of designer suits...a very handsome one, though, very handsomely worn." He drained his cup and set it down.

She remained stiff and nervous, sharp, ignoring his half-playful observation. "God, I recall once asking you why you weren't here; now you are...and well into the covert I'm sure."

"I know why *I'm* in Tegus...can't imagine why you are, though...at least right now. I was hoping you'd rest."

"Hmm, is this your exclusive purlieu? I'm working of course." She had to tense herself up to reach for calm.

He was frowning. "Yes...and that begs more questions."

"Oh sorry but it doesn't." She could barely hold her demurring voice from anger at his far too personal manner.

His eyes defied her flintiness. "Why didn't you return my call? I had nice things to say, Mahta...some praise."

"Then it's a good thing I didn't."

"No, you don't care at all for notoriety, do you? Well you might have called me when you were in New York."

She didn't answer but gave a faint smile and surveyed the room, hoping to find her contact and get away. The desperate need to work was eroding the thin civility she had so carefully affected. Paul disturbed her very much. Once again she had to think about him. He had been sent away from Seattle believing he was forgiven for past mistakes; perhaps it was easier to part that way because she thought their brief relationship had ended. Then she had revived him again, surprising herself by telling Rafael about him. Now he stood watching her as if there were much more to their tenuous relationship, as if he expected something from her. She felt there could be no camaraderie -- they had gone beyond it -- and yet Paul had nullified anything else. She was confused and didn't want to feel anything like arousal; it was too enervating. If she remained near him, he looming forceful and neat in his navy blazer, his subtle and knowing eyes all over her in an almost proprietary way, she was bound to respond with anger. What else was left?

Her eyes came to rest on a red-haired young woman in a sleeveless green dress, crossing the room to take Paul's arm. "Paul," the woman said, "Guess who I discovered over there." The woman looked superb standing beside him; they were both so tall and physically well matched. Paul Carl hesitated and turned back to Mahta, perhaps intending an introduction, but at almost the same moment and over his shoulder she was sure she had glimpsed the very man for whom she had come. Taking two quick swallows from her cup she set it down, excused herself and hastened across the room and out into the foyer.

Just ahead the white-coated man was opening a side door and Mahta hurried over, following him out onto the loggia. She sat down in a large white rocker not far from where he stood lighting a cigarette. He studied her with furtive eyes, smoking a while and finally flicking away the butt. Walking slowly by he gave her a sidelong glance.

"Carlos?" she said, standing up. "I'm Mahta. You knew the reporter Richardson?"

He stopped, paused a moment, then approached, reaching into his pocket. She watched as he scribbled something.

"Come *mañana* alone, seven o'clock, this address."

She reached out and took a small cocktail napkin from his hand, slipping it into the pocket of her suit. When she looked up he was hurrying away, hardly visible in the far shadows made by the loggia's dim carriage lights. The evening flower scents

were strong. She took a deep breath and slipped back down into the rocker, feeling a little calmer, as she always did after the first assignation of a new endeavor.

"You look like a Man Ray photograph in that rocker." Paul's startling voice had come from the shadowy fronds of a young cycad growing behind her

"Good God!"

"Sorry...didn't mean to creep up on you.

"He's probably not the most reliable person in town, your catering contact."

She stood up. "I can't afford the most reliable... Paul...you really don't have to monitor my work. I imagine you have more...more important business...I'm sure of it."

"I was going to suggest the same to you."

"I've got a lot on my mind."

"As usual. With contacts like that guy you'd better get some of it off...you'll need the extra space."

"Damn you, Paul. Oh, this is--"

"Mahta? What's wrong with you? You've gotten some well-deserved recognition which is... Sorry, guess I didn't like your contact...sorry. I thought we were friends."

"Just...some worries," she explained as an excuse for her quick temper, then regretted the revelation.

"Then why do you do this shit?"

"It's nothing to do with this. Nothing at all." She sighed. "So now...another apology I guess. It's almost funny. No, it *is* funny. Every time we meet I'm in some terrible funk. All you ever see is this...this unstrung person, either temporarily incapacitated or on the warpath."

"No, what I've seen is..." He looked back toward the lighted windows and muttered half to himself, "Oh, Jesus, I need to talk to someone. If you--"

"Don't let me stop you from whatever you need to do," Mahta interrupted. She was almost ready to remind him that he had followed her out there uninvited. "I'd leave now if I didn't know my friend was enjoying the socializing."

"Do you need anything...any help, Mahta? Is there something I can do?" This intimate offer unsettled her. Serious concern wasn't all that discernible in his half-shadowed face, but it was definitely present in the tenor of his voice.

"No...nothing...thanks."

"Where are you staying?"

"With my friend Ursula Schmidt...another artist. I met her in Munich a few years ago. She has a house just below a short distance. I'd better go in and find her."

"I'm at the Honduras Maya, room 406. Will you call me?" He was backing away from her.

"Why?"

"Mahta, will you *call* me?"

"If I have time. I'll be out tomorrow and I don't know when I'll... Good luck with your...good night."

#

At six in the morning Mahta crawled out of bed while the night rain was still dripping from the leaves outside her window. Tiptoeing around so as not to awaken Ursula, she dressed in slacks, shirt, tennis shoes, and light jacket. She made toast, chasing down and killing three huge cockroaches that scurried out from under the hot toaster. She leaned on the counter to eat her guava-jam-spread toast and sip reheated bitter black coffee.

At six-fifty her taxi deposited her on a street corner in front of a seedy dry cleaners. The clothes hanging in the window and ready to be picked up were so threadbare they looked as if one more cleaning would disintegrate them. This neglected section of town had ramshackle buildings and rough streets with damp dust that smelled of urine and dog excrement. Though not far in distance it was far removed from *la zona viva* with its upscale shops, offices, and restaurants. At seven-thirty when she was considering leaving, a rusty old Plymouth coughed slowly around the corner and eased to a stop in the middle of the street. The caterer, Carlos, and another larger man with dark glasses, who was driving, motioned for her to get into the back seat. For just a second she wondered why she had even gotten up this morning, then, thinking of Rafael, her stomach burned and she rushed out, yanked open the door and hurled herself and her camera bag onto the torn back seat. Were those bullet holes in the door she wondered as she leaned forward to speak.

Neither of them answered any of her questions, and the two men were soon furious because they were stuck fast in gridlock traffic trying to cross one of the bridges over the Choluteca River. Once across they wound their way through the twin city of Comayagüela, and when they were outside of the town the driver stopped the car. She had not even been introduced to this brawny partner who got out, opened her door and pulled a dirty bandanna out of his pocket. He got in beside her and began to tie the scarf over her eyes while she winced.

"Is this necessary?" she asked, then made a futile attempt to hold her breath as her nose came in contact with the soiled malodorous scarf. "Necesario?"

A succinct "Sí" was all the blindfolder offered.

What on earth did they imagine outsiders would think, she wondered, seeing her riding around with a scarf tied over her eyes? Perhaps in the present chaos it had become a common sight hereabouts, or in a less humorous vein, possibly the nameless area was so remote they would pass no other vehicle.

The car went on and on with numerous sharp turns, swaying around curves until she was convinced they were doubling back on their route. As the tedious lurching journey continued they

began to argue in Spanish about gasoline. Mahta firmly swore to herself that she would not pay for the gas in this redundant peregrination. Finally after what seemed hours the car jerked to a stop and the engine coughed, rattled, sputtered, and died.

When the bandanna was untied Mahta blinked in the bright light and tried to survey her apparent destination. They were parked at the end of an old bridge spanning a narrow canyon of thick forest. She got out of the car and looked down. Directly beneath and near the end of the rickety bridge was a small new clearing. It would never be noticed without getting out of the car. The fresh dark red earth had been recently excavated. Dirty lumps that must be bodies were just discernible below ground level. She heard the motor start and turned around to find one of the men leaving with the car. It was the caterer, Carlos, who motioned for her to come ahead. She made a clumsy descent, yanking her camera bag from the entangling vines. As she drew closer to the clearing she caught a glimpse of what she already knew would be decomposing human bodies lying in the dark pits. She gasped as her stomach churned with nausea. The smell was gagging and she had to at once dissuade herself from the thought of retching, having long ago learned that thinking about it made it happen. Even the dirty bandanna tied over her nose would be welcome now. She held her breath and then took small gasps of air through her mouth as her lungs protested.

Bones were showing through parts of the flesh. White hot rage rose once again inside her chest. *These were human beings who only wanted...* She shut down that train of thought and zipped open her camera bag, informing herself that she had become a methodical criminal investigator. *An instrument of revelation, a machine...a machine.* On seven desiccating heads the grotesque holes of bullet entry were in plain sight. One of the wormy half-fleshed skulls had its jaws opened wide and she could hear the scream. She clenched her teeth, feeling the hard enamel and envisioning her own skull. Who had dug up the bodies she asked Carlos, and he replied that it was the *Campesinos*. They wanted them found in order to expose an official attempt at disregarding the massacre, and to identify the slain and give them proper burial. She began photographing from various angles and at a distance to show the location. Once again with her lens before her she worked like the machine she had hoped to emulate, the horror held in abeyance. Occasionally she would run to the edge of the forest and take deep breaths of air, blinking her eyes at the indifferent vegetation.

When nearly half her rolls of film were exposed, Carlos suddenly took her shoulder and pulled her back from the clearing and under the cover of a spreading tree fern. He pointed up between the fronds and she saw two uniformed figures with guns starting onto the bridge. Had she and Carlos been spotted? Her heart raced with a jittery excitement as they waited, hardly

breathing. The two figures looked down, pointing and talking as they moved across the bridge, their footsteps echoing on the crude wooden planks. She lifted her camera and snapped their gesticulating forms. Carlos didn't like that. Remaining still and quiet in their hiding spot for another thirty minutes, they at last heard the motor of the old Plymouth returning. They scrambled up the hill through the beating branches and sticky vines, then ran toward the slowly moving car and jumped in. Mahta wondered where the soldiers had gone.

A minute passed followed by gunshots, loud and close. She could hear them whining into the car's tired body. Then there were shouting voices. "Oh Jesus," she muttered. Huddling on the floor where they had pushed her she asked what was happening, "Qué pasa?" They were just being warned to keep moving and get out of the area. Apparently they had not seen the car stop or Mahta getting into it. After moving a short distance they drove into the brush and blindfolded her again. By tomorrow or the day after, they told her, the bodies would be covered again or removed. But had anyone found the reporter Richardson's body she wanted to know. Yes, Carlos answered, but it was taken away. They didn't know or knew and didn't want to say where.

They retraced the same dizzying journey, lurching along and sending Mahta into a spate of motion sickness augmented by recurring mental flashes of the victims at the grave site. She was drained of energy when in the evening she was finally deposited back on the dusty corner in front of the dry cleaners. After she had turned over the money -- they kept demanding more until she insisted she was out --, the car rattled away in a thick blue cloud of exhaust fumes. The street was empty.

She went inside and tried to pay the balding little proprietor to call a taxi but he waved the money aside with polite dignity. When he had called he reached across the counter, shook her hand and wished her a good day. She had discovered on her first visit here that Hondurans were for the most part curious, friendly, and helpful people. They were far enough off the beaten track to have escaped most of the ruination which follows the influx of careless and carefree, self-serving tourists.

When the taxi dropped her off she had just enough money to meet the fare, having given much more of her cash to Carlos than she intended. Slowly counting out the money she was a little shamefaced, but the young unworldly driver seemed undisturbed by his pitiful tip and wished her a good evening.

Ursula had left a note saying that she was going with friends to the cloud forest of La Tigra National Park on a hiking and painting expedition, and inviting Mahta to come and join them if she could. The park was only eleven kilometers from Tegus. Mahta sorely wished she were there too, with nothing else on her troubled mind but all of that magnificent flora and fauna, so

fragile and yet asserting its lush vigor. Brilliant birds and orchids and bromeliads swam through her head until she recalled the bodies of the *Campesinos* and her stomach heaved. There was no food in it. At the moment she was far more interested in bathing than in searching out something to eat.

The housekeeper had laundered and folded her lingerie and left it on the bed. She drew a bath, thankful that the erratic electricity had come on long enough for hot water. The luxury of electricity was usually missing during the day, and the city air was often polluted with the fumes of diesel generators running in lieu of central power.

There was still no hunger in her head when she finished her long soak, but her stomach cried out for food. She ate a banana and made a repeated effort to reach her messenger service in Seattle. Finally crackling through with an impatience overridden by anxiety, she discovered nothing that she needed to hear. All trivia. The impasse she had reached was hard to bear as she stood thinking while her nervous fingers tapped on the replaced receiver of Ursula's kitchen telephone. Biting at a cuticle she perused a Spanish magazine lying by the phone, and then wandered into the living room, fatigue superseded by restlessness.

Against a pale gold wall, Ursula had a nice collection of mostly full liquor bottles resting on a narrow teak bar backed by a long mirror. They sparkled a welcome before the mirror in the soft reflected light of the lamps. Mahta crossed the living room and ran her fingers over the amber bottles. She picked up a bottle of Pinch and poured herself a good two-thirds of an ample tumbler. She sliced a peel from the rind of a lemon that was resting atop others in a pottery dish. Giving the peel a twist over her glass, she tossed it in and returned to the sofa. The short, but for her long, green satin robe Ursula had loaned her fell open, and she retied it then lay down, rising now and then to take a swallow of her Scotch. The quietness of the house became invasive. Somewhere a clock was ticking. With burning eyes closed, visions of Brehnt and Lemur and then Jim North and Rafael and the earthquake victims and finally the day's discovery in the red earth grave site floated beneath her trembling lids. "Oh God, oh God," she muttered, clenching her fists.

There came a sudden firm knocking at the door. She jumped and lay listening as the knocking grew more persistent. "All right." She got up and went into the foyer, squinting through the peephole and then swinging open the heavy door.

Paul Carl nodded at her, glancing at her robe, and said, "*Buenas tardes*," then brushed past her and through the foyer into the living room. He looked around while laying aside his camera and removing his jacket, then settled on Ursula's big tan leather sofa where Mahta had been lying.

"Well come right in," she said, following Paul. "You didn't have much trouble finding me." She eyed the camera and said, "Do

you sleep with that?"

"I'm too polite to suggest how you might find out," he remarked and then answered, "Yes, sometimes I do; it depends on where I'm laying my head.

"You were supposed to call me. Where's your friend?"

"Camping...painting. I don't recall taking an assignment from you. I've been busy."

"Mahta...I think we have to talk."

Taking a generous swallow of her Scotch she threw her head back and said, "I know you won't find this very surprising but I'm not feeling so well."

"No wonder. Is that huge glass full of Scotch? Good God, lay off that stuff. From what I've seen liquor turns you into a raving basket case."

"Yes, papa," came her mildly derisive voice as she set the glass down on the sofa end table. A smile formed on her lips because she had already had enough not to care.

"You're actually going to comply?"

"Only because you're right. Too much isn't good."

"Where did you go today?"

"Out. Way out. I'm very tired and...a little sick. I was blindfolded...driven crazy by the longest route...shot at...and I had to photograph bodies that..." Her voice trailed off and stopped because it sounded to her as if she'd been whimpering like an injured child: *Oh, papa, a brick fell and smashed my hand and it hurts so bad.*

His body had gone rigid and still. The left blue-shirted arm ended in a fist resting on his knee. The right arm was bent at the elbow on the arm rest, the hand with finger backs curving beneath his hard-set mouth. The incredulous sapphire eyes shot steely barbs at her.

"What if I had to photograph you lying in a ditch?"

"I guess at that point I wouldn't care."

"But do you care now?"

"Please...it's been a rough day. Why don't you say something nice to me?"

"I'm too furious."

"Paul, by now what I do is no mystery to you. Why do you get so emotional?"

"Because I think you're suicidal. You yourself have said you're not well. You know I find your lusting after this bang-bang journalism a pathological disorder. I've seen all of this far too often. Altruism turns into something else...becomes an addiction. There's a certain kind of person who gets high this way, and none of them get very old. When--

"Wait a minute," Mahta interrupted. "Someone has to do it. You've done it. Imagine what this chaotic world would be like without...without witnesses who manage to record--"

"That isn't what I mean. I'm not talking about necessity or

a few heroes. I'm talking about standing on the edge for the sheer ecstasy of taunting death. The news media always manage to find enough of these understimulated types who like to play around with death, so that when the bullets start flying and they're maimed or snuffed they can just send in another poor sod. But you! You're really a case. You send yourself on these suicide missions. You're going to fuck around until you're killed...when you should be home taking a rest. You need it and you've earned it."

"I don't rest well...not when I'm upset."

"Do you want to talk about that?"

"Not now, thank you." She began to pace across the room. In the last few moments she had grown too restless to settle anywhere. "And please note that I haven't tried to poke my nose into what you're doing here."

"Well you could ask but you wouldn't find out much. Anyway you're not worried about me the way I am about you, so it doesn't matter."

"You mean if I were I'd find out what you were doing?"

"No," he answered, shrugging and dropping the subject.

She felt his disapproving eyes as she crossed the room and took a large swallow of her Scotch.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Some toast and coffee this morning...a banana when I got home...some..." She gave a short laugh. "Some Scotch."

"Oh Christ. And Scotch...one of the more nourishing staples in your life. There's a good restaurant across the street from my hotel. It's called La Alondra. Ever been there?"

"The Lark. Well I don't feel like a lark right now. Yes, I have been there."

"Let's go," he said, snatching up his jacket. I've got a car outside."

Too exhausted to protest and admittedly needing food, she excused herself and went down the hall to her bedroom to change into a shirt and slacks. "Just a minute. I can't find my sandals," she called out while searching under the bed.

Paul met her in the hall with her sandals in his hand. "Here...I found them in the kitchen. They're a little mucked up."

She whacked them together over a waste basket, the dry earth reminding her where they had been, and said, "Thanks."

"Sit down, I'll buckle them," he offered.

She sat on the edge of the sofa watching his hands. His gold ring flashed in the dim light as his agile fingers quickly threaded the straps through the buckles and pulled them tight. The hands...there was something about them, a certain grace and confidence that always riveted her attention. She looked up to

find that while he had not lifted his bent head his eyes were glowing at her in the dimness of the room. It unnerved her and she moved to the side and leapt up from the sofa, heading for the door.

"Wait a minute. It's going to be chilly and probably damp out there. Where's your coat?"

"Yes, papa, my coat," she said, letting the Scotch elicit a careless humor as she went back to fetch her jacket.

Paul was right, of course, the nights at this altitude were quite chilly and she remarked on this as she followed him to the Ford Fiesta parked at the foot of the driveway.

"I think you harbor a small grudging fondness for occasional nurturing, don't you?" Paul said as he turned the car around in the driveway and headed downhill.

"I'm not aware of it," Mahta answered, trying to give her troublesome mouth a more relaxed indifferent cast.

"The Scotch is aware of it," he answered.

The restaurant was good. Honduran beef was famous and delicious, and she nibbled around the edges of a huge steak while Paul kept urging her on. He had eaten earlier. They spoke of nothing of import, only comments about local conditions and places they had both been in Honduras, and she was certain it was because Paul was afraid of starting something which would cause her to abandon her steak.

"Are you enjoying that?" he asked. She had cut off a slice of beef and was twirling it in the air impaled on her fork while she railed at the crazy system of gridlock bridges during the morning rush hour.

"Is that another decree from above, that I must not only eat it but, my God, enjoy it?" she asked, but it had all come out a little more seriously than intended.

"Well why don't you use up some of that incredible nervous energy and put the beef in your mouth before it falls off your fork," he suggested with an amused smile.

The fork dropped onto her plate, still retaining the meat. She brushed her hands together and leaned on the left one. A consuming fatigue and frustration swept over her. She thought that if she now put her head down as she wanted to do, she would have truly regressed to the untenable state of an overtired and about to explode juvenile.

"Oh now I've done it, haven't I? I just couldn't keep my mouth shut. Why is that? Sorry." He picked up the fork with the meat on it and held it up to her mouth. Without protest, she slipped it off the fork and tried to chew in an inoffensive manner because people were staring at her. Sighing, she retrieved her fork.

Finally she pushed her plate away and said, "This paternal concern of yours is just...what shall I call it? An overgenerous fixation? In my present state I might accidentally succumb to

it. Even so, I think you're a little young to be my father." She leaned across the table and studied his face. "How old are you anyway?"

"Thirty-six. And you're thirty-three -- June the tenth. That's all right, isn't it?" He took a swallow of his coffee, watching her over the edge of his cup.

"How did you know my age?" she asked, straightening up her tired body with surprise.

"I'm afraid I looked at your driver's license when you were asleep at Lake Wenatchee. I know that wasn't nice and I don't make a habit of it but I was curious."

"What if it had indicated that I was forty-nine?"

"Then I'd have done a photographic study of you and sold it for a fortune," he said with a broad grin. "Seriously, I imagine you'll age very well. Right now you look barely nineteen...even as tired as you are."

"If that's a compliment I've already said I don't know what to do with them."

"No, it was just an observation. Come on let's go."

The evening rains started before they reached the door of the house and they made a run for it. Paul stood under the veranda roof, removing his leather jacket and giving it a shake. Mahta was reveling in the luxury of laughter. "Oh I'm swamped," she squealed, and turned around to find Paul appreciating her rare abandon. Dark strands of hair released trickles of water over his forehead. Quite reflexively she reached up and pushed the wet hair away from his eyes, at the same moment his hand had reached to lift dripping strands from her brow. "This is worse than Seattle," she said, the laughter still in her voice. Her tongue caught a drop of water on her lip and she shook back her head. Paul had drawn her fingers from his forehead and still held her wrist in a hard grip as she was speaking. Was he contemplating some retort? Her eyes went to the hand holding her wrist; he released it and said, "Have you got the key?"

Once inside they both sat on the spacious leather sofa and spoke of the natural beauty in Honduras -- avoiding politics and war --, of Ursula's trip to the cloud forest, and of her nature paintings, quite good, which hung around the room. Paul was in no hurry to leave, and she didn't mind because she didn't want to be alone.

