



elsie russell

in  
over  
her  
head

a novel

*...like a black-and-white avant garde film exploring light and shadow  
as much as human nature.* - Publishers Weekly

IN OVER HER HEAD



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by Elsie Russell

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Robert Déscharnes



## A SLY MOVE

The man walked out of the hardware store on Canal with his bag of new tools: hammer, screwdriver, mini crowbar, roll of duct tape, and pair of latex gloves. Up around the corner on Grand he stopped at a rusty red doorway and snapped on the gloves before inserting a key. He stepped into the antique freight elevator and pressed B, tapping a nervous foot as the iron box clambered down. Beyond the elevator door's fluorescent strip the basement corridor meandered off into low wattage murk from the two grimy bulbs screwed into the ceiling's prewar metal cages.

A low beat thumped behind one of the corridor's red fire doors. He stopped briefly in front of this one and listened as he tore off a piece of tape with his teeth and wrapped it around the hammer's metal head. Still massaging the tape to the hammer, he crossed the hall to the door directly opposite and bent down to inspect the lock. This he carefully chiseled out with as little noise as possible. After dropping the dislodged mechanism into the bag on the floor, he probed around inside the hole. Stepping back to consider for a few seconds, crowbar firmly in hand, he lunged forward and attacked the empty circle with great ferocity, wrenching out long jagged curls of steel. After mopping his brow with a handkerchief he nudged the door open a crack with the tip of his foot. Clutching his bag of tools he spun around and made for the elevator.

## CANAL STREET

There was another customer in the store haggling with the kid when Penny walked in. She just wanted some CD's and other tech paraphernalia and this was the cheapest place around.

"I give you four hundred!" The guy held up four stubby fingers.

The kid at the counter laughed and scratched his head. He was probably younger than she was but ran the shop. The electronic bazaar's booths were individually run by three generations of a family, none of whom spoke English except for him.

"Nah, nah, it go for eight hun'erd in specialty shop, this classic, very rare! I canno' go for four, waddaya, cuhrazy? Fi' fifty, finahh price!"

The big bully chewed his gum and paced back and forth along the counter tapping the VCD case on the glass. On the cover was a faded photo of a naked guy in the throws of ecstasy with a fuzzy cut n' paste orgy background of more naked guys, all looking more or less like cover boy. Luckily just the top half of him showed, and the title, Gemini Blu, obstructed anything offensive at the bottom. Penny moved away from this sleaze ball and his homo art porn.

"Be careful wi'dat, mistah. Sorry, miss. These?"

He pulled down the package from the wall. "Dis latest one, just come in from Sony, very best ear bud, wi' megabass, ten to twenty thousand frequency response, see? One thirty fi'nine-nine, special!"

Flagging his meaty paw over Penny's head, the big oaf bellowed, "Four fifty, I give you four fifty!"

She moved aside to examine the slick little package. Both sides were covered with Japanese hieroglyphs, with the articulated ear buds nestled in the center of the blister pack. There was no English anywhere, but on the back, over a cute cartoon character modeling the things, were two diagram windows, one