After a pause she said, "Thank you for hauling me off to dinner. I'm a real pill, aren't I? I don't know why you bothered to show up but I'm glad I didn't have to spend this evening alone. Sometimes it gets a little heavy...I should be used to it but I...anyway I'm not as bad as I was at the cabin."

"Well I won't argue that point...but you're really..."

While he hesitated to criticize, so newly careful with her, she hurried on, emboldened by the potent residue of Scotch.

"That night I wanted... I know I wasn't so lovable but I

wanted you to...maybe just to lie with me...hold me." She heard a soft curse from him. Regret? He turned his head away from her, his loose fist sliding over his mouth. She gave a wondering laugh as she got up to study her favorite of Ursula's paintings, a large rendering of arborescent ferns. "But I admired your self-control and faithfulness."

"Exactly what I wanted you to do...admire *something* and then...forget that I'd been, as you say, a bastard."

"I did envy your...fiancée...a little...because she's found such...loyalty." She spoke without facing him and at once felt quite reckless. Why mention any of this? Why not just shut up? Blame the Scotch which had opened her up.

"There is no fiancée."

"Oh." Complete surprise. "You're not..." Her voice trailed off and she fell silent. She dropped into a chair facing the sofa and looked at Paul. For a moment she couldn't remember when she had called him a bastard.

"I lied...hoping it would be good for you...not for me. You were so fragile, so unstable...so clearly still belonging to Brehnt that I thought..." He gave a deep sigh. "I thought with our history if I spent one night with you and went winging off to New York you'd go right over the edge."

"Oh I wouldn't have...well I don't know...guess I was--"

"So I just let go of you...hungry and in need...off to be fixed by your Manila lover. He didn't do a very good job." His voice had projected an increasing heat.

"Oh but he... What makes you think..." She almost groaned as she stopped herself.

"If I didn't, I do now." His voice and manner inculcating.

Bounding off the sofa he put his hands in his pockets. She heard his keys jingle and thought he was preparing to leave. Instead, he turned around, picked up her tepid Scotch, took a swallow and returned it to the end table.

"Shall I fix you a fresh drink?" she asked.

"No thanks...just reacting."

Very tired and a bit maudlin now, Mahta sat forward on a convenient chair and put her hands over her face. "Don't know what's happened to him. I don't even know if he's alive." Her voice was low, rather more an internal conversation.

"What are you talking about, Mahta?"

"We were in the mountains...an earthquake."

"What?" He threw his head back and said, "I should have known. My God, you're like a cat with nine lives. The rest of us get there *after* it happens. But you! It happens *after* you arrive...all around you. How did you get out of there? Where were you exactly? Was he hurt?"

"We were in his Baguio house that morning and...his leg was broken."

"I get it. You were asleep and the place crumbled."

"He...made me leave him...just sent me away and... There've been threats on his life...I don't know what's happened."

"Why don't we try to find out."

"I've tried...I've tried. I can't get through, or when I do I get no response and I...I don't want to cause more harm. If something's happened to him that's it. That's absolutely it."

"So that's why you're here...exhausted, trying to get yourself killed. That's a punishing kind of love."

"I'm not trying to... He's a cherished part of my...my innocent past. Maybe that sounds strange to you but I love him partly for that. Our friendship has been...it's been one of the few steadfast male relationships in my life."

"And his wife?...he must have one."

"They're...Rafael and his wife, Eugenia, have always been--"

"What...a ménage à trois?"

Rafael had teased her with that remark. Her terse laughter held scorn. "Nothing like that at all." She wanted off this subject and again blamed the Scotch.

"Convenient. Well I hope it works out for you...with him and his extended family."

"Oh for heaven's sake...ridiculous. I go my own way. I only want to know that he's alive and well."

"If he cares for you he'll let you know...or someone will." The coolness of his voice was not at all consoling.

"Paul...I don't understand why you're here. Why don't you go back to...to your own affairs...to your red-headed friend." The words sounded idiotic, so petty and jealous. She was beginning to assail him in a foolish way and wanted him gone. He must know how bad off she was, how unstrung.

"She's a student of mine." He was smiling for a change, enjoying her discomfort.

"Well as you say, how convenient."

"And as you say, it's nothing like that at all."

"It's none of my business anyway," she said, putting an end to it. Everything was headed back to a dismal state.

She stood up and stretched her body, then curled up in the far corner of the sofa, taking a large swallow of her enduring Scotch. Dropping her head back she closed her eyes.

"If I go now will you keep drinking?"

With head back and eyes still closed she asked in a wondering voice, "Why do you care?"

"Because I..."

There was a straining moment of silence. Then she felt the sudden motion of his body moving toward her, his hands grasping her shoulders and the astonishing sensation of his mouth on her throat. She opened her eyes and sat up, looking straight into his unequivocal eyes.

"Yes. Yes, the bastard loves you."

She continued to stare, his wonderful words so frightening.

"Please get the hell out of Honduras, Mahta. Please go home and rest and save yourself for something besides another damned snakepit...or at least for me...because I want you so much."

"Snakepits attract me," she muttered. Her breath came in short gasps which she tried to suppress. She wanted to look away, move away, but couldn't, caught in that spiral of glowing sapphire. Her eyes traveled to his mouth. Fatal. Leaning forward the slightest bit she could answer its sensual taunt. When she did his response was swift and thorough, and the heavy grieving in her heart removed to a distant place.

After a while her head, her entire body reeling from his consuming effort, she drew herself away from his demanding mouth and said with short breaths, "Please don't leave. Don't go...or I'll drink and drink and drink."

"Don't threaten me...it's a waste of time." He pulled her against him and stood up with her body lifted in his arms. "Where's your bed?"

#

She awoke knowing it must be late in the morning. Had she neglected something she was supposed to be doing? What? An appointment, a phone call, something? Her back was a little sore. She turned on her side and saw Paul's hand lying near her pillow; it rested palm up with the fingers curled in. The relaxed strength of it, so vulnerable, held her dazed focus, irresistible, beckoning her touch. She raised herself up enough to float her fingers above his arm from the bent elbow to the wrist, then slipped her curled hand palm up inside his. The disparity in size was at first amusing. Then, as she stared at her fist resting inside overspread fingers as still as death, she felt a terrible pain of dread in her throat. She tried to pull her hand away, but his fingers closed over hers. She looked up beyond the focus of her effort and into his incredible eyes.

He gripped her wrist, kissing her captured fingers. "Hello, sleight of hand. How's the attached body?"

"I...I'm a little tired. What are you doing here?"

"You wouldn't let go of me...don't you remember?"

"I remember everything...every single thing. I thought you were going to leave after I fell asleep." She lay back, staring at the ceiling in a hopeless struggle with consuming emotion.

"I couldn't go; we were all tangled up. You had some kind of hold on my arm I've never seen. I figured if you wanted a part of me that badly the rest of me could tough it out."

"Tough it out?"

"That's just my sense of humor, Mahta. Even if I could've gotten away without waking you I wouldn't have gone. Why should I? Everything is here." He leaned over her, sliding his arms beneath her and giving her a long very destructive kiss. "I thought you were tired last night but, my God, you were...where

did you...learn all of that? Don't answer."

She stretched and yawned, smiling to herself. "I imagine you won't forget that ten years from now."

"I'll remember it for the rest of my life. Three thousand feet up on silver mountain in charming little Tegus, I was dealt a wild card."

"Or found a Cracker Jack prize."

"A prize, a prize...a solid gold treasure."

"Fool's gold, fool." Her voice was playful, strange to her.

He captured her hand again and kissed the fingers one by one then put them in his mouth.

"Are you hungry? If you are I'll go out in the kitchen and start killing cockroaches."

He tossed her hand down and leaned on his elbows, throwing back his head in laughter. "I'm not *that* hungry."

She stared at his black-haired chest. It was well-toned and muscular, and just below, perhaps nearly an inch of extra flesh around the waist that was touching. In the night she had learned all of this well, the smooth skin and soft black hair, the clever hands and ceaseless mouth, charged strength held to gentleness, the incredible sexual power of an understanding mind and body that anticipated and gave over and over exactly what she wanted and needed. Although she was still without enough rest, arousing desire diffused its warmth through her, holding her in its sway, augmented by the vulnerable and heated look he offered. When she sat up her overused body throbbed in all the stressed places of love-making. In a moment her head dropped to one shoulder and her languid eyes gazed into the heart-piercing blue of his. Her raw lips were smiling. He uttered an amazed oath, then pulled her down and fit her against him, his mouth sliding over hers. "Don't you have things to do today?" she whispered. "Lots of things," he answered. "This is several of them."

#

They sat at a small blue-tiled table in Ursula's bright yellow breakfast nook, eating mangosteens with coffee and toast. Mahta sliced the fruit in half and they scooped the rich white pulp from the thick umber rinds. Outside the window a giant orange hibiscus danced on its stem in the breeze while a large, shimmering green hummingbird hung over the chrome-bright petals.

"This is cute, cozy. It would be fun for a while," she said, "especially if the electricity were more reliable."

His eyes narrowed over his yellow mug of black coffee.

"Playing house?"

"You mean...no, I've done that."

"What about when you get tired?" he asked.

"More tired, you mean. I'll just put my feet up out in the country somewhere...maybe write things and get an old hound dog for company."

He brushed off his hands, pushed his toast plate away and sat looking at her in an undaunted quiet.

"You're so unusual...several people in there." He reached across the table and ran his hand over her forehead. "You're in such a damned hurry...but wonderfully voracious, with a wild wary animal anxiousness. You almost like to hurt and to be hurt in love-making, don't you? I'm not surprised. It fits in with what you do...dancing on the edge. You like to lose yourself, drown yourself in it. And God, you've done it to me...I keep wanting my hands on you."

"Guess now I've been exposed." She laughed a little and her voice went soft. She looked not at Paul but through the window at the sun-dazzled verdure of the garden. "Yes, I like to lose myself...but I'm always found again."

"Maybe you'll calm down enough so I can treat you tenderly sometimes...but don't think I'm complaining...or that I haven't seen the fragility. It's what makes you."

He ran his long fingers over her hand as it lay back up on the table. He turned it over, placed his hand on top and pressed his palm against hers with increasing pressure, looking into her eyes until she felt the heat rising in her body, liquefying her. His ease at doing this unnerved her, dumbfounded her.

"The photographs you take are sensational, split second timing that most people hit too soon or too late -- they try to compensate by running their shutters. You really see things, have an instinct for what to hit and when. And your writing...a natural understanding that's rare."

"So you tell me," she said, staring at their hands and then at him. "You left out the part about hopeless idealism."

"That's why you hurt so much. A few times I've looked at you and just hurt right along with you. I wish..."

"What?"

"That you wanted me a little more...thought of me as useful, thought of me from a distance and wanted me, instead of just when I'm close enough to flip your heart."

"How do you know what I want? Anyway you can't stay around me too long because it's dangerous. Things happen to people who do. Haven't you noticed that?"

"What? Are you afraid of a relationship because you think something disastrous will happen?"

"It always does."

He got up and pulled her out of her chair and against him, her head under his chin. "But that's just life, my sweet, that's the way it goes. You just give it all you've got and don't think about that."

"I think of it all the time."

"You've got to stop it. You'll never have anything of value if you don't...never enjoy anything."

Her eyes were brimming with tears, and when he tried to look

at her she turned her head away.

"Don't be soft and sweet with me please. I can't take it. I turn into a child. I want my mother...like that. So don't."

He ran his thumbs across her cheeks, rubbing away the incipient tears. "We all do sometimes...so we have to find substitutes and get what we can."

She moved away, collecting their dishes and setting them in the sink. "Well you're quite an analyst aren't you, doctor?"

He came up behind her, putting his arms around her, locking her in and kissing her neck. She dropped her head back just a little and closed her eyes, wondering if he could feel her body shiver at the frightening, inconceivable joy of his nearness.

"I think we're a lot alike, Mahta. We have certain things in common, the way we pursue interests. We don't give up. And despite all of my good intentions, if you'd given me a little more encouragement when I kissed you good-bye in Seattle I'd have paid off the taxi...confessed everything and loved you all night. Jesus, I can't believe I left you there without telling you I... And now *this*, you. You've got me falling-down crazy."

"I'm a little crazy myself...but I always have been," she murmured, turning around and rubbing her cheek over his shirt -- it smelled of cedar, his body of the soap in Ursula's shower.

Bending down with his chin against her hair he stood holding her until she couldn't have moved without flying apart, until she lost the boundary of her self. At last he was compelled to say, "It's uncomfortable standing with you...nicer lying down. How the hell could I have fallen in love with someone so small?"

She remembered the tall redhead who looked so ideal standing beside him, and smiled. Beneath her ear his strong beating heart offered tempting solace, this heart which also caused a fierce erotic ache ending in ambiguity: To have is to have not.

He kissed her tousled hair and revealed where his silence had gone, "I suppose now -- knowing what an untrusting defeatist you are -- you're thinking this is the last chapter of us. But it's not the case...oh no, just the beginning of the book. I'll think of a way to have you...a way to keep you."

#

Paul never hinted at what clandestine mission he was on in Honduras, but whatever it was he had to get on with it. He made her promise not to go anywhere that required a blindfold and then again strongly admonished her to go home and rest. Finally he was forced to leave her pondering her next move. She wandered through the rooms feeling a hollow loneliness, aware that the old worries were reasserting themselves. And there was that bit of gossip needling her, something she had overheard at the party about Paul and a longtime female friend. If only Ursula were there. She really wasn't up to tromping around in the cloud forest, regardless of how beautiful it was -- she had already

done some photographing there on an earlier visit -- and anyway she wouldn't be able to talk to Ursula while she painted away with her friends. It would have been nice, though, to talk to someone who didn't know much about her, a diversion. She could do a little further investigation on the missing reporter and probably get nowhere. A number of journalists were looking for his body, and his recovery would very likely involve a lengthy bargaining process. Although resisting the idea, she at last conceded that she had gotten the essentials of what she came for -- and quite a bit more -- and that she had to return home, to finish her Honduran assignment and try settling the mystery of her vanished Rafael, or at least of his unwillingness to communicate with her. The so often uncooperative telephone finally yielded a quick flight out and home via Houston. She left a note and some money for Ursula, who if she had been there would probably have refused it. Staring at her empty bed she had an overwhelming urge to call Paul's hotel and leave some foolish message. What would she say? Just: I want you. Instead, she called a taxi to drive her to the dilapidated warehouse of a building that was the Tegucigalpa airport.

The fatigue of airport limbo was harder to bear each time she encountered it, and after her layover in Houston she tried to sleep the rest of the way home. Her success was not complete. Her racing mind ranged back and forth over her recent life and ended with Paul.

In Beirut, even attracted to him at Lake Wenatchee when she needed to be held and loved, she truly did not feel that he was her kind of person. But what did that really mean? Nothing, she concluded. It was a shallow observation. You clicked with someone or you didn't. You were attracted or you weren't. When she came into his presence he overtook everything, apparently a mutual feeling. Still, she would never have imagined the present events possible after he left her houseboat. It occurred to her that he had fooled her once again -- she had found it easy to believe that he was marrying someone. The soreness of her body from their erotic night was still arousing. Remembering how they were together made her wish she had gone to his hotel instead of the airport, and waited outside his room for his return. After their incredible love-making she had been restrained and cool, very surprised and quite afraid to continue. A relationship had to be maintained like a fine garden, and then there was the inevitable loss. She stared into the clouds brushing past her window and admitted to herself the unfortunate stigma attached to her existence, producing hazard. Hadn't she enough proof of it? Paul would be angry or hurt or both because she hadn't even said good-bye. It was very unsettling and problematic to find that her attraction to him went beyond the physical -- powerful as that was. She gripped the arms of her seat. Where could it go? She wouldn't give up anything. Nor would she expect any drastic

sacrifice from him. Encouraged, he would find some clever and unconventional way to wrap himself around her turbulent life, and then what? Suddenly something utterly unbearable would happen. Let it lie, she advised herself, surprised again at how very unsatisfactory, how very sad that dissuasion was.

X

Junk mail was on the exponential rise with each return from travel. Flipping through the top part of the unwieldy bundle, Mahta came to something promising, a letter from Frannie Gauzemahn. She settled in her big chair to read it.

Dear Mahta,

I've been too busy to know how you are, and that disturbs me. I want to visit with you and talk a long time---before we grow too old to move. Consequently, I've hit upon a wonderful idea. The children are, of course, great fans of Mozart and have been begging me to take them to the Summer Festival in Salzburg. I've said no to this because I simply can't stand those crowds at that time. However, I told them we would go when no special events were occurring, and they could "Mozartize" to their hearts' content.

I'm so familiar with lovely Salzburg that I'll be bored thirty minutes after our arrival. I don't intend to visit anyone because I'm hoping that you can come and we can talk, talk, talk. Just think how ideal. I won't be in our chaotic home where you hardly get two words in when you visit. What a really nice time we could have.

Perhaps you're in the middle of something and this is a pipe dream, but if not please call me as soon as you read this and I'll make all the arrangements. Please call and talk whatever your plans.

Love, Frannie

It sounded wonderful to Mahta to have Frannie's undivided attention for more than fifteen minutes at a time, but her immediate reaction was to assure herself that it was impossible. Then she began to think about it. Why was it so impossible? She hadn't taken any large new assignments. There were no strings attached to her. The media people were still after her for interviews about the Borleau and her stories but she wasn't ready for that yet. All she had to do was get the grievous Honduras photographs along with a small amount of devastating copy Air Expressed by the end of the day, and she would be free to escape this and other problems. If only she knew what had happened to

Rafael.

Looking over at her desk she saw that her stack of mail was only two-thirds finished. She went back to the task of disposing of it. A needed sip from her cup made her wrinkle her nose with dissatisfaction -- cold coffee. She was too dispirited even to walk to the microwave and put the cup inside. With listless hands sorting, her mind was far away, thinking why, if Rafael were able, couldn't he have relieved her worries with one small note. Something serious must have prevented him. She was still frowning over this speculation when she took into her absently working hands a swollen thick-padded envelope with a Manila postmark. Her erratic heart was speeding and her easy chair seemed miles away. She sat down and tore open the flap. There was a neatly wrapped package inside tied with a gold ribbon. When she removed the wrapping she found a small brown box. Inside, nestled in thinnest layers of gold tissue, were the two cranes standing by a clump of marsh grass, all so very delicate, carved of fine pale jade. The scene with Rafael at Jambu House flashed before her -- his offhanded question about which netsuke creation she liked best, apparently with the concurrent thought of this gift. Here held in her anxiety-ravaged fingers was the exquisite piece she had favored. How many lives had it passed through, this little antique sculpture bearing such a powerfully alleviating message? A small note folded in quarters fell from the box, handwritten in an elegant black script: "Like these--- long life, always devoted. And you will see me again, mi querida. Your Rafe, only." Her hands shook with emotion. Perhaps she was not always so dangerous. She rubbed the note across her cheek and kissed the small netsuke. Her head dropped over her lap, eyes streaming with relief.

Later, with her Honduran work completed and sent off, she sat with head back and eyes closed, dreaming in peace, paying no heed to the ringing telephone until the message taker came on and she heard her father's disgusted voice.

"Mathilda, are you in that tub or not? Why don't you answer your phone once in a while before--"

She grabbed the phone. "Hello, dad. How are you?"

"I'm okay. I thought maybe you were in Timbuktu or some damn place."

"No, I was just in Honduras, remember?...but I was in Tombouctou once."

"Well...where the hell is it anyway?"

"Western Africa, near the Niger River in Mali."

"Well I'll be damned."

"What I'm calling about is this Borleau thing. There was a little blurb in the paper, not very much, and why is there nothing on the news about you? Don't the local media care for their own...or what?"

She laughed. "It's not for want of trying. I've been

avoiding them."

"Oh...why's that?"

"I just have trouble talking about the story right now."

"I see. I can understand that. All right. Well how are you otherwise?"

"I'm fine, much better."

"Much better? Were you ill?"

"No...just tired."

"Well now you can get some rest, honey. I'll hang up. Good-bye."

"Talk to you soon, dear," she said, and hung up feeling a surge of overwhelming joy, one of those inexplicable little epiphanies of happiness that came, best unexpected.

At four o'clock in the morning Mahta telephoned Rafael at home. She had set her alarm and awoke to the unsettling noise of a raging storm. A harsh wind whistled around the corners of a creaking houseboat being hammered by the intermittent sweep of rain squalls. She thought of the weather in the Philippines; the typhoon season was just ending there. It would be eight o'clock in the morning of the next day in Manila, probably a warm humid morning. The gregarious housekeeper, Maria, answered in Spanish. Still a little groggy, Mahta waited for Rafael with a nervous impatience augmented by the storm. At least he was apparently reachable. His voice sounded as if he were in the next room.

"Hello, my wild little skylark. How are you? I miss you," he said in his endearingly refined voice.

The blustering storm outside was now a merry tempest. She glanced across her room at the radiant face in her dresser mirror. Her mouth was grinning with lunatic happiness.

"I'm fine but, Rafe, are you all right? I was really worried."

"Of course I am. I'm becoming an expert with my damned crutches...very useful. I can fend off boors and smite my enemies without reprisal. Sorry I made you worry. Things were moving at a fast pace and, with my impairment, I wasn't. I had to limp off to Hong Kong. Believe me, that city is not designed for crutches but I did finally get the hang of it. I *am* sorry, but I did call several times -- no you, just *messages*, please. Mahta incommunicado again.

"I'm the sorry one...the unscathed one. Your *leg*. I keep remembering how we danced. You made me love it."

"And we'll do it again. I'm mending very well."

"Good God, Mahta, it's four in the morning there. What are you doing awake at this hour?"

"Talking to you in the middle of a noisy storm...so happy to hear your voice. Rafe, thank you for the cranes. I'll treasure that piece always. If you only knew how happy those little messengers of your safety made me. Before that I flew off to Honduras on a very low plane... I thought--"

"Jesus Christ, I'm sorry I didn't persevere. If my leg were working I'd kick myself for saying anything to make you worry in the first place. I regretted sending you off like that. Really I'm doing fine, Mahta, but you...*cuidado!* Stay out of dangerous places...for a while, at least, *querida.*"

"I'm taking a bit of vacation...off to meet Frannie in Salzburg."

"Ah, our little Madonna of the singing strings. Say hello for me."

"Is Eugenia all right?"

"Of course she is. She was away and I didn't hear of your message for a while. I was humbled...and grateful. I'd intended to send you the cranes...so I did at once. Eugenia bears you no malice. She finds you fascinating."

"And I like her...very much."

"I would never have believed it possible but I've become shamelessly fond of my new clothes."

"But are you still fond of your clothier?"

"I love my dear friend, Rafe...please always be my friend. Oh God, your leg wouldn't be broken if I hadn't come to you."

"So what? I chose to transport you right into the middle of that chaos...and anyway it was worth it."

"Oh certainly. That remark is the ultimate in politeness, Rafe...a *broken leg!* Suppose someone had said to you, Rafael, you must break your leg if you want Mahta?"

"I would have said, may I have her first and *then* break my leg? And that's just what I got."

Clutching the phone to her ear she threw herself down upon her pillows, delirious laughter producing tears.

"Ahh, I really like to hear you laugh."

"You do that. You always do that. We have a lot of good memories, Rafe...except for the earthquake. But what will you do about your Baguio house, build it again?"

"Right on the same damned spot. I love defying the wrath of nature. Sorry our wonderful adventure came to such a sad end. I have seen to some of your rescued victims. I had incredible reports of you acting as a sort of one-woman Red Cross...ahh, I've amused you again."

"But Rafe it was tragic.. Those images have stayed in my head...the children. Thank you for helping. And you're there and you're well, and that gives me such pleasure."

"And now I'll end this...so you can return to sleep and dream of dancing with me. Have fun in Salzburg. God, I miss your sassy self...but ah, those memories, skylark."

Once again she hung up her phone smiling. She closed her eyes smiling and would surely dream smiling. Such extraordinary happiness was almost frightening.

One keeper of smiles was safe. Now she was going to see another, flying off to be with Frannie; a thin slice of rarest

time with yet one more sharer of callow days.

XI

Frannie had procured for them comfortable, very modern and spacious apartments on the Rainerstrasse not far from the baroque symmetry of Mirabell Gardens. They could walk almost anywhere they wanted to go in the small town of Salzburg and, both being familiar with its points of interest, merely use it as a charming backdrop for their conversations. Frannie had brought along a young woman to escort the children around town. On the very first morning the two blond boys Claude and Luddy and their devoted little fair-haired sister Ingrid, who more and more favored Frannie in appearance, were off with their young escort, Caroline, to visit Mozart's *Geburtshaus*.

After the commotion of departure had ceased, Mahta wandered over to Frannie's apartment in her dressing gown, carrying a cup of coffee. They settled in large overstuffed chairs covered with a soft lemon yellow fabric. The very immaculate and up-to-date apartment with its modern bleached oak furniture, thick ivory carpets, and pale green and white striped wallpaper, smelled of its newness. It was similar to Mahta's. Probably Frannie found the decor refreshingly uncomplicated after her enormous old mansion. Mahta knew that many Europeans surrounded by the inescapable baroque and arabesque had a partiality for modernity. The nearby windows were swung out a little and a faint breeze ruffled the crisp white curtains. Below, an efficient yellow and red streetcar rattled around the corner and up the street.

"Here we are complacent in our peignoirs," Frannie said. "Do you still read Wallace Stevens?"

"Yes...yes I do, but not often enough. His lines come into my head a lot, though. If I think about it, it's my contention that he inserted Mozart into his poetry with a genius comparable to that of his subject."

Mahta took a sip of her coffee and appraised her friend with one of her quick wide-angle glances which could take in a great deal.

Frannie's elbows rested on one of the chair arms. As she leaned on her twined fingers the broad sleeves of her beige silk dressing gown slid down her arms. A few wayward strands of the pale blond hair twisted above her head came floating out in fine slight curls. Her pretty face was roundish with peaches and cream cheeks and a small straight nose. On her ring finger was a hefty emerald baguette surrounded by diamonds. Its size and brilliance seemed a little incongruous to Mahta, but it was an heirloom that had made its way down the long and accomplished lineage of Claude's family. The familiar soft benevolence still flowed from Frannie's warm hazel eyes, the eyes now a little more tired but no less enthusiastic.

"The children are adorable and they have such good manners,"

Mahta said.

"They're dears but they can be a handful. They're normal healthy, sometimes far too rambunctious little individuals. Surprising how they keep me sane."

Frannie paused while she kicked off her gold mules and drew her feet up beneath her.

"Mahta I have to say this: your lovely little body is too thin...much thinner than when I last saw you...and you...you look...well, to put it mildly, tired.

"I'm getting better."

"Have you been ill? I know you haven't been yourself since Brehnt... I was so happy for you two...just right for each other," Frannie said in a gentle maternal voice. "My dear old cohort, so ambitious...but a rocky personal life. All the way back to your marriage...and your mother--"

"Well it hasn't all been as dreary as you make it sound...peaks and troughs...some wonderful peaks."

"Oh God, yes. You care so much about what you do, but it scares me to death, this running around in dangerous places. You've always been so...so well-intentioned, your endeavors really sweeping. I can't do that. I just try to help out on the home front. But are you feeling all right?"

"Yes. I had some difficulty in Central America...lost someone I was trying to help get out. The story just won me a Borleau. My God, I wish I'd never had to write it."

"More sadness. Mahta, you've got to...but the Borleau! Don't you... Well, how do you feel about *that*?"

"Numb. I try not to...I don't want to spend much time thinking about it...too painful."

"I didn't know about it. Well I...I guess I can't swamp you with congratulations because I can see it's not quite appropriate. Can't help being really proud of you, though. What else has been going on?" Frannie shook her head and tried a smile. "As if that weren't enough."

"I was in Manila."

"Oh, how is Rafael? Lord, you two bonded didn't you?"

"He was wonderful until we were in an earthquake and his leg was broken." Mahta lapsed into a pensive mood. She put her head back and closed her eyes, prolonging the sudden vision of Rafael dancing.

"Oh no. For heaven's sake. My girl, you *have* been going through it. Where were you?"

"Baguio...in the mountains."

"Oh...yes, I read about that. Were any of those incredible photographs in the papers yours?"

"Possibly."

"And he's all right now?"

"Yes, I just learned that he is. What a relief. He said to tell you hello...called you 'our little Madonna of the singing

strings'."

Frannie gave an appreciative chortle and said, "He was a brilliant student...well, both of you were pretty good. Claude and I were at his home in San Francisco. Remember?"

"Of course I do," Mahta said, brightening with the memory. "You played Eugenia's father's violin...superbly."

"What a gorgeous woman. And I've always thought Rafael a fascinating person...very magnetic. You two were...hmm, inseparable in college, and yet you never really did what could be called dating...and all these years... When you talk about him you...he's still married isn't he?"

"Yes, to the same terrific woman."

"Frannie fair, let's go out for a walk to Mirabell or by the Salzach. I'm getting so nervous sitting here."

"I wish I knew how to make you calm down, but really you've always been like this. All right. Why don't we walk over to Alter Markt and around the St. Florian Fountain, if it isn't too cold. Then we can glance in the shops later if you want...or maybe you don't want," she added, noting Mahta's sinking interest at the mention of shops.

The weather was crisp and they put on their coats and mufflers and set out, walking toward and then along the Salzach River and crossing over it on the Staatsbrücke. Everything looked as clean and fresh as a storybook painting. Salzburg was already preparing for Christmas.

Mahta huddled in her wine woolen coat, keeping her hands in her pockets except to blow her nose. "Sometimes I really love cold but I've been in warm places too much lately...can't get used to this."

"Maybe it won't be too crowded and we can sit in the Café Tomaselli," Frannie offered as they hurried along.

The café, established in 1703, was next door to Salzburg's smallest house, a tiny structure wedged in between two large buildings, with only half of a bit of roof and a curious dragon rain spout.

"I feel the same as I did last time I was here. It's so pretty." Mahta waved her arms around her and went on. "The perfection of it: serpentine little river, magnificent churches, snowy mountains, and that huge fairy tale fortress towering above...and these darling streets and squares all so handsome and...sanitized. There isn't a scrap of paper or debris in sight. It just makes me nervous. I feel like I'm on a movie set, 'The Wizard of Oz' maybe, instead of 'The Sound of Music.' The circumspect religious history of the place couldn't approach this. And way back, monks used to live in holes in the rock face. Imagine if they were to emerge from their holes and see this."

"You're right, but think how the children love it," Frannie said, throwing up her hands and laughing. "Everything is Mozart,

oh yes indeed...but I don't think he would care much for it."

"I seem to recall that he didn't care for it when he lived here. He was dying to get out, wasn't he?"

"Right you are," Frannie said as they sat down at a table in the café, which was not very crowded at all.

"Let's order something decadent with our coffee. You don't have to worry. You need fattening up," Frannie argued when she caught Mahta frowning.

"Order for me," Mahta pleaded. "I can't figure out what all of this goo is."

They sipped their rich black coffee and forked their way through huge slices of chocolate cherry cake oozing with creamy fudge sauce. Mahta complained that her teeth were going to fall out.

"We all need a little sugar," Frannie encouraged in her soothing motherly voice.

"It's your turn to tell me about yourself," Mahta said, pushing back her plate. To her own surprise she had nearly finished her slice of cake.

"I think you have a lot more to say."

"No, first tell me how you and Claude are. How is family life?"

"Well...crowded."

"Is that all? Do you ever play the violin?"

"Yes. Yes, I do...more and more. It's wonderful."

Mahta noticed a girlish sparkle of enthusiasm in Frannie's eyes and asked, "Concerts?"

"I play in a small chamber orchestra which really comes together in a lovely and progressive way."

"That's wonderful. And how is Claude?"

"Newly in love."

Remembering how much in love Frannie and Claude were, Mahta had to sit and grieve for a moment, taking in this news with great disappointment, and anger at Claude.

"Don't look so glum," Frannie said, quite cheerful.

"Nothing will change very much...and I have a beau."

"A beau," Mahta exclaimed. "What a great word. I don't think I've ever used it." They threw up their hands, laughing until Mahta suspected endorphins were at work. "And what does the beau do, besides care for you?"

"Most important to me, he plays the cello," Frannie said, pulling at her little gold earring.

"Oh, how fine...you make heavenly music together."

"Well, yes."

"Does all of this affect the children in any way?" Mahta asked with careful words. While Frannie was a longtime bosom friend, always willing to talk about herself when asked, Mahta didn't want to offend.

"It's good of you to ask. No, it doesn't. Claude and I

love the children deeply...and we care for each other. Although at the moment I can't bear to think of it, the other situation, mine, probably won't last forever."

"You're in love again," Mahta said, sitting back a little and, with the index and middle fingers of her right hand, tipping the bowl of her teaspoon back and forth on the table while she studied Frannie's jubilant girlish face. "Well, isn't that the sweetest...and...the saddest damned thing."

"Well, the sweetest. I was lonely, lonely for...oh, at first I just wanted to rediscover me...to see if I could exist without Claude shining above me like the sun. I was acquainted with the chamber orchestra and then found that they really wanted me. I was making people happy with music again...so gratifying. I turned into a satisfied creature. I suppose then I was shining all by myself and that's what made my cello player, Julian, fall in love with me."

"I never really wanted you to give up your music, but you and Claude were my ideal couple," Mahta said, pushing her cup out to be refilled. "Well, I hope it turns out nearly perfect and that you all live happily ever after."

"Mathilda?...that's a little smug...smarmy."

"Oh, no, oh, no! Sorry if it sounded that way. I just want to think of you as happy. I always have. I can't bear to rearrange that comforting image when so many others have crumbled. My God, if you aren't happy...someone like you, what is there to contemplate of the good?"

"You poor thing. You look about to cry. I *am* happy. Whatever that means, I'm it. The children are happy. Claude is happy. We're all happy and that's that."

"Thank you," Mahta said. "Do you know I used to feel so guilty when I went home with you for the holidays. For as long as I can remember, on Christmas mother and dad, and later just dad, always went to my Aunt Grace's. First Aunt Grace would give me a dressing down for numerous imagined improprieties, then Mother -- in those early years before I knew you -- would pry herself loose from the punch bowl long enough to, in some crazy way, thoroughly embarrass me. Anyway I didn't want to go there anymore after one of your holidays. Your family was heaven, everyone happy. You were all airborne, floating around playing musical instruments, joking, singing, eating...dancing in the snow."

"We still do all of that on Christmas. Why don't you come and join us," Frannie suggested.

"Thank you really, Frannie, but it would all be far too wonderful...and me: the orphan watching Christmas through plate glass. I'm a little outside of everything right now, and you'd find me a...a very somber presence." That would be especially true if she had to watch Frannie and Claude and think of all the enviable love that had flown away to alight somewhere else.

"Besides, while I can listen very well, all I can do is strum a guitar...and sing a bit off key."

"Come on, we'd love to have you...and you can strum anything you can find in the house...except my violin."

"Thanks, but there's dad. Although I suppose he'll go to Aunt Grace's again. He likes to take presents for his grand-nieces and nephews. He knows I just can't stand it there, so he's stopped inviting me along. Christmas is not a good day...but I'll either be home or out working on something. Fortunately, it doesn't last long. It's the nonstop commercial buildup that drives me insane."

"It sounds so depressing. How can I...? Look, the sun's coming out. I know, Mahta, let's take the funicular up to the Fortress and exclaim over the view. If it were summer we could sit under the old lime tree in the castle courtyard...but of course the tourists..."

Insisting on paying for the rich dessert breakfast that she had encouraged, Frannie pushed Mahta's hand away and laid her schillings down. They put on their coats and headed, with unhurried steps, across Residenz Square, strolling under the archways and past the Cathedral.

Frannie chatted in German with a woman in the funicular as they climbed above Salzburg's nearly flawless display of domed architecture and the massive Mönchsberg rock face. The silver river serpented into the distant mountains. Deposited at the Hasengraben bastion, they climbed the steep steps to the inner castle, walked under the arch toward the old lime tree and cistern, and decided to go into St. George's Chapel, although it wouldn't be much warmer.

They sat talking in hushed voices beneath the marble relief figures of Christ and the Twelve Apostles.

"So you and Rafael have...enjoyed each other completely. What will this do to your friendship?"

"We've had a long and wonderful friendship, a very understanding relationship that drove us to...well, it's like certain unique plants that take years to bloom."

"But, Mahta, then they...they usually die after all that effort."

"We won't, because we expect nothing more. Rafael saw much more easily than I the condition I was in. He wanted to make me happy...and he did, he really did -- no shrink could have done it. Everyone worries over this. We don't."

"Everyone?"

"Well I exaggerated," Mahta, said hugging herself. The heavy stone walls constructed almost five hundred years ago were damp and chilling. "You seem worried and...another friend seemed a little concerned about it."

"A jealous male?"

"I think I'm ready for a big warm fire," Mahta admitted with

chattering teeth.

"Yes, me too. Let's go," Frannie agreed, turning up the collar of her long tweed coat.

They went down and made their way to Getreidegasse, which Mahta facetiously called, "The darlingest street in Salzburg."

Walking along, Mahta saw that her friend was desirous of browsing and decided to indulge her by tagging along in and out of shops. There were a lot of coffee shops, candy stores and souvenir shops awash with repetitive Mozart mementos -- he could never have envisioned the cunning little chocolates made in the likeness of his bust -- also costly jewelry and clothing shops. Finally they came to rest over lunch before a warm fire in a cozy pub, laughing and chatting with discursive exchanges. They had both ordered veal and decided on a bottle of Gewürztraminer.

Frannie pushed up the left sleeve of her beige cashmere turtleneck and glanced at her watch. "I suppose the children are eating greasy sausages somewhere," she said with a sigh and a bit of laughter. "The little darlings," she added.

The bite of veal that Mahta had stopped chewing went down in a lump. She took a swallow of her wine.

"Your eyes just clouded over in a strange way," Frannie remarked.

Mahta glanced at Frannie then out across the room. "There was a...a baby boy I plucked out of a street full of people being machine-gunned in Beirut."

"Oh God! Mahta, that's horrible. Is he...alive?"

"Yes, he's in a mission shelter. I send him things." She finished her wine and poured herself more. "I wanted to take him out of there but it didn't work."

"I'm so sorry," Frannie said, her eyes brimming with concern as she squeezed Mahta's arm. "Uh-oh," the utterance escaped her as she turned her head away a moment, brushing her cheeks. She pulled a handkerchief from her purse, dabbed her eyes, blew her nose and took a swallow of her wine. "Oh, what a crazy world this is."

"Yes," Mahta agreed. "Sometimes I think it's one hell of a place." She rubbed her hands over the dark green sweater covering her folded arms, then dropped her head briefly in her hands and looked up at Frannie. "And then on the other hand some people are so fine. They can have absolutely nothing but the torn shirts on their backs and be that way. You're somewhere where you can't speak the language. You laugh with them and point. They just look at you with eyes that understand everything that counts, and your heart burns up."

Frannie gazed into the crackling flames of the small fireplace, and after a while said, "I begin to understand a little more, Mahta. I see now that this is your...your ordained métier...and that you'll never...never change."

"Did you think I'd change? Oh, Frannie, I have to say

that's damned unfair of you...but unfair isn't the right word. It's...disappointing. I've expected you to know all along what it means to me. At least you have to understand that...because it's...it's my *raison d'être*."

Frannie placed her hand over Mahta's which had begun twirling a knife on the table, a nervous act of which Mahta was hardly aware, and said, "Mahta, you certainly do need to be understood...deserve to be taken seriously, and, my God, I do. It's just that... Yes, I did want you to change. I wanted you to be more like me. It sounds selfish, I guess, egotistical, but I thought you'd be happier. I see now that you...you just wouldn't...because of how very unique you are...how you've come along in the world. I was myopic. I simply wanted you to be happier...that's all."

"Then I forgive you," Mahta said, and her serious purposive face rearranged itself around a large smile.

"Let's go back to our rooms and put on our robes and lie around in a dissipated fashion," Frannie suggested when they had settled their checks. "I don't get to do this very often. I'm so unused to it that my shocked flesh feels as if it's left behind a lot of amputated limbs."

"The description is apt," Mahta replied, standing up and reaching for her coat.

In Mahta's room, which differed little from Frannie's in decor -- except that the wallpaper was of gold and beige stripes, the overstuffed chairs of a natural chamois, and there was a large Saarinen-style chair in the bedroom --, they settled into the soft leather chairs and sipped their coffee. Frannie seemed a little hesitant but was nevertheless bent on guiding the conversation in a certain direction.

"Mahta, do you...are you...well, do you have anyone to bring you a measure of joy and comfort, that is...other than Rafael?"

Mahta dropped her head back with amusement, then gave a short burst of laughter. "You sound like my father. For heaven's sake, Frannie, what the hell happened to our old familiarity when you could just ask me if I have a lover?"

"As rudeness and crudity increase, I've become more tactful and polite," Frannie explained with a broad grin.

"Well I didn't have much -- as you put it -- *joy and comfort* until my recent meeting with Rafael. And then--"

"But Rafael isn't really there for you, is he?"

"He's very much there for me, and then again he isn't. It's all right. I know where he is and I love *knowing* he's where he is, where he must belong...if a person like Rafael belongs in any one place. His mind and his life are really far-reaching, but he's also a creature attached to his environment. I like that."

"Well at least you were never harmfully interested in casual sexual relationships. They can really jade a person. Your successful loves have always included -- at least it seems to me

-- the promise of deep friendship."

"Yes...with Rafael the friendship goes deeper and deeper. I swear to you it's unshakable, like brother and sister...only much better...intelligent, stimulating, sometimes even harmlessly contentious...really in many ways like you and I."

"And how I value that *you and I*. But a minute ago when I interrupted you, didn't you say 'and then,' as if you were going to go on to something or someone else?"

"Yes," Mahta agreed, smiling at Frannie's impatiently twirling foot, "you want me to talk about Paul Carl."

"Ah, so that's his name."

"Whose name?"

"The man we're both talking about. My God, you're evasive."

"The way I am with him." Mahta laughed. "He imagines we have things in common. I'm not so sure...maybe some."

"Well do you care for him?"

"Yes...only...I think I won't do anything about it."

"Good lord, this is the most stoical involvement I've ever heard of. You certainly have what appear to be *difficult* relationships."

"He would probably say I make them that way."

"Does he really know you?"

"Thinks he does. He's a quick study and he does persevere."

"Who is he really...is he...? You know what I mean."

Mahta went on to give a brief account of Paul's profession, her encounters with him and the little she knew of his private life, and in so doing decided that she really needed to know more about him to fairly divulge any of her own opinions. "How do we ever really know anyone, Frannie? It takes years to know so little. We only know what another chooses to let us know. I myself am very much that way."

"You don't pretend to be something you're not, which is the important thing," Frannie answered. "My God, it's refreshing. I get so tired of façades and superficiality."

"Sometimes that's all a person has," Mahta responded, stretching and twisting her neck from side to side with closed eyes. There was a tension in her that would not relax. Perhaps it was the subject.

"Does he want to marry you?"

"Huh?" Mahta exclaimed, straightening up her body. "I should think not. Neither of our lives are the stuff of that sort of thing...marriage."

"Well to live together then?"

"How would that work? We're never home. He's staffed his school so that he can leave whenever he wants and still return in time to give his students the Paul Carl cachet. I leave day or night at the drop of a hat and answer to no one. I'm not about to move to New York, and I doubt that Paul Carl is coming out West at the behest of Mathilda Lind. Oh Frannie, journalists and

photographers aren't always reliable people, except when they're working on something consuming."

"If I could see the two of you together I'd know a lot more. You're rather cavalier about this. Possibly you feel that you can never have another love as good as Brehnt and you've just given up. You're too young to do that, Mahta. Could be you don't really know how you feel...or maybe you do know...maybe you're very much afraid."

Mahta's eyes flew open and she sat up, staring at Frannie. "You're very wise, Frannie. Sometimes I see you as the caring mother I never quite had. There's a...a kind of soft goodness in you that's rare. I'm such an erratic obnoxious...oh, such an obnoxious beast, that I'm very lucky to have your concern and tolerance. A lot of what you said about me just now is so true...maybe all of it. I don't know...I don't know. I found myself fighting with Paul...or at least arguing with him. In a very short time we've really had a...well, a rather adversarial relationship. For a while I imagined it was because of our brief little encounter long ago...that I simply couldn't forget being discarded like that, but I don't really think so. Could my ego be that tender? No. No, I think some of it is my independent personality and just general mistrust. The few times we've been together he's often acted...hmm, almost like a father. Yes, watching over me...trying to prevent me from doing certain kinds of work...trying to make me eat and stop drinking...trying to--"

"Wait a minute, Mahta," Frannie interrupted. "He loves you. That's so clear. Lord it's simple. He wants you safe. You're so intelligent...don't you see?"

"Maybe I do but...God. Love, what does that mean, really? I don't want anyone taking control of my life."

"But in a way lovers do control each other's lives. There's quite a difference between caring love and a bossy male. Are you just going to be a lone wolf?"

"I don't know. Who knows? I guess so. When it comes to my personal life I never know what I'll do next. I'm really quite impulsive...untrusting and..."

"What?"

"I'm bad luck."

"Bullshit!...a person of your intelligence making a statement like that. It's a rationalization because you're afraid of failing in a relationship...or of losing--"

"I'm afraid, yes, because I'm bad luck."

"Mahta, for heaven's sake, do you care for this man?"

"I...when I'm around him I'm in a kind of...it's a nervous state that doesn't facilitate clear thinking. He's a powerful lover. Oh if I thought only of that I'd... I like being with him but it's...it's almost painful."

"All of that, my friend, is called being in love."

"I just don't think I can accept that. I'm not a...a child

with a first love. I guess I'm too difficult...and I'm a...I really am a dangerous person to be around."

Frannie was about to give further vehement protest when there was a knock at the door. When Mahta opened it the children burst in amidst wild chatter, and with hands and pockets full of Mozart souvenirs. Plump and red-faced Caroline trudged in behind them and sat down with an exhausted sigh.

"Oh, Caroline, I hope you didn't let them talk you into a lot of kitsch," Frannie said with gentle disapproval.

"Only a few dozen things they just couldn't live without, Mrs. Gauzemahn."

"Mama, I saw the clavichord that made the first notes of the 'Magic Flute,'" ten-year-old Claude said in a rush of words which were overlapped by his lively sister Ingrid's enthusiastic voice.

"I saw his violin, mama, the one he played in concerts when he was a little boy." She knelt on the floor with her hands on her mother's knees. "Do you think it's as good as yours?"

"I don't know, darling, but it's worth considerably more. Where is Luddy?"

"He's gone to the bathroom because he ate too many sausages," Ingrid said.

"Oh no. Caroline?"

"He really only ate his own and Ingrid's," Caroline said. "She didn't like hers and decided upon a large hot pretzel."

"So he ate your lunch too." Mahta laughed and pulled Ingrid's blond pigtail with playful hands that wanted to touch tender innocence. "Did mama make that beautiful French braid?"

"She always does. She's quite good at it," Ingrid said with a large smile; the resultant dimples and mischievous pale blue eyes were irresistible. Mahta gave her a hug.

Ingrid was her godchild, six years old and born in Mahta's favorite month of April -- a time of vernal innocence, renewal, when the tulips and lilacs bloomed. Mahta had always tried to send her a birthday card and a small gift, arriving late, often from a remote place.

"Do you think she could make a braid like that out of my unruly hair? I've always wanted one," Mahta said.

"Of course," Ingrid answered, twisting the jaguar ring on Mahta's finger. It had become loose again. "Where did you get that? It's a little cat, isn't it?"

"It's a jaguar that a friend gave me."

"Where is the friend?" Ingrid asked.

Frannie turned very quickly away from Claude's garrulous rundown of the day's events and said, "Ingrid, come here and stop pestering Mahta with questions."

Mahta observed that Frannie had been listening with the very necessary third ear which only mothers possess.

Ingrid ran to her mother with a happy near spontaneous obedience. "Mama, Mahta wants a French braid like mine."

Frannie came to Mahta and grasped a length of her wavy hair, stretching it out. Her soft hazel eyes sparkled with amusement. The attentive maternal touch of her exploring fingers caused a delectable feeling which the child in Mahta savored. "This hair is long enough. When do you want it?"

"Right now," Mahta said with an impatient voice. "I've just had an idea. When you finish you can take my camera and photograph me with my godchild...two French braids."

XII

Back in her houseboat, Mahta sat curled in the arms of her mollifying chair -- the familiar resting place which almost always enfolded her in a measure of comfort and security. But not today. Just now she was feeling weak in the stomach and very anxious. The newspaper lying face up on her coffee table revealed that an eastern senator named Slendailo had opened an investigation into drug trafficking by certain U.S. citizens who were linked with a Latin American drug ring. The traffickers in custody were to have their names revealed at the upcoming indictment, names which Paul already knew. She couldn't stop reminding herself that it was she who handed him the confirming list, some of the listees not then even suspects. Expected but troubling news. The imminent release of Brehnt's dangerous critical list had also produced cruel flashbacks. Moreover, she was reluctant to stir the pot by phoning to learn if Paul was disengaged from these serious matters, and she was even a little paranoid about phone messages. Still, if the known suspects were already in custody perhaps the worst was over. Most of her concern for Paul had stemmed from the certainty that her houseboat had been burgled for the list. She did console herself with the knowledge that, partly because of Paul's persistence, Brehnt's effort would have meaning.

As she sat pondering all of this, her eyes fell upon the portrait of herself and little Ingrid, which she had just hung on her wall with her other most cherished photographs. The sight of it carried her away from heavy thoughts and made her smile. Frannie had done a masterful job, or more likely it had been a lucky chance shot: the seated godmother in black turtleneck with her head slightly turned toward her godchild, displaying the handsome French braid; the standing goddaughter in black jumper and white blouse with her hand on her godmother's arm and her bright eyes on her smiling godmother's face -- two French braids. The pleasure of it remained with Mahta as she again grew reflective. She was thinking of Frannie and the children. Then she thought of Claude and Frannie and their lovers. She imagined Frannie and her musician making music together; how thrilling, even innocent, the fortuitous alliance seemed. She closed her eyes, dropping her head back. Why did change have to accelerate? Even her friendship with Frannie had changed, although it had

deepened for the good, as it did each time they met.

Their visit had flown by too swiftly. With present lives so dissimilar, their often recounted past still bound them up in the brevity of existence, and they had parted more drawn together than ever. They promised to do the same thing again in another city -- Florence had been mentioned -- at a later date as yet undetermined. Mahta thought Florence almost too rich a setting, too full of wondrous studies for a mere backdrop, but when Frannie also mentioned Venice, she declined at once. She was far too fond of Venice -- that Moorish-influenced architecture floating on reflected light. "No, please, Frannie," she had pleaded, "I couldn't walk along those pungent old canals or cross St. Mark's Square talking about myself. People shouldn't talk much there." "You're absolutely right," Frannie agreed, "that sinking enchanted past glory has sounds too rare: gondoliers' barcarole, chugging vaporetta, the bells of the Clock Tower Moors...and of course the concerts in the square. Even the stenchy air is strangely acceptable. One does need a companion though. Claude and I loved being there. I got pregnant there. Ah well, it's really a place for lovers." "I first went there with Kenneth the spring before we married," Mahta admitted, "but I believed I was happy then...and maybe I was. We made love and drank very good wine...wandered into the churches with their hundreds of paintings...plowed through the water to the islands. It was a carefree time that promised a future where nothing serious could go wrong. I've been there alone..." Mahta's voice trailed off. "So it won't be Venice, but somewhere nice...maybe tropical...a warm island," Frannie suggested with a reassuring happily anticipating voice, "where the children can play and there'll be nothing to distract us but falling coconuts. But wherever, it'll be just as good as this has been."

It had all been good, their extended tête-à-tête in Salzburg, even though worried Frannie had admonished with a fervent voice: "Don't miss the joy of existing by grieving too much over what can't be changed." "How do we know what can't be changed?" Mahta countered, but staunch Frannie had persevered: "Well even if some of it can, please don't be killed in the process. The obverse of good is evil, my darling pal, and you'll never change that; it's the nature of the bipedal thinking beast to dabble in both sides." "True," Mahta answered, "I can't change very much, but I can't hide from it either." Frannie had hugged her and pondered aloud, "Through the years you've grown so much more complicated...but, no, it's just that I keep learning more about you, isn't it? I'm so glad I have you. Give that man a chance," she advised at the last moment, "and please take better care of yourself...so we can argue in our dotage."

#

Only one of the messages taken by her message service while

she was away interested Mahta as a new prospect for work: an assignment in Chile, a country currently in stark transition with a long and chilling history of brutal human disappearances. The other messages were mostly media people wanting to talk, and propositions for assignments of which many involved risk without merit or usefulness. There were no messages from Paul, not that she had expected any after her silent departure. But Jane had left a message, inviting her over for coffee and a look, at last, at the Fiji paintings.

#

A gentle autumn drizzle was falling and the dark hills shrouded in misty clouds as Mahta drove over to Jane's spacious old loft. It was located atop a square three-storied building which filled an entire block, in a mixed commercial district at the north end of downtown Seattle. She felt eager to talk and had chatted away in her head all the way over there, presenting questions, anticipating the questions Jane would ask and trying to answer them.

Jane lived in her huge work space. There were barren blond hardwood floors, and at the farthest end from the entrance an open hastily tidied kitchen with an adjoining bathroom. Nearby, an ornate antique bed with a bright quilt was shoved against a wall, and beside it in succession: an armchair, armoire, and long bookcase. The remaining open spaces contained stretched stacked canvases, easels, a loaded Italian style taboret holding her current paints, oversized filing cabinets, work tables -- some holding stacks of glossy art magazines --, chairs, a couple of sofas, a tape deck with a rather extensive sound system, and all the cluttering paraphernalia of the working artist. Her large windows had a northeastern exposure, facing toward Lake Union.

Mahta walked around the propped Fiji paintings "Once again I'm amazed at the way you fix on the unique atmosphere of a place...splash out exaggerated images in your special style. This blaze of color...the shapes... Oh Jane, they really make me feel good...life affirming. Love this purple and azure with the dark body by the white boat. Oh this...wonderful airy palms. A small yellow bird...*singing*. These won't be around long."

"Hope you're right. I'm going to add just a few more touches to this series and then have a gallery show. Thanks for your enthusiasm...good for my needy ego. I'm off on a new tangent now." Jane waved her arm at an easel holding a large canvas; it was across the room and turned away from them. "In progress," she said. "You can peek at it later."

When they finished looking and talking about the bold new Fiji work, they sat on oak Windsor chairs, drinking coffee at the round scarred oak kitchen table.

"Are you feeling better now?" Jane asked. "You're still a bit too thin but you've got a little more sparkle."

"I'm fine. I'm pretty healthy, actually."

"Of course physically you must be strong -- you'd have to be, wouldn't you?...but your mental state..." Her voice drifted off and she shrugged with a wan little smile of apology.

"My mental state is always in question, isn't it?" Mahta said, laughing off Jane's serious plunge.

"How's your friend, Rafael?" Jane suddenly asked.

"He's wonderful and mending well," Mahta said. She had not told Jane much about Rafael. Jane knew she had seen him in Manila, and about the disaster and his broken leg. For the present there seemed no point in going further and confusing Jane with the particulars: the depth and complex nature of their relationship -- perhaps Jane wouldn't understand how solid it was. Jane would be prone to suggest that Rafael had taken advantage of her -- she couldn't bear that -- a thing he'd had countless opportunities to do but had never done, despite all his teasing. It was only when he saw how very disturbed and lonely she was that he gave of himself, revealing his deep concern, his joyfully received ardor. From Jane's sardonic point of view that would be difficult to grasp, but whatever Jane thought she would have plenty to say. Mahta changed the subject.

Looking at Jane, a study in dove gray with her matching raglan sweater and slacks, Mahta said, "You're wearing my very favorite Seattle sky...the one outside right now."

"Certainly gray is indispensable to artists...but only a native could love it above us the way you do." Jane had been quick to respond, with her native-Californian misgivings. "And look at you...turtleneck and slacks, all in black. Should I compare you to the night? A dark brooding drama. That is so true. But at least you have a sense of humor."

"Sometimes I like black...not always but sometimes. I think it's...hmm...parenthetical," Mahta said.

"Shall I sit here and think about that a while, or do you want to speed things up a whole lot and tell me what the hell you mean?"

Mahta's laughter spilled forth. "Just think about it, you savvy artist. No? All right...fairly simple, though. Sometimes black sets you apart from the colorful things around you while it's making a mute statement about how you feel about those things...like parentheses."

"Okay, I get it...but do I want it? Heavy. Once in a while you make me feel a little dull, Mahta, even though I know my marbles do shine."

"Fear not, no one will ever outshine your wit, Jane."

"Do you want cake, pastry, something with your coffee?" Jane asked, pushing her sleeves back and pointing at a covered silver tray of pastries on the counter. "This is left over from an open house I had Saturday. I was blowing some of my small watercolors out of here...things I don't give the gallery. Still very fresh

goodies here. One little peach tart for another?" Jane's teasing voice coaxed.

"No thanks, you silly woman. This coffee is fine. Frannie encouraged too many sweets while I was in Salzburg."

"You shouldn't care. But motherly little Frannie is a sweet herself. Who'd ever believe she could play the violin like that? My God. Do you remember you brought her here once to look at my Costa Rican triptych?"

"Of course I do. She really liked it...and while she was trying to make up her mind you sold it to a bank."

Jane laughed and slapped her knee. "She wasn't going to buy it, Mahta."

"How did you know?" Mahta asked with disbelief.

"It's my sixth sense. I've learned to read people, especially prospective customers, very well."

"And speaking of reading people, what happened to that big photographer...Paul Carl...came to your place on the infamous day we drank too much tequila? It's a lucky thing I hopped a bus over there instead of bringing my car. I was well on my way to Valhalla when I left you."

"I wasn't in such good shape myself...drunk or sober. I sent him off. Maybe you and I should have drunk coffee."

"So what happened? I wasn't so smashed I couldn't see the man was gone on you."

"Your imagination was moonlighting, Jane. It wasn't... It isn't the case...well, not..." Mahta's nervous body twisted in her chair. She stood up and poured more coffee.

"You mean you've never seen him since?"

"No," Mahta answered with a thoughtful slowness. "I mean that...I've seen him...in Honduras where we--"

"Uh-huh, I knew it. It was the way he looked at you. Total absorption. That kind of look always makes me jealous. You two were sort of fascinating together, like a story, no like a myth. Disproportionate but fascinating: that elegant dark hunk towering over bitchy little blond you in your bare feet."

"God, a myth?...I was tipsy...a disheveled wreck."

"He didn't seem to mind...and, with all the professional interests you have in common, I kind of thought you'd make a pretty good team."

"Well we...we aren't going to. Guess I'm just a hopeless case. My defenses are..." Mahta shook her head.

"Hey...do you look sad all of a sudden. Come on, tell Aunt Jane what evil thing you've gone and done."

"I didn't do anything. I just... We got rather close in Honduras and then I...I left without saying good-bye."

"So? Call him...apologize."

"No, that's not... I thought maybe he'd call me while I was gone. But that's really hypocritical and duplicitous, isn't it? Because I really don't want... I'm...I... Oh never mind, Jane."

It's more complicated than you think."

"It always is with you. Tell me about it, anyway. Maybe you'll get something straight in your head that way. It's obvious you're all mixed up...aren't you?"

"Forget it. It'll all get preempted by Chile soon."

"Oh sure, run away to Chile, you little coward. Sorry, guess coward isn't the right word...because you're probably headed for the dead center of another foreign horror -- how the hell do you do it? Anyway it *is* a little cowardly to run away from your personal affairs. Don't you know what you want? Or are you just afraid?"

Mahta squinted at Jane. "You and Frannie think alike when it comes to my bugbears."

"It's not too hard to figure. You've had some fairly horrific experiences. Maybe you're afraid of doing it all over again."

"Maybe." Mahta offered only a weary smile for old news.

"What about Paul...did he say anything?"

"He said lots of things...once even called me baby."

"I wouldn't care if he called me cupcake. But you know what I mean: anything that could be construed as binding. Oh lord, I'm not sure you're bindable." Jane leaned back, producing a boisterous roll of laughter.

"I'm sorry, Jane. I wish I could laugh too. I headed over here today happily ready to talk your ears off. Now I'm just clamming up. I guess this is the wrong subject."

"No, I think it's just what you wanted to talk about. You're really having trouble...and I've been shitty. I'm cutting loose because I just had an uptight fight with my printer. It left me in hysterics -- not the good kind. He asked me to sleep with him...and all I wanted was a decent color adjustment. Damn it. I've worked with him so many years. I suppose I'll have to switch to someone else."

Now it was Mahta's turn to laugh. "Maybe you should just do what he wants."

"No I shouldn't. Your advice is terrible. I hope you don't give yourself any. No wonder you're so dejected."

"But if you like him..."

"I do...I really do. That's the trouble. It would be the end of a great friendship...and just the beginning of hell. But we're talking about you, and you never did answer my question."

Mahta sighed and stood up, ambling down to Jane's big new canvas in progress and pulling back its cover. "I like this, Jane...yes. Blues and greens, for me like a...a diminuendoing duet...softer and softer...I can hear it. Oh do I love blues. They're..." Her voice trailed off as she thought of so many: the deep ultramarine blue of Lake Atitlán; an azure sky against big white Honduran clouds; the intense blue of certain eyes -- often so clear and light, in the evening more like sapphire...piercing.

She was unable to convince herself that Jane had started this. "Oh God, I really am a case," she called out, turning around to Jane, who stood back by the kitchen with her feet apart, arms folded, waiting. "I didn't believe it...couldn't...to say you're going crazy over someone you don't really know is... How could he do that?"

Jane had moved closer because Mahta's voice had gone so soft. She threw up her arms. "Oh well. Oh well. Is a thing like that so hard for you to accept...someone with your quick brain? I think you're in deep, woman. I'll tell you what I'd have done if the man said it to me. I'd have--"

"Don't tell me, please, Jane," Mahta pleaded. "I can't deal with it now...maybe ever. No. I'm headed for Chile."

"I'll say you are...and you're the one who's crazy."

"Yes, that's what I said. You couldn't understand, Jane, not without knowing...not without being in my shoes."

"If your shoes are causing that much trouble, take them off, honey. Take them off and get a little earth between your toes."

#

There was still one more sorrowful blow to be received, although Mahta told herself she must somehow rejoice at the news. The day after her visit with Jane, a small letter, nearly as tattered as its point of origin, arrived from the Beirut mission, thanking her for her contributions and informing her that her little Lemur had been adopted. She curled up in her temporarily ineffectual chair and thought of crying but was already doing it.

XIII

"You're going to have to get an agent," an admonishing Sidney Gaffenough told Mahta on the phone. "Your story and prize have precipitated a good deal of interest...heightened by your unavailability. I wish you'd move here. For lack of anyplace else to go, media people are calling me and asking if I can get you for their shows. Isn't it about time Mathilda Lind made a few guest appearances?"

Unable to think of any more excuses, Mahta soon found herself on a flight to New York with a suitcase full of Rafael's choice gifts of apparel, her itinerary duly worked out by a media representative Sidney had recommended.

In her seat thirty thousand feet above the Great Plains recent events crossed and recrossed her nervous mind. Her father was just home from the hospital after suffering a kidney ailment that turned out to be minor, at least for the present. Rushing to his hospital bedside she found him in good humor, and when she informed him that she was canceling her New York agenda he almost leapt out of bed. "If you don't go I'll be much worse off and mad to boot," he exclaimed. "In a way seeing you do this is kind of *my* celebration, Mathilda." Now settled back in his much

preferred condominium, he agreed to let both a nurse and Jane check in on him and keep Mahta informed during the time she remained at her hotel in New York. If he was well enough to be left alone, as soon as possible when she returned, she would go to Chile. There were still serious disappearances crying out for investigation and exposure. Meanwhile, she tried to concentrate on what lay ahead.

As the interviews progressed, several of them to be taped, there would simply have to be a point at which she declined to answer certain questions or discuss certain events. She had thought the process through so carefully that she was sure she could retain her privacy. Her intense mental rehearsal of how she would accomplish this, and at the same time actually communicate something worthwhile, proved useful as the tapings and live appearances began.

She was pleased with her initial control, responding on cue and staying focused, using meticulous care in delineating the remarkable character and self-sacrifices of Jim North and the value of his work. Only when the conversation switched to her private life and sentiments did she hasten to close the door. The monitor on the Jacob Mahlner show flashed photographs of her with the coffin in Guatemala. She didn't look. "Aren't we entitled to know a little more about you?" Mahlner asked. "I don't think so," she answered. "America craves the heroic act, loves the hero; they want details," he persisted. "I don't do heroic acts...only once in a while a necessary act...and, judging from experience, this will be forgotten soon enough, perhaps by tomorrow." "It's said that you saved a child whose parents were killed in a hail of bullets in a Beirut street. Isn't it true that you ducked through machine-gun fire and plucked a baby out of that situation?" The unexpected question caused puzzlement, discomfort, almost sabotaging her self-control. Should she mention that it was impossible to duck through machine-gun fire? No. She took a deep breath and for a moment was silent, slowly producing a faint smile. She was looking at Mahlner while recalling Lemur's wondrous eyes. "Can we take that silence to mean it's true?" Mahlner demanded. "I was very lucky to be in the right place," she offered succinctly but without harshness. Then with only a slight edge in her voice she gave a sardonic little half grimace half smile and said, "Can we talk about something else? -- what these photographs and stories of mine and others mean...why they're so important, for instance," and she was back in control. For a second she squinted beyond the cameras at Gaffenough, who had raised his fingers in victory.

Sidney Gaffenough was a mass of energy, doing twenty things at once. He was a pleasant middle-aged man, stocky, slightly balding and gray-haired, with narrow gold rimmed glasses and a mellow reassuring voice. Mahta chided him for constantly jotting in a small black notebook, even while he accompanied her and her

agent to the interviews. The rather taciturn agent perhaps thought herself de trop in the face of Gaffenough's exuberant display of assistance. Gaffenough did seem to think of Mahta as his protégé, quite pleased with his role of mentor.

When the final show of her New York sojourn was completed, Mahta returned to her hotel to shower and change, donning a slender burgundy gown of satin which a discerning Rafael had selected for her. The coruscating diamond leaf spray earrings were hung from her ears with cautious fingers. Then she removed them. Then she put them back. As she stood before her mirror she recalled Rafael's appreciative face, heard his low aroused voice as he told her she looked sumptuous as a damson plum. For a few seconds she was back in Manila standing on the Persian carpet; Rafael was sending her an admiring smile which made her crave far too much the rarity of devoted cossetting. Forcing herself from her dreamy state she tried to hurry. Gaffenough was taking her out for a celebratory evening.

Within fifteen minutes Gaffenough arrived, commented on her attractiveness and, staring at her earrings, asked, "Are those real diamonds?"

"Yes," she said, giving a secretive smile which she realized might call for further comment. "Don't look at me like that, Sidney. I couldn't afford them. They were a gift."

"Which is even more intriguing to contemplate," he replied. When no further explanation was forthcoming, he whisked her off to dinner at the Algonquin Hotel.

They sat in the darkened Oak Room, beneath the glowing gold light of the wall sconces, dining on game fish and talking until the nine-thirty show. Mahta's appreciative eyes roved over the filled room, coming to rest fondly on the red velvet banquettes. "Sidney, you've brought me to the one place in New York where I'm happy to spend an evening. Thank you so much." Gaffenough looked very pleased and started to speak but the show was just beginning. A female jazz stylist, barely known to Mahta but whom she very much enjoyed, sang in a soulful voice with impressive range. When certain standards came along which Mahta especially liked, she hummed under her breath and thought of the obnoxious throaty woman at the Club Pavo Real who had caused Rafael's ironic laughter. That inebriated woman's audacious act was a tempering reminder of a prettily bubbling drink's betrayal.

At the show's end Gaffenough embarked upon a less formal conversation with Mahta, subtly revealing that his interest in her went beyond their professional relationship.

"You know, Mathilda, a lot of the questions they threw at you are the same ones I have. You are a mystery, and the fact that your privacy is so guarded only serves to heighten the fascination."

"Apparently they can find out anything they want if they dig deeply enough," Mahta remonstrated, ignoring his signaled desire

to stray into her private world.

"You're quite attractive on many levels. I can't believe you have no private life."

"Well, if I do it's private," she said with a gentle laugh at Gaffenough's obvious perplexity.

"But please," Gaffenough persisted, "at least tell me why you're a journalist...why you do what you do."

She took a sip of her wine and said, "Because I can't do otherwise. I don't mean I'm not capable of doing other things that interest me. I just mean there's nothing else more important to me."

"And how did you decide that? What process brought you to that conclusion?"

She tilted her head with a sly smile. "Oh, Sidney, I think you're trying to sneak in the back door of my private house, aren't you? You know that to explain process I'd have to explain the tedious chronological history...the personal evolution of me...such as it is...talk, talk, talk."

Gaffenough put his hand over hers on the table and said, "Well, what's wrong with that? You're interesting."

She patted his hand and dropped hers onto her lap. "I've gone on like that a very few times...and concluded that it's self-indulgent...maybe some day when we both have nothing better to do. These days I'm only interested in forward motion."

"Forward motion would be moving to New York, my friend. Some folks of your caliber like it here. You don't have to give up your history and homeland to do that you know."

"For me to do that something really momentous would have to happen...an adjustment of gray matter. While I'm not clairvoyant, I don't see it happening."

"It might...will you have lunch with me tomorrow?"

"I'm sorry I can't. This has all been very good of you, Sidney. Thank you so very, very much. What a great help you've been. Tomorrow I'm just going to fool around a while by myself then catch my plane out of here."

Gaffenough sighed and reached for the check.

#

Mahta slept a little later than usual and had a roll and coffee in bed, gazing about her spacious cream room with its inoffensive modern appointments.

As she was finishing her shower she heard the phone ringing and grabbed the receiver, with her wet body wrapped in a towel. The call was from Jane. She and Mahta's father had watched last night's interview together, and Jane remarked that he was quite puffed up with pride.

"We were both sitting there with our mouths open, learning amazing things about you, my friend. You were covered on the

news here too, Mahta. I think you're going to catch it when you get home. Better be prepared," Jane warned.

"All right, by now I've had some practice. I'll just kick off my shoes and run the gauntlet," Mahta answered, in a voice made cheerful by imminent escape from further attention.

"Are you going to see Paul?"

"I don't think so, my nosy friend. He's gone most of the time anyway."

She chatted a little longer, laughing at Jane's witticisms, then hung up, blow-dried her hair a little and began to dress, having decided upon her iridescent blue silk suit. A plain gold necklace and small gold loop earrings were added last, so absently done that a moment later she had to touch her ears and neck to see if they were in place. Something was troubling her unduly and she hadn't yet identified it. Pushing this quandary aside she hurried on with her preparations.

Clothes were low on her list of priorities; yet during the shows and tapings she had felt a strong need for dress that was unobtrusive, a simple but smart couture which would not detract from the serious intent of her professional persona. She didn't want to spend much time thinking about it and, because of Rafael, didn't have to. She was growing more and more thankful for his wardrobe. "I'm going to give you an outfit for every year we've known each other," he had begun with enthusiasm. Much to his disappointment she had swiftly put a stop to that. He then concentrated his efforts, divining her partiality for simplicity with a cunning instinct. She knew that Rafael loved to make his environment beautiful, but also that his giving went beyond any self-indulgent whim, and had said, "I know this wasn't for you as much as me, Rafe; it was a very thoughtful thing to do. Because of you, I now have all of these handsome artificial skins." He grinned with pleasure and offered an adroit answer: "To cover the natural layer most choice of all. Thank you for letting me do it. I know I had more fun at it than you but possibly you'll think of me sometimes; I like that." "Thoughts of you don't need prompting," she responded.

Standing before the mirror, she brushed her drying curls into a soft feathery cloud around her face. The dark blond color would lighten more as her hair dried. Before she left Seattle she had visited a salon to have her hair cut shorter, but perhaps she would let it grow a little longer again -- French braids were fun and rather smartly tidy. Finishing with a brisk economy of effort, she packed her suitcase then called the desk for a cab and stood at the window sipping one last cup of coffee.

On a sudden impulse she had thumbed through her small red leather personal address book, looking for the address Paul had given her. She would not of course try to see him, nearly certain he was somewhere else in the world, but would pass by in a clandestine manner and see where he lived. It would fill in

her elliptic picture to imagine him in his New York milieu, and perhaps also soothe a troubled place in her heart.

The address was an East Side Manhattan location, which she found to be a ten-story edifice with an attractive brick-and-limestone façade, and broad windows resting on wide friezes carved in intricate floral shapes. "Mmm, elegant," she muttered, and asked the driver to try and park in the next block. Complaining, he nevertheless managed to race up behind a car just pulling away and slip into its space.

"I'll be only a few minutes," she promised, getting out of the car.

"It's up to you, I'll get my fare," he replied, throwing back his seat and pushing his hat over his eyes.

The air was heavy with late autumn chill. She pulled the collar of her coat up around her neck and realigned the shoulder strap of her leather purse. The long wine coat fit well over her slim suit and fluttered against her calves. On her feet were mid-heel walking shoes enabling her to saunter along with slow and easy steps.

As nearly invisible as she believed herself to be, when she was almost across the street from the building her heart was racing and her fists clenched in her pockets. None of this resulted from her little exertion but from a kind of furtive excitement at her proximity to an incident she expected to avoid. She stood a while taking in the handsome façade, and then saw a doorman opening the door and a tall blond woman in a fashionable raincoat stepping out. As she was watching this activity a silver-gray car roared out of the garage beneath the building -- a shining Jaguar sedan racing toward the intersection. The man behind the wheel glanced at her and back at the street, and the car sped away. When she heard the brakes screech she was horrified because the face had been Paul's. Even though the chance of this happening was not beyond her expectation, she felt the shock of its occurrence with a thrill of dread. The law of averages had betrayed her. Turning back to her cab she tried to fall into a nonchalant pace. She felt a growing sense of fearful hopelessness. The car had been thrown into reverse and was rushing back to its point of origin and swinging to the side of the garage driveway. Its door slammed and there were brisk footsteps on the sidewalk. She had almost reached the cab when a hand grasped her shoulder and turned her around. She had no idea what sort of face he saw looking at him because she couldn't imagine what she had put there, knowing only that she felt extremely foolish. His expression was one of astonishment.

"You here? Here standing in front of my building and you were just going to walk away? What the hell are you doing, Mahta? I nearly smashed up my car."

She glanced down the street at the car and thought that there was someone in it. "I'm sorry, Paul, I was just in New

York on some business--"

"I saw some of your business last night on television. Where've you been? I tried to reach you a while back...I didn't leave a message because you never respond. But I called you this morning and this time I did...two of them. Why don't you ever collect your messages? Oh, Mahta, can't you even return a call?"

"...on some business," she repeated, "and I thought I'd just see where you lived. I didn't think you'd be home and I... Why do I need to report to you where I've been? I've been in Salzburg with a friend."

"Great...with a friend...great. You don't have to report anything to me, but you were standing in front of my residence. Why is that?"

"It's... My old friend Frannie Gauzemahn and I...and her children...have been in Salzburg. I needed to see her again and...I don't know why it is...why I'm here. I'm sorry...it was just...just a whim. Isn't there someone waiting in your car?" She squinted at the car windows. "Anyway I have to go. I've got to catch a plane."

She saw that his jaw was subtly working with the kind of anger she herself so often tried to avoid. Then she was looking at an altered demeanor of frustration and disgust, further indicated by a sigh and shaking head. This all ended in a low chastising voiced: "I see, cop a look at Paul Carl's place then run back to the West Coast. The hell you will."

He strode over to the cab, paid the driver and lifted her luggage out of the taxi. She looked up at him with surprise as he took her arm in his free left hand and led her up to his doorman. For a moment she felt her old anger rising, beginning its devastating sweep, then she bit her lip, swallowed and produced a faint smile. Perhaps her own conduct had been a little strange and certainly impolite. Hardly bowled over by his swift and incensed command of the situation, hardly docile, she still went along, guided, she thought, by a certain curiosity.

"Frank, this is Ms. Lind. Will you please see that she and her luggage get into my place." He turned to Mahta with a much more level voice. "Forgive me...this isn't how I wanted it...be back quickly as I can. I'm dropping the housekeeper off to do some shopping while I run another important errand."

Mahta actually found herself laughing. "I'm sorry, Paul, but I really do have to catch a plane."

"No. No!" he called, backing down the steps. "If you aren't here when I get back I'll come after you...drag you out of the airport by your heels." He flashed a grin that was supposed to diminish a measure of his severity, and was gone.

With a thin embarrassed smile for the doorman, Mahta quietly followed along, all the while thinking how to best deal with this new predicament of her own making. She was definitely battling feelings of approach and flight, but at the moment her intense

curiosity was winning. Upon reaching the tenth and topmost floor they paused at a large mahogany door carved in abstract floral patterns. The big leather-faced doorman drew out his rattling chain of brass keys and opened the door. He set her suitcase inside with a discreet glance at her and a courteous little grunt, and departed.

Inside, the floor of the circular foyer was composed of large hexagons of black and white marbles, gleaming from the wintry light thrown down by tall clerestory windows. This same illumination gave a brilliant sheen to slender black and white marble sculptures arranged around the white-walled perimeter. A passageway with a barrel ceiling of opaque glass branched off into other rooms just before it led straight into a spacious living room with a commanding view of East Side Manhattan. The shining floors were of milky-stained hardwood partially covered, the carpets a thick weave of a few small bright colors but woven predominantly in black and white. Most of the white walls were hung with photographs and black ink drawings. The larger pieces of furniture meant for sitting were nearly all covered in black softened leather, intimate arrangements with a few minor white chairs and black and white hassocks. A climbing birch-wood fire burned in the screened black marble fireplace. On its long mantelpiece rested a few artifacts from distant places, most noticeable a clay Mayan lamp. Mahta was stopped short in her meander by a huge framed photograph of herself in her rose dress, hung above an ebony secretary. She glanced through the living room into the dining room and saw a long mica-surfaced ebony table, its ten chairs padded with a heavy braid-patterned white fabric. Above the table hung a very unusual chandelier of black and white glass streaked with yellow, most certainly Venetian. Beyond the French doors off the dining room was a wide terrace with trailing ivy and potted trees, some now barren; probably a green haven in the spring. She was disinclined to venture any further but took off her coat, draping it over a convenient chair back where it would be available for her departure.

At the perimeter of the living room, she perched on the edge of a black hassock as a temporary point of observation, refusing to settle in and ready for flight. Her gaze moved slowly around the room, studying the exquisite black and white photographs: some were portraits, a very fetching one of two happy dark-haired children whose sensitive features bore evidence of Paul; many others were exotic settings or extraordinary human scenes from around the world; and still others were quite abstract. At last she spied what she thought resembled a bar, and stood up, moving cautiously toward it. Tinkering a bit with the ebony doors she managed to swing them open, exposing several crystal decanters and glasses. She held a decanter up to the light, uncorked it and sniffed. Scotch. Pouring herself a drink she then moved further into the room and sat on the enormous davenport, which

made her feel small and alone -- rather comic, she imagined -- a whimsical little Goldilocks in the bear's largest chair. The thought amused her enough to cause a high titter of laughter, but the short ripple of sound in the quiet room was startling. She put her head back and closed her eyes, taking a sip now and then of her soothing relaxant. What on earth was she doing here? What? Some time later she heard Paul in the foyer. Her body tensed. Muffled words were spoken, she thought in Italian, and then he entered the living room alone. He came straight across the room, tossing his jacket down and taking the glass out of her hand with a sniff at the contents.

"*The Macallan*...very hard to resist. Forgive me, I'm going to be a rude host and ask you to give up on this. It's a little early in the day, isn't it?"

"I didn't have anything to do and I'm a rather nervous person...doubly so because I'm going to miss my plane."

"You didn't have to sit here. You could have gone exploring. I've got a new darkroom, a library...some other interesting places."

"I wouldn't know. I generally don't snoop."

"May I get you something else? Ginger ale?"

"No thank you." The humiliation was sufficient, she thought, but held her tongue, reduced to a transgressor once again. Probably it was a little early for Scotch.

Looking at her he said with an apologetic voice, "Oh, Mahta, do you want this Scotch?"

"Not anymore." I wouldn't drink it if you tried to pour it down my throat, she assured herself in silence.

"Now you're mad at me."

"No not yet." She smiled a little, rather nervous, then threaded her fingers together and sat back, looking at him with quick glances and silence. She had forgotten how tall he was, how striking to look at, the unconventional attractiveness fitting in nicely with his elegant male bastion. While his apparel was ultra-modern, something about his stature and dark-bearded face made him seem a figure from an earlier age, a portrait by Sargent or Sorolla. With his sudden presence she realized that the room, its entire contents, every inanimate object, took on a fresh vitality and purpose that she hadn't noticed before. It amused her to think that his leather jacket thrown over the arm of the sofa, his crisp white shirt and black slacks and clean loafers must all be splendidly labeled. He was still standing, looking down at her with the glass of Scotch in his hand. The riveting blue eyes were very hard to take. He took a swallow from her glass and set it down on the obsidian-topped coffee table. A difficult silence followed.

"You're always drinking from my glass." She had felt compelled to speak at last, aiming for silly light-heartedness.

"What am I going to do with you, my beloved?" His voice was

only partly facetious.

"After all the fanfare I thought you at least had some plan. Well you could...you could drive me to the airport and dispense with all your troubles in the process."

"Not quite all my troubles. Just recently I tried to call you -- God, you never respond. Otherwise I haven't bothered you much, have I? I thought if I left you alone a while you might figure things out."

"What do I need to figure out?"

He sat down beside her. "Well, first of all how to come to me all by yourself without being asked, and you almost did...but not quite all the way. In that respect, and that respect only, you're a coward."

"I don't think I'm... Are we going to argue? I don't know why I'm here...God, why on earth I--"

"Don't you? Don't you, Mahta? Do you remember anything of us in Honduras...the night you asked me to stay? What I said to you...how we parted, for instance?"

There was the certainty of total recall in his demeanor -- all of a smooth piece, she thought, almost instructive.

"Is this the Socratic method?" she asked. "I'm being forced to teach myself something?"

He laughed. "Well, strongly coaxed. You can still do that...smart as you are."

She allowed a brief thought of Honduras, but here in his presence the startling recollection of their intimacy made her restless and oddly shy. After that she could only look at him with stolen side glances. Perhaps his hair was a fraction longer, a thicker trim, more imposing, his very short dark beard and urbane mustache fiercely, jarringly impeccable. The jet brows were now drawn up with a frown of earnest concentration, clearly waiting for her to incriminate herself. The suggestive curl of lip was amused but serious, ironic. And his eyes...she could see them without even looking, demonic blue pools that produced in her a hopeless anger at the possibility of drowning there. Her averted gaze was careful but still too revealing. He dipped his head down before her and made her look, made her eyes follow his as he stood up.

"Of course you can leave any time you want, *if* you really want. Do you want?" Impatient hands reached down, unavoidable, grasping hers and pulling her up. She stared at the two hands, pondering their strange fascination until they disappeared behind her back. She found herself breathlessly held against his shirt. There was the cool outdoor automobile smell of him, along with a subtle aroma much like a bouquet of wild summer flowers and fresh herbs, pleasing, faint, as if it were somewhere across the room. "Do you want?" His voice awakened her. Her refusal to answer bespoke a stubbornness obviously out of keeping with her wishes as his head dropped to hers. She closed her eyes to hide

herself, and felt the warmth even before the touch of his mouth, then the soft beard against her cheek. The entirety of her previous mental effort dissolved in a precarious pleasure.

"Did you happen to think of me in Salzburg?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk about me?"

"A little."

He kissed her again, she supposing he was fully aware of the result. "Do you think of me when I'm across the room?"

"I think of you...yes...across the...of course."

"Across the country?" His mouth was against her cheek.

"I have."

"On the other side of the world?" He was laughing.

"Especially there where I'm in no danger of you." Now she was thinking she had fallen as easily into his high-spirited mood as she had under his powerful erotic sway.

"It's so damned uncomfortable standing like this. I have to put my feet apart and break my back to get you where I want you. Or I'll just have to..." She gasped, suddenly lifted up into his arms. "Say hello, Mahta, and tell me you're glad to see me."

She dropped her head back and said, "It's a little late for that." Her appropriated body tensed in a disorientating mixture of eagerness and astonishment.

"My God, Mahta, you're in my home." She felt weightless in his arms, an absconding emotion carried out of the room and down the hall to his bedroom. "Almost in my bed -- where you belong."

She stood with her head bent against his chest while he removed her jacket and skirt with deft impatience. The rest went very fast, her astonishment swiftly overridden by a careless wild hunger. She tried to help him with the buttons of his expertly cut Jermyn Street shirt, and then it was merely yanked off.

Their astounding need of one another had taken such precedence that very few words were spoken until half an hour of satisfying each other had passed.

"You on TV I wanted both to strangle and eat alive. A fine persona, my sweet...persuasive cool professionalism, this bossy little nose so very condescending." He ran his finger down her nose. "I thought you'd leave without a word, and you would've, wouldn't you?"

"Yes...and now I've lost my airline seat."

"I'm afraid so. I canceled it on my car phone...and also one that was bringing me to you."

"I do have to go. My father's been ill."

"I'm sorry." He put his fingers in her hair, tilting her head against his mouth. "Will you come back and stay with me?"

"You mean live here?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Mahta, why do you want to make yourself so unhappy?"

"Living here might make me that."

"You don't like my home?"

"It fits you...really very well," she said, thinking what a decisive act it was merely touching his bearded jaw with the backs of her fingers. "Guess I was thinking mainly of the city, but I like things a little less elegant, more simple. I see no evidence of there ever having been a Minnesota canoe."

He laughed. "That was a long time ago."

"I think I'd have liked the canoe."

"Good. I have one upstate slung outside a friendly little cabin."

"Lucky you." Her enthusiastic laughter rushed out and just as quickly she fell silent.

"What is it, Mahta?"

Drawing near him she spoke in a low and confidential voice, "Just tell me something in as few words as possible. Brehnt's work...I wanted to...to talk to you but I've been worried. Is all of that going to be all right for you?"

Understanding produced gravity, although his voice held only a slight hesitation. "All of that is going to be all right. Thank you for helping...and for asking."

She couldn't look any longer into his eyes, almost ashamed of the swiftly resuming warmth which spread over her, overtaking and suffusing her mind and body. Turning away onto her side she spread her fingers over the hound's-tooth sheets and closed her eyes. His arms slid around her, drawing her up against him as he nuzzled her hair.

"I've missed the smell of your hair. It's shorter, so clean and fresh...like you. My God, I have missed you. We loved so well in Honduras. I've thought and thought of this...of you here...thought I'd have to come and get you. I was coming."

She turned over and kissed his startling dark-haired chest, whispering in between kisses, "Mmm, sweet fresh herbs...and your car, and papery summer flowers...I think wild asparagus...tender musky things that grow by the river in the spring."

"What the hell are you muttering?"

"The way you smell, not all of the city, mostly wild woods."

He twined his fingers in her hair and pulled her head back until she was again forced to look into his eyes, the hot blue of a summer sky. "Tell me that you love me."

"What? No. I can't...can't...not this way. I can't do that. I only want--"

"You want to make love with me but not love me, is that it? Are you fooling yourself, Mahta? Not me. Where have you been this last half hour? I've just had you and you've had me. Together we're a helluva lot more than two bodies. In Honduras you finished me off...and now this... I'm not dense, I know when I'm loved. Why can't you say it?"

"If you think you know why do you need to hear it?"

"Because you need to hear it, to hear yourself say it. It's like a fence you have to get over before you can get into the meadow. You want into the meadow, don't you?"

"Isn't there a gate?" she asked, a little playful but also stalling and with a growing agitation.

"All right it's a gate, open it. Don't play with me. I'm through fooling around. I need to hear it too."

"When I loved...that way..." Her voice faltered.

"Brehnt? My God, you're a devoted woman. All I can do is admire you for it. That love is a consecrated kind of idolatry. I know you think you need more time, but I...I need you...and, if you'd only admit it, you need me."

Guilt over Brehnt and where she was at this moment took her slowly but steadily by the throat. She sat up. "I probably killed him with my wonderful love."

"Why do you persist in this kind of torture?"

"I went on and on about the...the misery all around us until he climbed down from that...that venerated academic position. Oh yes, climbed down and gave himself up to a cause that was mine. I did that. I did."

"No you didn't...not entirely. I knew Brehnt too. He told me he'd...that he'd wrestled with his scholarly pursuits and the misery around him for years...ever since he began his work down there. Poor darling, you're something of a masochist."

"Oh God...his letter...his letter...a part of him wanted so badly to return to those scholarly pursuits...but he was so driven to...he couldn't...he couldn't. Maybe I--"

"His beautiful letter to you...it tore me up. Thank you for letting me read it...something so deeply personal. It helped me learn more about you. He knew what he had. He was wise to value you so...the depth of you.

"You were so important to him that Jay wanted to put you in his story, but Brehnt said no. Now Jay wants to do it anyway and I've said no."

"I'm not afraid to be mentioned with Brehnt."

"No, Mahta. No. I don't want you anywhere near any of that. Maybe some day...not now. The story's in revision. Promise me you'll tell Jay no if he asks."

"I imagine I will." The old uneasiness reappeared in her voice. "What about you...if things are that uncertain?"

"It'll be all right. Don't worry...please."

Unsettled by an emergent malaise she lay back, eyes closed, allowing his distracting fingers to work their way over her tense body until the anxiety and pain receded. With quickening heart her blood stirred, warming her skin.

"Will you tell me what we both need to hear, Mahta?" He waited. "Well at least I need to hear it."

Her silence brought him against her with an aggrieved ferocity, yet knowing this she uttered nothing, his demanding

mouth sliding over hers, his silken beard at her throat and against her breast.

"Please tell me that you love me." His hands on her thighs pulled her against him. She kissed his breastbone with opened mouth. "Good God, Mahta, just say it."

"I want you. Isn't that enough?" she whispered.

"No. No it isn't. Just *I love you*," he insisted.

"You...you want to make me say something dangerous. I can't. Please," she said, her voice held quiet. "Please."

"Not until you say the words."

"It's too final...dangerous...everything goes to pieces and...and what if...oh...what if it's a lie?"

"A lie? To whom? For what? You couldn't do what you do with me...not you ever. It's in your eyes...your body. Damn this evasiveness. God what a brave little coward. I've never seen anyone try so damned hard not to love...too late for that."

"Please...oh don't do this, don't take any more away from me. I can't lose any more...can't..." She started over with flattened voice. "I don't know who you are."

"For Christ's sake! Ask me. I'll tell you anything you want to know. I don't want to take, I want to *give*. That's how it feels...love. Doesn't it?"

"Don't. Right now I just want you...want you."

"Then you'll have to say what you've never said to me."

She sat up and ran her fingers through her hair. Why had it been so easy to tell Rafael what she couldn't say to Paul? Part of the answer was definite and clear to her: because with the same words that kept Rafael forever in her heart her relationship with Paul would become completely different, a deep and constant commitment, one that might, very likely would, end in loss. *Loss*. "Oh God," she whimpered, "may I have a little Scotch?"

He gave a long hard sigh and drew her down against him. "Dammit...you get me instead."

Shyness lost in the wild she swayed atop him, no more threats to halt her paroxysm of ecstasy, her body arched back, her throat murmuring arousal. Suddenly he brought her down, rolled over atop her and grabbed her close. But just as suddenly he moved away. Then, yielding to her pitiful moan of protest, he snatched her back and muttered firm-mouthed against her quivering lips, "Tell--me--you--love--me."

"Oh but if I lose you... All right I'll...I love you. There! There. *I love you!* I've thought of you so often but it's wrong...so wrong, isn't it, to love like this...for *me* to love like this? How could it've happened?...happened with you? I tried so hard not to let it because I know...but I couldn't stop the feeling. Oh God this...*feeling*." Her body shook. Was it relief or uncertainty or both? And was that a flash of pity in his eyes or all hunger?

He drove himself into her until she cried out and they both

gasped and lay twined together, her fingers in his hair, his hands stroking her back. Dry airy rasps of his amazed laughter were expelled against her temple and formed into exalted words.

"Now I have you...word and deed...coequal at last. And we're still alive, little fool...my tough little end game."

She heard his voice as part of total encirclement, thought of nothing more than that, drifting into sleep, obliging him with both hands holding fast the enclosing arm claiming all of her.

#

She was...where was she? Alone on open land, a flat stretch of land and lapping water...far too much water, as far along the shore as she could see. Her frantic eyes searched up and down the disappearing shoreline. She had to decide, and finally set out. She walked and walked, hurrying, hurrying, anxious because she had to get away from this land surrounded by water -- a gray barren island. A narrow channel appeared but the water there was deep with swift tides. Looking across she could make out a clean white beach at the edge of a thick forest. At her back was a desolate smothering confinement. Its stark emptiness was acutely terrifying. How she wanted to get through the water. Over there was lush green forest, so much life. She waited in fear. A tall form emerged from the dense forest and stood on the far shore. Standing in the wet sand with her toes in the water, she waved and called, "I need to get across. Can you help me?" The head lifted and the eyes looked back at her, endless blue spilling into the water. She could lean out and almost fall into that blue. "Paul!" she called. "Help me, I need to get across." "You never will!" he shouted. "It's too swift, too deep. You never will. I'm sorry. I know there's nothing where you are. Everything is over here. All the trees, life, everything is here, but you'll never get across." "Oh you told me that I could!" she cried in a long wail of misery. "You told me I could. You lied to me. Damn you! You lied to me, Paul. You lied to me!"

"No I didn't. I didn't lie to you. Baby, get your eyes open. Mahta? Come on wake up. You're dreaming. Wake up, sweet woman. It's only a dream."

She felt his hands slide beneath her, lifting her up and against him. Her body was perspiring, even in the sharp coolness of the air. Unable to speak, still in the dream, she hung onto him for a while in silence. Then her puzzled voice climbed out of a dreadful torpor. "Why...why...why did you lie to me?"

"Your hair is damp and you're so hot, Mahta." His fingers were testing her forehead. In a while he sighed and said, "Please don't. Only once a helluva long time ago did I lie to you...an easy habit, careless. And then just Wenatchee -- that was a good lie...for love of you."

His hands stung her flesh, as if there were something still

unresolved, but she couldn't let go. She leaned back and looked into his eyes. "God...I was in a terrible place...dreaming something so real...so..." She let her head drop forward and muttered against his chest, "But it's always so real...my dreams are always like that."

Stroking the back of her neck, he said, "I'm sorry I wasn't better in your dream."

She heard a soft chortle of laughter; it was her own. "You could hardly take the blame for that."

"Maybe some...but you are going to trust me...even in your dreams." He kissed her lips one at a time and traced them with his finger.

"You know you have a...a Botticelli mouth...the way the top lip goes up in little points...into ridges...the way its middle swells into the lower lip...and the fullness of the bottom lip...slightly indented at the middle of its lower edge. I've stood and stood at the Uffizi looking at *La Nascita di Venere*. In fact you altogether look like her...your amber eyes and the color of your hair...your sweet melon breasts and slight round belly...sly shy you rising from your clamshell."

"I was just on a beach in my dream but there wasn't a clamshell in sight. There was nothing."

"Not even me?"

"You were on the far shore, assuring me I'd never get across."

"Trust me. I was going to swim over and get you."

"You can't...you're dressed."

"Yes. I hope you'll get up now. We're going to have dinner...and then I have something for you."

"What? How long have I been asleep? I...isn't it the middle of the day? Oh I'm all...so mixed up. Why am I sleeping? I never sleep like this...well never used to. I think you exhausted me."

"That's not quite what happened. You exhausted both of us...yourself *and* me. My God you're an incredible handful."

"Is this...turning into an argument?"

"Not even close. You'll find out when we really do it. But it isn't going to matter." He laughed and held her. "I've already showered. I wanted to scrub your back but I let you sleep instead. It wasn't easy to get away from you...even in your sleep...not that I really wanted to."

Paul was wearing Levi's, moccasins, and a white shirt. Mahta had nothing but suits and gowns and said so.

"You have a robe, don't you?" She nodded. "When you finish showering just put it on. We're not dressing for dinner. You *have* eaten today, haven't you?"

"A roll and coffee."

He threw back his head. "Not enough. Well hurry up so we can get some food into you."

"There's a picture of me here."

"Yes one of my favorites. Nice, isn't it?"

"I can't believe this. You took it of me while I was sleeping at Lake Wenatchee."

"I know that."

"For heaven's sake, do you...do you want that sort of thing lying around beside your bed?"

"It was the best I could do until you got here."

#

When Mahta came out of the dressing room, searching for her robe and with only a towel wrapped around her, Paul was leaning forward in one of the large overstuffed chairs in his bedroom. He snapped her picture as she dropped the towel and hung onto one of the thick posts of the fruitwood bed to retrieve her robe, which seemed to have gotten lost in the covers.

"This is really too much. You know something, Paul, if I lived here you'd be throwing all these photographs of me out the window at my departing back, in no time at all."

"I don't think so. And you are going to live here."

"No I'm not."

"I think you are. I hope you are. You're so afraid of living, except when you're working; then you appear to be fearless...at least at getting the job done."

"Well I'm not fearless...ever. I'm very honestly afraid when I...afraid as anyone exposed to danger." She was still searching for her robe with no luck...lack of concentration.

She hesitated a moment, inhaled deeply and then said, "Paul...as soon as I see how my father is I'm...I'll be going to Chile. I have to...have to go. There's still so much wrong there...so much that...and I've been asked to--"

"Oh don't do that to me, Mahta." His face assumed a look so pained she had to turn away.

"I have no argument with your work, you know that, but not now...please. We need us for a while. What is it?" he asked suddenly. "Look at me. Are you jumping at this work to punish me for wanting you to live here? You are, aren't you? I swear to God if you go away now I'll come after you, nipping at your heels like a...a starving hound."

There was a dark ferocity about him that startled her. She grabbed up the towel, fitting it around her and backing up. With a surprised stare he said, "God, don't be afraid of me, Mahta. Please come here. Would I hurt you? Why am I always worried about you? Yes I... All right, like you, I have a temper. Damn it. You already know I'm far from perfect but I'm not...I'm not dangerous, for God's sake. I will never ever hurt you. Stop looking at me like that. Come here...before this gets out of hand...please come here. I love you. *Jesus!*"

When she saw his face closing in defeat, she ran to him and

cried, "Oh it's me, isn't it? It's me. It's not you. It's me again. I keep thinking there's something so...so terrible just around the corner. Why...why do I do that?"

"It's all right...you're all right." He stroked her bare back as the towel slid to the floor. "See what I mean about how skittish you are? You don't have to run away from anything. My God, sometimes you're so brave. Still, I think...you know, I think you're more afraid of staying here than of anything you'd encounter out there."

"Because I cause things to...some of that's true," she said, grabbing up the fallen towel and clutching it around her. She stroked her agitated fingers over her face and through her wet hair. "I won't...not going right away. I don't think I could anyway...because you've... Oh where on earth is my...dammit."

Searching a moment he pulled her robe from the cover folds. "Here, put it on. You're getting cold."

He sat down and leaned forward in the chair, watching her as she slipped into her blue satin robe and went to get a fresh towel. She felt clumsy being watched so closely, and moved with awkwardness, strangely presciently cautious as she came to stand before him. He took the forgotten towel from her hands and had her kneel beside him while he rubbed her hair.

"What I meant about the fear was: you're so afraid of adversity, my sweet, that you hardly live outside your work. I know some of the tragic things that have happened to you but I think there's more." He tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. She wanted to turn away but the blue depths held her. Then she knew with absolute certainty that something dreadful was coming. "You say very little about your mother. She drank and she's dead. How did she die?"

Mahta stood up so rapidly she almost fell. Folding her arms she walked to the tall window, pulled aside the heavy check curtains and looked outside, hugging herself. Early evening dusk. Her heart was beating, beating as if about to launch itself, leaving her eviscerated body behind. Her throat was dry. How could he have asked that question? And what right had he to invade, intuit, lay bare so much?

"You've gone away from me...folded your arms and shut me out. Why is that?" He waited. "Aren't you going to answer?"

"I can't."

"No you *can*, but you won't. Only I think you'll have to...even before we have any dinner."

"May I have some Scotch?"

He folded his hands and leaned back, resolute, kicking the hassock away. "I don't think so. No. I'll get you a glass of water." He got up and went straight to one of the bathroom faucets, returning with a tumbler full of water.

"No...has to be Scotch." She was growing nervous, absently grabbing up a comb from the dresser and trying to get it through

her damp and tangled hair. She looked into the mirror. There was something wrong, the face dissociated, strangely demonic. Did she see only with those damaged eyes? There was a comb in her hand. She tossed it down and began to pace over the thick white carpet. "Please," she said with a soft persuasion.

"Sorry, I think we'll just stay here until you answer."

"You're so smug. You don't know. You don't know anything. You can't treat me like a child. You can't just take control of my life. You can't just--"

"I have to...my darling just this once, because you need rescue so badly. You certainly haven't got control...not now."

As she stood at the window, rigid, coiled like a wild thing that would strike, she thought, I'll do something unpredictable, something I'll regret. Then she felt his arms come around her, and for a moment gave in to the relief of being drawn back from the edge of that ever-present descending dark void.

"You're hurting bad, Mahta. You have to trust me. Let me in, let me help. Remember I'm the one who loves you...and you love me."

"Why do you love me? Why if I'm such a damned mess do you love me, for God's sake! Why? Why?"

"Shh, shh...calm down...calm down." He held her raging body tight against him. She felt his fingers massaging the back of her neck and shoulders. She began to feel dazed, hypnotized. "Take a deep breath and let it out slowly." He watched her breathe. "Do it again." Her heart was slowing. "Once more."

She breathed deeply with her forehead against his chest. "You didn't answer," she said with softened voice. "Why me?"

"That's just the way it goes. Can one be a *little* obsessed? Well...I am with you. You're a tremendous challenge. You're not such a mess...not beyond fixing." He put his hands on either side of her temples, restraining the turning away of her head, almost too tightly she thought. He looked directly into her eyes and said, "I love your body...I have it...I need it, but I want what's in here too. I love that. I want that."

"Maybe I can't give you what you want. Or maybe you think you're strong enough to just take whatever you imagine is there for you." The words were forced out of her even though she knew they were wrong, because she had savored his voice, because she had looked at him and felt herself caving in she wanted him so badly. Why couldn't she let go of this stubborn resistance, simply let herself fall and fall? Why did this have to be so difficult? Very soon he might know too much, more than anyone had ever known; he would have almost all of her, possess her mind. Then if she lost him most of her would be gone too. She heard her own voice fighting on. "I look so vulnerable to you that you think you--"

"No! Stop this second-guessing; it's all wrong, Mahta. In many ways you're stronger than I am. You need me but you can

resist me with sheer will. I can't ever resist you...don't even want to try. That will of yours is the same strength you use in trouble spots out in the world. It's so much a part of you I don't think you even realize how it enables you to carry on. Amazing, because alongside it is that...that excruciating sensitivity which makes you so..." His voice died away. His fingers slipped down over her shoulders, his hands a soothing mantle of warmth. She had to turn her head then, fascinated, startled, fearfully in need of something seen as treacherous. Her tingling cheek lay against his fingers, waiting.

"I loved you before I even knew your name. It was the first incredible instant I saw you, which I date from our meeting in Beirut, because that was the first time I really saw you. When you grabbed that baby in the street with bullets flying all around you, I said, 'That's who I'd like to be. I want to be like that.' And when you want to be like someone that much you just love them."

There was something giving way deep inside, something that had long been held taut, unflinching, necessarily immovable. She didn't want it to dissipate without knowing what was beyond; but it was free fall, this uncontrollable disintegration, like stepping into empty space with no possible way of knowing anything but panic. She sat on the hassock and put her head in her hands. He already knew far too much.

"Come on, baby, get it out."

"Then what will happen? Will it do any good?" Her voice was a whisper over nervous fingers.

"Don't even think about that...just do it."

From the moment she knew she was going to speak, she began to shake. She jumped up and paced for a while and then returned to the window. Evening lights. Below, bare tree tops, movement, people, but the thick glass shut out most of the sound. What was before her dissolved into shadows of the mind, and she felt herself more real standing in her mother's bedroom in the country house.

"When I was sixteen...a not very sweet sixteen," -- she turned and tossed a nervous smile at Paul, who merely returned her smile until she had to look away -- "my mother was having quite a serious depression after one of her periodic drinking binges. She thought she'd fallen in love with, of all people, the salesman at the liquor store...God, her confidant abetting her escape. I found her in the driveway, sitting in the man's car, and a little later...in the dimness of her room where she'd gone to rest, I...I gave her a stern lecture -- I being the parent of us two. She said she was growing old and wasn't pretty anymore. But she was. She was. Sometimes she was so beautiful. She was always sad and craved some little attention from...from whomever, apparently as long as it was someone new and different who found her the same. She just lay on her bed, quiet, not very

drunk, while I...lectured and demanded that she understand that her depression came from alcohol." Mahta turned around again to look at Paul. "I know what you're thinking."

"No you don't." He dragged the hassock back and put his feet on it. "I'm only thinking that I want you to tell me the rest of the story."

Mahta turned back to the window, pressing her hands for a moment over her ears as if she could shut out a loud frightening sound, the sound of her own terrible voice. Her hands fell to her sides. She swallowed and sighed.

"I told her she was acting foolish...dis...disgusting. Oh God, oh God, *oh*...huddled in the shadows she looked so small and helpless and...so sad. When I finished my smart little diatribe I...I closed her bedroom door hard, with impatience, and went off to my room. Mother then proceeded to drink nearly half a fifth of bourbon. She went out to her Mercury sedan, drove...drove down to the freeway and...at nearly seventy miles an hour aimed her car straight into...concrete...slammed...slammed her car straight into a concrete wall...overpass. I saw..."

Something was wrong with her ears, like explosions, and the last words she spoke were distant hollow sounds. She was hanging onto the window ledge and couldn't feel the floor under her feet, but when she let go Paul had his arms around her. He turned her around and held her against him and she said into his shirt. "So there's an evil voice in me that's always saying, 'I hate you for that, mother.' I want my mother. I want my mother. *I want my mother!*...I want to tell her...tell her it was my fault...ask her to...to...if only I'd understood...if only I'd hidden the keys. Oh God, oh God, it was all my fault."

"No, baby, it wasn't. It was *not* your fault." He ran his fingers up her back and firmly into her hair against her scalp.

"No don't tell me otherwise. Don't tell me that." She heard her choking voice and hated it, hated the tears rushing over her cheeks. "You don't know. Oh you can't know. I'm really a terrible person. I'm really a monstrous--"

"Stop, right there! You know that isn't true. You know it in your wonderful intelligent head, and you've got to know it in your grieving heart. My God, if you're a terrible person what are the rest of us? Baby, baby, I'm sorry, so sorry it happened, but you were sixteen...only sixteen. Your mother was a grownup."

Mahta lifted her head and looked through her tears into his assuaging eyes. "Grownup?...that was *me*." She rubbed her eyes.

"I've never told anyone this...only you and I know this. Oh I can't get it out...I want it out...out! I'll never get it out of my head. I've let friends think that she...she died some sort of slow alcohol-related death. Even my father doesn't know what I said to mother before she...before that." She felt stupidly, hopelessly culpable, worthless and ugly; exposed at last, before this imposed-upon man. Why couldn't she stop it, stop all of it?

He cradled her against him and led her to the bathroom, easing her down onto a large straight-backed chair. Her eyes felt swollen. The lights in the wall sconces had fogged misty haloes. She watched with dazed attention as he held a wash cloth under the warm water then knelt down and brought it to her face, wiping her streaming eyes and running nose. He rinsed the cloth and held it a moment over her eyes. The warmth was distracting. "Thank you." She tried but failed to smile. She could taste salt from the steady flow of tears he was wiping from her face. He grabbed a box of tissues, tossed it into the bedroom then picked her up and carried her to the bed.

"Oh look what a mess...what an awful mess I am," she wailed as the despised tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm regressing. I don't ever want to talk about this again."

"But we aren't quite finished with it," Paul said, "because you have to understand that it was not your fault. You could have hugged your mother and said, 'I love you' and gone off to your room and she would probably have done the same thing. I'm so sorry you've had to carry that alone all these years. You've held on to it and tried to run from it. That's torture. And you've kept it so deep inside you don't even realize that it colors everything you do. It's made you assume responsibility for the troubles of everyone who comes into your world. You can't do that. No one can. You can't spend your life trying to get the jump on disaster and nullify it either. You know that's impossible. As I told you in Honduras you just give life all you've got, all the positive, and don't think about it, don't dwell on negative forces...demeaning yourself isn't how you help. I understand what's happened to you, my poor embattled soul...why you're so caring and yet so hard on yourself."

"We should all be more responsible to each other," Mahta said, crumpling and twisting a tissue in her hands.

"Yes we should, to some degree, but that's different; that's a positive thing. I know that's part of who you are, but the other affect is making you sick. Ah, my nervous wary little animal, you won't do anyone any good that way...least of all yourself. Do you see?"

"Oh, I see. I always see but I don't know if I can... What I do see now is...is more of you. I like you very much."

"Well what a surprise, loved and liked all in the same day...and the news received almost by accident. God, what if I'd only imagined I saw you standing there today?...but I was heading for your floating house anyway."

He rubbed her wet cheeks again with his thumbs, kissed her a slow kiss on her slightly parted mouth, and said, "You're almost dinner enough, but as soon as you're calmer let's go have a try at one of Rosa's nice suppers. It's a little early, I know, but I asked her to get started. I have a reason."

"All right. I'll just...let me gather my robe around me,"

she said with a heavy sigh. She felt so very fragile, volatile, unpredictable, and wanted to be hard, steady and invulnerable again, but that would be a lie; she never had been. She was wrung out and amazed that Paul could have done this to her, gotten so deep into her psyche with such a quick thrust of insightfulness. He was watching her intently. She tried to say something light and superficial. "Hmm, it's a pretty robe, isn't it? New. I'm afraid it'll have to do."

"It's nice but I don't give a damn about fashion here, my sweet. You could be wearing one of my old sweatshirts. All I know is that I want you sitting at my table."

#

In the dining room Paul introduced Mahta to his shy and taciturn Italian housekeeper, Rosa. Mahta thought her surprisingly slender. Weren't all respectable Italian cooks supposed to be plump with expertise? Rosa vanished as they seated themselves at one end of the shining ebony table. Mahta's eyes roved over an enormous colored photograph with an elaborate gold-frame, very painterly, of a Venetian carnival scene. The table held pieces of white porcelain china edged with thin black and gold lines and resting on white linen place mats. She set about unfolding her large damask napkin and spreading it over her lap, with a sigh. Paul reached under the table, lifted her left hand and placed it on his knee. With an encouraging wink he laid his hand over hers. Some of the heaviness slid away. In one deep breath she found that she had inhaled a rich floral aroma. Further along at the center of the table was a clear glass bowl filled with white lilies, very fragrant.

"I happen to love the scent of lilies...some people don't."

"I do. It's wonderful," Paul agreed.

In a moment Rosa reappeared with a food-laden tray. Aromatic steam rose from an herbed mussel and pasta dish, and beside it rested a bowl of tossed arugula, Belgian endive, and watercress, fresh and crisp in herbed olive oil and vinegar.

"It smells good enough to eat," Mahta teased.

"It always does," Paul said, lifting the serving tongs. "and tastes good enough to go on eating. My mother thinks that Rosa's the greatest cook this side of Tuscany."

When they were nearly finished Rosa returned with a woven silver basket of sparkling red globe grapes.

"This supper is just delicious...perfect, Rosa," Mahta said, with more enthusiasm than her appetite allowed.

"*Squisito*, Rosa," Paul praised with a wink.

"*Grazie*," Rosa replied, giving a shy nod.

Mahta studied Rosa as she came and went on noiseless feet. Her white hair was done in a loose knot at the nape of her neck; she wore a soft gray crepe dress with a white lace collar and a starched white apron. Her eyes were dark and alert, and Mahta

sensed at once that she saw everything.

"Rosa, please tell me about this man," Mahta teased when the fastidious Rosa entered to remove their empty plates.

Rosa studied her a moment with blushing cheeks, and Mahta thought perhaps she hadn't understood, then Rosa said in a thick accent: "You...lucky woman." She picked up the plates and silver with care, stacking them on the tray with deliberate cushioning fingers and hardly a clink of sound, and returned to the kitchen on noiseless feet.

"Well we know who pays her salary," Mahta said with a laugh, adding, "I like her."

"She's embarrassed," Paul said. "Her English isn't very good. I met her when I was photographing her persecuted family who were fleeing Bulgaria. Her brother was head of the family. She cooked me a delicious meal out of nothing, and I asked her if she would come and work for me. She heartily agreed, but of course she thought I was just making conversation. It took a while to get her out of there but I finally did. I send her back to Italy from time to time to visit her relocated family."

"She must be about at the foot-kissing stage. What a wonderful thing you've done."

"She's a wonderful housekeeper and cook and friend. She was overfeeding me and I had to tone her down a bit."

They toasted each other, clanking goblets of swirling crystal filled with effervescent water. "We're not drinking anything tonight," Paul said, "I'm after clear heads."

"Why the need for all this clarity?" Mahta asked.

"You'll see," Paul said with an enigmatic smile. He popped a large juicy grape into her mouth and ran his thumb slowly over her lips.

She crunched down on the cool sweet pulp and felt the seeds crack, then worked them around with her tongue until she could release them into her hand. "All right have your mystery," she said, staring up at the unusual chandelier.

It twisted and turned with silhouette-like black tendrils shading into clear elongated bells fluted with pale yellow, these edged with the thinnest thread of carmine. "Isn't that Venetian? It bears a strong resemblance to Venetian glass...or at least a Venetian carnival."

"Yes...had it done on Murano. I was doing a study of the glass blowers. Sassy little anomaly, isn't it?"

"To put it mildly, but it kind of grows on you...the way Venice certainly does. Venice, especially in the off-seasons, is a very special place to me."

"I like it too. We'll go there," Paul said in a voice so matter-of-fact it disturbed her.

"We'll go there?" A little nervous tremor started up in her head. "When, tomorrow?" she asked with flippant voice and a look of complete disbelief.

"No in the spring. That's a good time for Venice. After you've gotten a little more used to New York life."

"That's very presumptuous, Paul."

"Why? You can keep your houseboat. We'll divide our free time between there and here. I like Seattle. But this is a better home base for you...better to work out of. If you go anyplace dangerous -- ah, as usual -- maybe I'll come along."

"I'm getting angry," she blurted out, feeling a swift rush of heated blood.

"Please don't. Some people find me useful, Mahta."

"You're not going wherever I go, Paul, and, dammit, I'm not living here."

"All right maybe you'll die alone...working somewhere. Well, we have to die alone anyway. Or maybe some day you'll favor me with an invitation and we'll work together, but you are living here; oh, I know you are, my darling...not just because I want it as I do but because you'll want to. Furthermore, you may not look it but you're a heavyweight now. You must know that. This is the place for you to be. You don't know how glad I am that you came today. You're so very, very stubborn, even worse than I am...but I'll succeed in this. I did wonder how difficult it would be to get you here. I called Mahlner's show and tried to find out the name of your hotel. Then you just leapt into my net. I didn't even have to throw out my line." Paul rubbed his eyes and laughed with delight at his double-edged metaphor.

Mahta pushed back her chair and stood up. "You know what I feel like doing right now? I feel like calling a taxi and getting the hell out of here."

"Why? Are you afraid again?"

"Yes, I am. You sound obsessive and controlling. I won't have that. I have no intention of--"

"Mahta, sit down a minute," Paul said without rising. "I thought we'd gotten beyond this but we haven't I see. I guess I'm just forcing you to make some decisions...and teasing you a little, yes. Oh Christ, life is so short. I think I'm in a hurry because of that. Please don't confuse me with someone who tried to control your life. I have no interest in doing that. Can't you trust me a little?"

She started up in anger, "How can I if you keep--"

He held up his hand, cutting her off. "Why do you have to be so confrontational? I'm not the enemy. Are you ever going to calm down, Mahta? Didn't you once tell me that love was a bit of a commitment...or did I just imagine that you're the kind of person who believes that?"

"And what are you committing, Paul?"

"Everything. Myself. All my support. All my help. All my love. Everything." He spread his arms around him. "As to the material, which you obviously don't much care about, you can avail yourself or not, as you wish...and there's probably a

little more than you realize."

She moved close to him, staring hard into his eyes, nearly certain she was hearing easy mendacity, facile promises. Wasn't he the same careless deceiver who had once told her he would return the next Saturday morning and drive her to the beach? -- he was whistling as he went out the door, never to be seen again; he, now affecting extravagant pledges, soulful commitments. But what in the world had he to gain by deceit, and why had she given herself to him if not by an instinct of change, of virtue made of experience? She blinked, nearly collapsing with sudden truth.

He slid out his chair and pulled her down onto his lap. "My God, you really don't trust me, do you?" She saw the hurt in his eyes and knew it as a punitive misery of her own making, done to herself and worsening with his leveling query: "How can so much love and this sad doubt exist together?"

Her hand rose to soothe as if she had struck him. "It must be an old habit, doubt...clouding my perception where you're concerned. How could I have thought it would be easy to know you? You're stereotypical of nothing. Now you've decided to--"

"It's love...not a decision, finally the real thing. Don't you get it? I've got it bad. I think you're called *La Grande Passion*. Kiss me...kiss me until you feel calm and happy."

"That's not what happens when I kiss you...at least the calm part. I don't think you quite realize what's happened to me."

He laughed and kissed her and seemed to know everything. "Well how do you feel now, loved one? Are you better?"

"I'm...pretty nervous. You're right about that."

He stood up, still holding her against him. "Then let's go back to our bed and prop ourselves up there...talk a little more. I don't quite know what's bothering you now...and I'm not sure you do either. We'll find out together."

"I'm trying to hang onto reason and you're so heavily into emotion that... Do you think that's the right place to go?"

"Yes, because I can get close to you and read you better. Come on." He walked ahead with his hand reaching back. The inadvertent motion of her hand so easily grasped the flexed fingers it surprised her.

"Do you know what I think?" he said with a very careful voice, as they kicked off their footwear and settled down among the bed pillows. The cautious intonation had signaled delicate territory. She waited with a quiet uneasy expectation. "I think maybe you should write about your mother...write about your relationship with her. It would help--"

"Oh please. I'm trying not to think of it. Don't do this." She felt a sinking feeling of dread.

"All right I'll get off it, but let me just say this: The guilt is still there. Writing would be hard but very effective therapy...if nothing else. Don't shove it back down where it can slowly eat you up. There might be a number of good...some quite

positive things you can remember about your relationship."

"Of course there are...funny things...silly little innocent things...tender things...painful, painful. No, I couldn't--"

"But part of your misery is that you think your mother died without ever having lived. You could make her live, give her meaning...or finally recognize it. She did something wonderful: she gave birth to you. For that she has my everlasting thanks." He kissed her forehead. "Will you just think about it?"

"Yes...yes...all right." She thought she was agreeing because she loved the last things he had said and didn't want to displease but only to be rid of the idea. But in the next moment she wondered if she could ever do anything like that. Even the thought was painful. And beyond that it seemed a questionable self-indulgence...far from a remedy.

"I didn't mean to cause that."

His fingers touched her cheeks, and she tested her face with her own disbelieving hand.

"Tears?" She rubbed her eyes. "Now I do it without even realizing...a very bad habit."

"Not if it helps. Come on, let's get back to why we're doing this...that other something bothering you."

Mahta snatched up a large pillow, hugged it and leaned her chin on top. "I think it's a lot of things and some of them are me. I have to be what I am...do what I do. I can't change that...won't ever change that."

"I don't want you to. I know I have to share you with the world. Just don't go away from me right now. Tell me, Mahta, do you want the same...to be with me a little?"

"I want to be with you very much." The surprising ease of her answer brought her both relief and concern.

"Then what is it?"

"Love...it's a...a huge centrifuge into which all things are tossed...everything. It spins round and round until all the good parts fly off. Nothing lasts."

"It lasts but it changes. With us it'll get better. We've had lots of practice. Yes you're afraid, Mahta, and you have valid reasons but you have to keep taking chances. I'm very good at that. And I have a strong sense of self-preservation, my sweet; don't think you're going to kill me off by loving me. It's just the reverse -- I have to watch you a little to keep you from doing yourself in. God, I've fallen in love with Malraux's advocate of action, haven't I? That's who you are -- the idealist goes into the world."

"And predictably fails to move mountains...if true."

"Uh-uh, Mahta. Throws them at us, one rock at a time. But we've strayed again. There's something else bothering you. What?" His hands held her shoulders, the charged sapphire eyes eliciting a forthright response.

She looked around the room. The lamps and dresser, the

nightstands and shelves were all shiny, dusted, immaculate, the toilet articles neatly arranged atop the highboy. And there was the same kind of steady order in the way he proceeded. Neither her life nor her home had ever been that shipshape. Of course, Paul had a housekeeper...but as to women...

"Maybe this other thing is...I guess...my mind insists upon returning to this attitude I have about you."

"What attitude?"

"It's...hmm...for instance, remember at the consulate party in Honduras when you asked me to call you at your hotel and then I went back to find Ursula and go home?" He nodded. "Well as I was searching for Ursula I overheard a conversation. I didn't mean to...but...I'm afraid I listened because it was about you."

"And?" he said, picking up her hand, kissing cropped fingers that she again wished were more like Eugenia's.

"If you make love to this gnawed little paw I'll succumb." He dropped her hand, laying his fingers over it.

"As I was saying, a man and woman were talking. The woman remarked that you had recently broken up with someone named Christine...who was really quite...disturbed over it and--"

"Huh, that's gossip for you...getting it all wrong again." Paul gave a dismissive laugh. "Why didn't you ask me about it when I came to see you at Ursula's house?"

"I didn't think it was any of my business, and I didn't think...I wasn't planning on this."

"I was."

"When you already had someone?"

"No. I didn't. We came apart when I returned from Beirut, and I thought it was by mutual agreement. Our relationship was just sort of...of floundering...probably some of it due to my never being there and feeling no deep commitment...but it wasn't all one-sided. Wait a minute, are you trying to take the blame for something again?"

"I don't want to be the cause of anyone's misery."

Paul laughed and put his arms around her. "Does that include *my* misery? It's true that when I returned from Beirut I was pretty smitten. I looked into some of your work and bells went off. My shutter caught a lot more than that amazing act. It caught a small feisty creature ten feet tall with nerve and skill...but so much anger -- I soon had an idea where some of it was coming from. Brehnt's sad woman, hurting. I wanted to mend you so badly my head was spinning. Was that hubris, the idea that I could mend you?"

"Obviously you still think so. Maybe it's happening as we speak." A smile came to her, floating above reawakened memories still too near at hand. She slogged forward.

"Somehow that brings me to the rest of the gossip."

"There's more?"

"The man said you were a generous...a...what did he

say?...companion, I think...a generous companion, but that you went through so many women because your initial enthusiasm turned into disappointment...that you found them all sadly lacking something or other...that you--"

"Who the hell was this busybody, anyway? What did he look like?"

"Never mind that. I never reveal my sources." She folded her arms, her mind working with clinical precision.

"Please don't fold your arms that way. It means you're shutting me out. And yes, Mahta, I found them sadly lacking because--"

"I don't want to get involved with someone who...who's going to find me sadly lacking a month, a year from now. I already know I'm sadly lacking plenty, Paul."

"Before the night is over I think you may regret this conversation, spirit. But anyway I've never felt like this or...or *been* like this with any of those women. You're the only one I've ever invited to live here with me. The others are so far from being like you it isn't worth discussing. Mostly models and pretty women...there are so many of them. It gets a little tiring watching them love themselves, or knowing they love you mostly because you can do things for them. So very many of them...only one of you. It's you I want. I really thought you didn't exist."

He repositioned himself and sat cross-legged before her, lifting a strand of hair from her eyes; she remembered how he had done the same thing on the street in Beirut when she was holding Lemur, remembered her anger at him. But in the night rain of Honduras she had felt a thrill at his restrained touching of her hair. At what moment had her feelings changed? Perhaps they had been evolving ever since she received his note and the incredible photographs of her with Lemur.

"Let me tell you some things, Mahta. Eventually my mother will get around to telling you all about her little *Paolo*, that I was a kid who liked projects, liked repairing things. Yes, in the summertime I could hardly wait to get to our country house where I had so many projects. When I wasn't reading stacks of books I was fixing broken radios, lawnmowers, toys, bicycles, clocks...broken everything...until my mother complained of never being able to throw anything away. I even tried to patch together the broken relationships of my little friends...and I certainly tried to mend all kinds of damaged animals."

"And right under your nose is this flawed bit of work. What a...a handy little project. I think I understand."

"Oh no you don't, not quite yet. Of course you know we're all flawed; that's what makes us so fascinating: how we deal with it, what we do with our lives. My flaws grew with my ego and got me into a lot of nasty scrapes. Still, even as a young kid I liked collecting the flawed things...the most challenging things.

The ones that seemed perfect never interested me much -- there's nothing perfect but what looks that way is sterile. All of our provocative complicated flaws...God, I think I love you so much because of what you've done with yours."

She slid forward and put her arms around his waist, dropping her head over his crossed legs, luxuriating in the sound of his words, the sensation of his hypnotic fingers stroking her hair. Her head was turned on its side against his thigh, her eyes open. *The constant need to apply mental acumen, to analyze, criticize, speculate, deliberate -- let it go. Let it all slide away into this warm pool of feeling.* She was a tranquil animal having its fur stroked.

"Because I know...I know how devoted you are to those you love, I knew that the moment you admitted your love for me you were mine...not as a possession but as the mate I wanted. Even in Honduras -- the way you hung onto me that night after our love-making -- I knew what you didn't know yet, that you would always come to me if I learned to wait...the way you came and stood outside my building. I knew that was love...but I'll never take it for granted. I respect you, Mahta. I want to watch you do the important things you do...to be responsible to you always. That's what I want. And you have me: a lover, a companion, a fixer...worn and torn with usefulness. I'm here for you."

She sat up and rubbed the heel of her hand over her eyes. "But how can I ever do so much for you? What can I possibly give you in return, Paul?"

"Just be who you are...love me. That's everything."

She stared at his face; at the long cheek bones with expressive musculature which flexed or tightened when he smiled or laughed or clenched his teeth in the quick heat of emotion -- how was it that she, Mahta Lind, could cause such fluid changes in another's visage, could here and now decode their faintest degrees? -- then to the gently pitching sable mustache, enhancing without touching the upper lip's curving message, repeated in the sensually fleshed lower lip, below that a point of beard defining bare tan skin, spreading its black silk bristle close against a very forthright jaw. Only to look was to feel the startling new consequence of that mouth on any part of her. There were tiny splayed threads at the outside corners of his eyes that she had not noticed, because she rarely got beyond the dimension of blue which poured from beneath arched dark brows and flowed over her like a thrilling evening sky, her skin then ruddying in warmth. Mounted in the blue centers of iris were those photopic jet pupils with diamond points of light that saw into her, saw a great deal and so quickly. Finally she forced herself to take in the narrow depression of his left cheek where a small caper-sized cream scar advertised the abrupt edge of mortality. There, a childhood playmate stabbing at the blue eye missed, but in this wild act carelessly marked lifelong hazard. With the tip of her

ring finger she gave that cicatrice a very light touch.

"I'm afraid, Paul...like a stone in my chest, *fear*. Not for me...but you. How will I ever keep you safe?"

"You can't." He touched her palm to his mouth then pressed it hard against his thigh. "You have to stop it, *stop it* and just live. I know you hurt, but you have to let it go and fly above that. I'll try to stay alive for us. I'll try to help you but *you* have to do it...climb out of that fear and live."

She looked down at her hands, at the ragged cuticles, and thought, when that happens possibly I'll stop biting my ravaged fingers...but I never will. Then she looked up again at Paul, and the irony of their mutual history brought a smile.

"We're really very good together, you know? That continues to surprise me. Why...why have we fought so?"

"Oh but we haven't fought so, my darling. What most of this day and evening -- and for that matter much of our short relationship -- has been about is you fighting with yourself, trying to make yourself whole by being open and vulnerable, yet trying to keep from being those very things, and trying to hide who you mistakenly thought you might be -- that misplaced guilt. You're so afraid of loss -- you've lost so much. God, you've been strong, holding yourself together. So you've fought and you've fought and I've only been the referee. I declare you the winner," he said, offering a broad teasing smile and chucking her under the chin with a loose fist.

She lay back looking at him with fascination, quite surprised once again at his consummate understanding of her long chronology of fitful struggles and miseries.

He opened her robe and ran a savoring hand down the length of her body. "This small nervous sex-crazed body that can turn me into a red hot coal. Look at those cunning little legs; one could hardly imagine the power of them, how hard they've worked; they are very slightly bowed...all the more touching...and your hands." He picked up her hand. "Those savaged fingers that have done so much...so much that's worthwhile...and what they've done to me. *Christ*."

His calculating eyes were now working at her body, as if photographing a fleeting subject soon to be lost without the optimum shot.

"Mathilda...Mathilda. I hardly ever say that big name. It's large and you're not. When I pick you up you're so light it scares me...mostly spirit. How tall, sprite? Mmm...I think you're about...didn't your license say five feet?"

"And half an inch. But my feet touch the ground...not much of an inconvenience...just...the right size for me."

"You are just the right size...for you *and* for me."

Crimsoning with unwanted scrutiny, she tried to deflect attention from herself. "Jane called us *disproportionate but fascinating*. You see, we're not esthetic, unsuitable."

"Wrong. Photographed, we would represent Eros, Mahta."
Again she deflected his words. "How tall are you?"

"Six four...and a half." He emphasized the fraction with a teasing wink and continued his topographic study.

"This blushing face is a nice oval, and if I lean close I see tiny spattered freckles across the bridge of this fearless nose. And when you smile at me," he smiled himself, "there's that charming...God, that maddening little space in your front teeth. Every time I see it I want to come in you."

She sat up and tied her robe together. "You know so well what you're doing, don't you?...just what you're doing to me."

"I'm telling you how I love you, why I love you. You know, if people are very lucky they find once in their lives what they and they alone consider the perfect love. My poor long-suffering wife was the best love I ever had until you...and for you I know it was Brehnt." He would avoid nothing but at least he moved on. "And your eyes, I forgot to mention your eyes, your fiery amber eyes. How much is in them...always leaping ahead, wanting to help others, and I want you to...as if anything could stop you. It's part of what I love about you...and I want--"

Her eager mouth smothered all the rest. His response was to haul her against him while her fingers pleased themselves in mussing thick waves of hair, traveling on, sliding over the guileless mouth, exploring his cropped beard. "This fiendish black beard...very sophisticated...a little scary, satanic. What made you decide to do that?"

He grinned and kissed the tips of her fingers. "First it was traveling. In remote places it was easier to give up vain thoughts of ladykill. It got streamlined into habit. I'd hardly recognize myself without it now. You don't mind?"

"Would you shave it for me?"

"Maybe." There was some surprise but serious consideration.

"Well I don't want you to."

He fingered back his mussed hair. "Testing the water?"

"In an interesting little powerboat." She watched his lips form a chiding half smile half smirk of amusement.

"I probably shouldn't tell you then that you could make me do a whole lot more than that."

"Why is that?"

"Oh come now, stop fishing from your little powerboat. You know why it is. That's all we talk about...really...all I think about lately. It's almost pitiful."

"Tell me that you love me," she teased and watched his eyes crinkle with laughter.

"Easy...so easy. God how I do love you."

He grabbed her and rolled across the bed, his large careful frame leaning over her as he looked into her eyes.

She was laughing but grew silent, turning her mouth against his wrist. "I just remembered something...something Jane told me

not long ago."

"What?"

"That you were...maybe a little in love with me then...on the day you suddenly appeared before two stupefied women drinking tequila in my houseboat."

"And you answered...?"

"I was afraid to answer...didn't want to... Why do lovers always revel in this kind of information? *Did you love me then? When did you begin to love me?* I won't be as hopeless as all the rest...will I? Am I? I told her she was wrong."

"Now you know you were wrong. I've said exactly when I began to love you. That day I showed up at your place I was in love, and worried...saw a helluva lot of misery...self-abuse and the shocks...the stress of all that anger."

He lay back and closed his eyes, stroking her arm with his fingertips. His face was serene, vulnerable. She watched a curious smile forming, then leaned close and whispered, "Your thoughts...?"

"Of Lake Wenatchee. After I left you in Seattle and came home, I discovered that when you pounded on my arm you left a few bruises. Every time I saw them I wanted you. What? No, baby, give that look away. I'm not into S-M. I wanted to make you at peace with me, to make you incapable of doing that."

"I'll never be incapable, unfortunately...but I can be ashamed and I am." She stroked his arm. "I hurt you."

He sat up. "Not my arm, my ego a little. No, I doubt you could hurt me physically...unless I let you. I'd have to be asleep to get decked by you. But I do understand quite a lot about you, Mahta, about the...your anger...your frustration. The things that have happened to you -- maybe I too -- have made you very untrusting. You'll be all right. You have been somewhat difficult to win...but, my little cyclone, you're worth a helluva lot more effort...for such a valuable package."

"Valuable?" she asked with light derision aimed at herself. "You're that...I'm just learning *how* valuable. Is there nothing very bad about you, Paul...or am I completely blinded by all of this...emotion?" The question dropped like a ponderous weight, with a ringing sarcasm unintended.

He punched at a pillow then crossed his legs and eyed her quietly a moment. "Well, huh...that's actually encouraging. Not so very long ago you whacked up my self-esteem pretty handily. So, yes, you know there've been some bad things. I know you think I'm not enough of a humanitarian, but in my way I try to... And," he sighed, "the other thing, the one that must be troubling you...I wasn't -- Christ, this isn't much fun at all. I've told you I was not a faithful husband. It's certainly no excuse, but sex was far too handy...always at my fingertips. I've been constant in my relationships for a while now. I like it that way. And there haven't been as many of *those* as circling rumors

suggest -- if you show up with a friend at some gathering, people always assume you're hot in the middle of something."

She looked at him in silence, not certain of how much her eyes revealed, thinking that the reality of what their future held was completely inaccessible by any means at all, that there was always only trust for both of them.

"It isn't going to happen, Mahta -- been there, done that. It is *not* going to be that way. Don't even think it. I can't lose you. You're way too exciting for me...all I need...much more than I deserve."

"Am I? It's possible I'm not such a plum."

"Mahta...you...God. How can I make you love yourself? Do you understand what I mean...that kind of love? It isn't vain...just necessary. Love your incredible existence."

"I have a reverence for life, Paul...even my own...and yours, oh yes. If you didn't exist I'd never invent you."

"Jesus, you're hilarious."

"Good...that's good. So much heaviness...too much. Now this...this...you. I'll have to think of a few spectacular ways to...to show you what you've done, Paul."

"I'll help you with that...and keep you at it. We'll start with you waking up here in this bed every morning."

His eyes were sparkling with her revelation. Now that his more salient shortcomings had been offered up and overcome, he was relaxed. Yet, she wanted to ask something private, invasive. The needling thought pricked at her and caused a little fear to start up.

"Why that serious look, Mahta? Now what?"

"I wanted to ask...to say something...and...I think it's probably none of my business."

"I'll decide. Tell me...ask me."

"Your wife...former wife...the way you speak of her. I know that you...do you...see her very often? Of course you see her about the children, but do you...would you consider your relationship...oh I'm no good at this."

"Okay let's talk about a few of the people we love. Maybe we should now if it's bothering you."

"I didn't want to let her go, Kate...Katherine, my fortunate children's mother. I loved her very much, still do, and it was hard. She had every right to do what she did but she's been very fair. Lovely Kate...she's quite a good artist. I used to have one of her paintings hanging over the living room secretary but I...I finally took it down."

"Oh. And you hung...a photograph."

"Yes. You couldn't fail to notice, could you? A fiery-eyed vision in a rose dress...a little whirlwind humming in my ears. After I hung it, it seemed to me it had always been there...you had always been there."

Her head was bent and her eyes closed. He lifted her face

and she felt his mouth press against each of her closed lids. Unsettled, regretting her clash of moods, she waited.

"Kate's happily married -- that was hard for me too, but her husband Phil and I are cordial. I think Kate and I are friends now. Yes, we see each other from time to time, and of course it's mostly about the children." He paused in thought, then said, "We don't conveniently jump each other whenever we're alone, if that's what you mean." He studied her unmasked face. "Well I'll be damned, it is, isn't it? You're jealous. Sorry, I think I'll just enjoy that for a minute."

"Is that what it is? I don't like the feeling at all."

He laughed, rubbing her hand between his hands. She saw that, even with her hand lost in the largeness of his, she could still feel her own strength. But it was different.

His laughter was abruptly gone. She found his concerned eyes watching her with intense concentration, a heavy pondering she could feel in her wrists. He stroked his beard in silence, moving those lithe fingers over an obviously reticent mouth. Finally she heard his careful voice.

"Now let's talk about...Rafael."

Hearing Paul say Rafael's name startled her. She had been feeling some troubling concern over Katherine, and wishing she weren't so sensitive, but when she heard Rafael's name she was shocked. She flew up, slid off the bed and stood with her arms folded in defense.

"Wait a minute. Come back here, Mahta. Some of this was your idea and I think it's good that we're doing this. Come here please, sweet." He stretched out his arms to her. She returned, sitting on the edge of the bed with only a furtive glance in his direction. She was unable to turn around and look at him. Rafael was hers, inviolable. How could Paul ever know this? What would it mean to him if he could know? He locked his arms across her chest and pulled her against him, his mouth nuzzling her hair near her ear. The ensuing battle of her emotions made her tremble.

"You'll understand that it's painful for me to say this, but I know that Rafael is deep into you...has been for a long time." She started to wriggle free from his arms but he held her and said, "Wait please. The way you're acting is so defensive. It's exactly why I wouldn't tamper with that...friendship; if I did it could be damaging to you. I wouldn't want to destroy any of the happiness you've managed to have because I...love you too much. I hope that you can understand why I've--"

She turned around at once, glanced into his eyes and then hid her face in his shirt, almost like a confused guilty child. "Paul...I don't want to hurt you...don't believe I ever will."

"Don't promise the store," he said, laughing a little. "I know that sooner or later our paths will cross, Rafael's and mine, and I'll have to deal with it."

"You don't understand. He'd like nothing better than to see me have..." She cut short a persuasion she had meant to be reassuring, realizing its opposite effect and feeling very insensitive, even cruel.

"Ah, then I have his approval," he said, the affront held to a light sarcasm in his voice.

"Don't...please don't. I didn't mean it that way. Oh that was stupid. I can't stand this. Don't make me think of this. I won't deny anything. I love Rafael. He has his life and...I'm here with you...so amazingly here with you. Damn it...I thought of you in Manila and I..." She felt demoralized, frustrated, reduced to a wretchedly exposed condition, and then the moist eyes again, the final humiliation.

"Yes, this is what I meant," Paul said with a sigh. "I have no intention of tampering with that or torturing you any further. You have a...a valued friendship -- I don't want to say enviable, but it is. It's yours. It was in your life long before me and it's yours. God, it's so hard for me to think about -- fallible human that I am -- but I'm glad we've talked. Here, blow your nose, darling." He handed her a tissue and waited for her to look at him.

"So now, have I satisfied your questions, your concerns, at least a little? When you have something that's bothering you please tell me. Don't hold it inside. We can always talk. We'll figure it out."

"Oh isn't this nice...isn't this really nice and--"

"No, it isn't *nice*, Mahta. If you think I'm giving this a casual fillip you're wrong. I don't want to focus on it, no, but I also don't want it to fester hidden away and then explode on us. There's us now. *Us*. That's what I'm thinking about, and you must be, too, because you brought it up. Now you know how I feel...about Kate and about Rafael. And I think I know how you feel. Can you live with that?"

"Yes." An open-ended condition, like life, yet equitable.

"Then I can live with the conclusions I've drawn from everything you've told me and...everything I've observed, Mahta."

She lifted his hand and held it against her cheek, wanting no more heaviness, craving a buoyant playfulness. Pushing him back against the pillows she moved her mouth by sensual degrees over his cheek. "Kiss me."

"You irresistible little temptress." He kissed her with an ardent and warming slowness that made her curl against him.

"Jesus, I love to hold you...hold you still, you wild little thing. You fit so nicely in my arms...except when standing up."

"Tell me this: if you thought I would always come to you if you only waited, why were you flying out to see me?"

"Ah, well I...when you're starving for dinner already in the oven you turn up the heat a little, don't you?"

"Interesting...so interesting, the way you always have an

answer for everything...and even a handy metaphor."

Triumphantly savoring his sheepish grin, she said, "When I leave and am with my father what will you be doing?"

"Waiting for you. And at the end of next week I have to go somewhere with our students who've finished class. It's their final. We take a vote on where they want to go in the world to do a very comprehensive shoot."

"Where's it going to be?"

"Mexico City."

"Oh I like wonderful tragic polluted Mexico City. If only you could breathe the air there and feel good about it. The poor gasping multitudes. But how *much* it has to photograph. What do you do with all the photographs?"

"Good question. We assemble them into a book, sell it and use the money to buy camera equipment for kids who can't afford it and are interested -- or might become so -- in photography. Some of those very children have received scholarships from us and are now pretty good photographers."

"I like that. I wish you hadn't wasted so much film on me. I'm not that crazy about being photographed."

"I'm thinking of doing a picture book on you."

"Absolutely not."

"Mahta, I want to do a pictorial story of you...use some very good photographs I have, all the way back to Beirut, and also use a few a student of mine took of you in Guatemala. I want to present you the way you should be presented...before someone else does it poorly."

"You wouldn't invade my privacy like that," she said, and heard her rising angry voice resonating with shock. "I can't believe that you would do anything so crass."

"No. No, Mahta. It's something I need to do for both of us. Maybe you've noticed you're my favorite subject. I want to make you a part of what I do...a tribute from me."

The anger faded as his compelling earnestness overtook her. "Oh, Paul, I'm sorry. You're so good...really so sweet. But my darling I don't deserve any such thing...that sort of attention."

Paul stared at her for a long moment, still and silent. "My God, except when you forget yourself in the heat of love-making, that's the first time you've ever said anything very endearing to me. What did I...tell me how I can make it happen again."

The shame of thoughtlessness vexed her, along with a quick fear of emulating her mother, but reparation was easy. "Somehow I've come to adore you, my sweet...my loving man," she happily offered, unbuttoning his shirt then putting her hands inside and caressing his responsive body.

"Oh Jesus, what are you playing at now? Are you doing this to make me forget the photographs?"

Her persuasive mouth traveled over his bared chest, issuing velvet love words. "I'll have you...you big delicious urbane

hunk of man, even if you ruin all your classy cameras on me."

"Mahta? All right you've got me. *Jesus Christ*. Wait a minute...wait...need to...jettison some clothing."

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Paul sat up, holding his wrist near his face. She saw that he was still wearing his watch. Its gold band gleamed in the dimness of the room as he squinted at the time.

"I tried to leave you to catch a plane and now you're trying to leave *me*...to do what?" Her fingers slid over his shoulder. Her leg was entwined with his, the hairs of his flesh crushed against her smooth skin. She floated in a warm sea of content. "Don't go yet." She tugged at his shoulder but his firm resistance was surprising and powerful.

"Sweet, where I'm going you're going. Come on, get up. Put on your robe so I can see straight."

She made no attempt to move, running her fingers down his upper arm, nice firm muscle. "How do you stay in such good shape? Do you work out?"

"Try to jog a little...a few exercises. I get plenty of exercise on the road."

Some of his attention was elsewhere and she knew that he wanted to get up. Her fingers were enjoying the touching too much to quit. She pressed her lips against his collar bone.

"You have a scar on your shoulder."

"Uh-huh...you'll find an assortment of those if you look around." He was trying to stifle a yawn. "That was Angola."

"So you have them listed by countries?" Her voice was amused but her heart troubled.

"Pretty much." He chuckled a little. "Pretty much."

"What happened in Angola?"

"Got pinned down...stuff flying around...flak." He stretched and stared at his clothes flung over the chair.

"I was there too."

"I discovered that -- my research on Mathilda Lind. You get out of those places unscathed...smaller target."

"We burned up in that hellish heat trying to psych out check-points -- I came to equate them with death; often the most dangerous places. I've never in my life been aimed at with so many carelessly held AK-47s. Spent most of my time counting bodies. My God, the three major factions couldn't even recognize their own people." She was frowning with the brutal memory of bloody chaos, the stench and putrefaction of so many tumid bodies lying in the sun.

His restless vision focused on her. "It sickens me to think of you there, Mahta. It was one of the easiest places to get wasted I've ever been in. Life wasn't worth zip if you showed up at the wrong side's massacre."

"Terrorize a village, slaughter, plunder, disappear, ad

infinitum...insanity. If there were trigger-happy mistakes, so what?" she said with bitter woe. "The whole thing was a mistake. The thought of what happened to you isn't a thought I want." She closed her eyes. "I can't bear to see those kinds of scars on you...I just...to think how you've lectured me. It's much easier to imagine it happening to myself."

"Don't, Mahta," he said, shaking his head.

"See what's happening to us, Paul? This makes it harder."

"I don't do that anymore, not without someone providing a damn good reason. I've always chosen life, Mahta."

Now her interest was rising and she wanted to know more.

"Do you sometimes work for the government?" she asked, watching his drowsy profile come rather swiftly to life.

He turned aside and gave her a long stare. "Do I?" he asked. "Not in Angola."

"Yes...I think sometimes you do...only you obviously don't want to talk about it."

"I work for myself...used to have a sort of reputation for getting in and out of places. Sometimes people have asked me to do things...once in a while..." His voice drifted into a heavy silence.

She sat with her head bent, aware of her own heartbeat.

"Come here, you." He pulled her against him and kissed first her top and then her bottom lip, something he did with a very concentrated intensity. "Scars...I've just realized that yours is gone," he said, examining her mouth. "You're perfect again...Botticelli perfect."

Now she loved more his voice than its praise. How quickly he could awaken her desire. She laughed and said, "But you don't like perfection, remember? And you've changed the subject."

"Mahta, I love lying here with you, loving you," he offered with softened voice, and she knew he was being very tactful. "A while ago I couldn't help myself, but I didn't think that was going to happen just then because we have some other things to do. God...I never know what's going down when I'm around you. I think you're right about staying on this tempting bed."

"I seduced you. Oh it was so nice...a lovely, lovely pastime." She wrapped her arms around him.

"Sorry, you can't do it again right now because it's getting late. See me later." He pulled her hair, winked at her then reached for his clothes and began dressing. "And by the way, I am going to do the collected photographs of you."

"That isn't why I waylaid you," Mahta said with mock seriousness. "I don't know about the photographs, though."

"Please don't worry, sweet; it'll be very well done, and you can take any profit add more to it and give it to...let's say the mission in Beirut."

Her heart gave a surge of anguish. "That's something very painful for me...more than I ever realized. Did you know that

he's gone? I see that little face so often. Somehow he came to stand for all of them." She looked up, startled to find his eyes liquid bright with her sadness.

"I'm sorry," he said, putting his hand on the back of her neck and pulling her head back to kiss her. "I love you. I only want good things for you. You'll find out that everything I do for and with you is like that. You're going to have some happiness. It's time. I know you've thought of me as a self-centered son of a bitch. I want to prove to you that I'm not that bad anymore...that I--"

"I already know that," she said, resuming her thought. "Maybe he's happy now. Oh I hope so. Do you think?"

"Yes," he answered, holding her in front of him with crossed hands and nuzzling her until the sadness diminished.

Her fingers slid over the veins of his hands. "Such clever hands. I liked watching you eat my pancakes at Lake Wenatchee, the way you held the knife and fork and the way you made the fire." She turned around to see how he would accept her little obsession with his prehensile dexterity.

"Uh-huh, at least you've fixed on something. The rest of me is hopeful." His playful remark, accompanied by a scintillating grin, made her think back to his expression while driving her car. Was it possible that at that moment he had loved her?

"You have another winsome smile."

"If I'd had you that wild night -- how proud of my control I was --, I wonder how much would've changed," he mused.

He must be thinking of Rafael, she thought and then quickly dismissed it all from her mind.

"Can we go back to the lake...or...or my island, and do it the way I wanted...if I promise not to beat you up?"

"Yes," he said with laughing voice. "Yes...and the way I wanted it. Get up now."

"I'm so into this...this *emotion* I can't really... I want to *talk* to you...with you...I want--".

"Mahta, look at us...look at us. Let's just be this way now. We *have* been talking...*communicating*. I know how to talk plenty...discuss this struggling world. You'll see."

"Would you like to...maybe to come with me and meet my father before you go to Mexico?" she asked, and thought her shy voice ridiculous. The blue eyes turned to her, filled with surprise, delving into her own hopeful eyes. A sharp misery spiked into her heart as she imagined that he was trying to think of a polite way of refusing.

"I'll go with you...would love to go and meet your father. Thank you."

They came together, kissing with a heated eagerness. Finally she released him and took a deep breath, feeling herself slide into the difficult intricacies of candor. "It's...I didn't think I'd ever...ever do this again...all this high flying with

another person. I hardly know where I'm going to land."

"You're going to land right where you are...you've *already* landed." He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. The excitement had returned to his voice.

"On Christmas Eve I have a family gathering here -- always fun. There'll be my mother, Lydia, my children, Dan and Berit, and some close friends. I want you to meet them. They'll take one look at me and know you're it. They'll like you...and you may want to adopt my mother. She'll brag a little and also tell you all my faults. Before you, she was the only one who could get away with it. She tells it straight, just the way you do."

She smiled at this and was immediately kissed, before she could go on to protest with a nervous reluctance her anticipated appearance on Christmas Eve.

"See what I mean? I can't resist you whenever you smile. God I hope to make that smile appear and see it for a very long time." He picked up her hand, looking at the jaguar ring. "I know you don't care for marriage. For quite a while I haven't wanted it myself. Mahta...I want you to let me marry you because -- wait a minute, just let me finish -- because I want to show you that I really am committed...and give you a kind of security, freedom to--"

"Oh, Paul, I'm sorry...marriage is just too...it's too conventional for someone like me...really only necessary for a family." Her leaping heart was stunned.

"All right, but it wouldn't be so conventional because you aren't. All right, let it rest." His careful voice seemed to follow some imperceptible train of thought. "How do you feel now? Are you still afraid of all this...us?"

"I'm...I feel sort of dazed...not really so afraid but maybe a little...startled...out of focus?"

"Not you...not for long. It's all converging now, isn't it?...coming together...easy. Come on, slugger."

She teased her fingers through her hair and, feeling a surge of energy, sprang to the edge of the bed. He watched her with a slow appreciative smile, then reached out to tie her robe but instead pulled her against him for a deep kiss, which neither had expected. When it ended she only felt an intense need for more.

"Paul?" She slid her fingers over his shirt. "All this need...this neediness...I was going to live without it. Probably better, I thought...because of the way I... Now I--"

"No you didn't live *without* it. You lived without having your needs met." He frowned, his eyes holding hers. "Now you're afraid again...afraid of loss. That's because you still don't know what you mean to me. You don't know what I think and feel lying with your warm little body pulled against me...this explosive little engine held calm against me. I'm fairly certain I'm good for you. Lucky, isn't it? Because you're so good for me. You. *You alone.*"

He kept ahold of the hand he had removed from his shirt, and led her out of the bedroom and down the hall. One of his cameras was lying on the floor by a closed door. He picked it up and stood looking down at her in stillness, studying her face as she tilted her head back with a slow questioning gaze. His silent mouth held a faint smile, curious, different, suffused with a certain expectation. Then her eyes plunged into the appraising blue depths of iris and were confronted there by a mysterious joy, a thrilling anticipation of something well guarded. It made her heart leap up again, and lurch forward at a rapidly beating pace. He opened the door. She saw Rosa sitting in a chair, then Rosa stood up, nodding with a smile, and walked past her. She heard a child's squeal of laughter. A little dark-eyed boy came running toward her.

"This is my newest son," Paul said. "We call him Lemur because his mother likes it. It's because of her that he's here...that he's anywhere at all. Every night he listens to her stories. He knows her voice and has her photographs and now he has her. And when she goes...when she goes to Chile we'll be waiting here for her return."

She gave a low wordless cry and knelt down, opening her arms. Lemur was laughing; tender soft flesh, not dream, alive. His limpid eyes were full of mischievous delight. She held his sweet-scented flannelled warm body against her breast until he squirmed and cried, "Mama." She carried him to a rocker and sat rocking him, speaking in soft baby talk, only vaguely aware of Paul and his clicking camera. Her robe fell open and Lemur's hungry little fingers reached for her breast, putting the nipple into his mouth. She laughed and started to close her robe.

"No let him, my love. It's the easiest method of bonding in the world."

She lifted her head and stared at Paul, seeing him for the first time, just then aware of how long he had been waiting for that look of recognition. For a perfect moment he stared back at her, then the camera rose in his hands and her look was kept.

The End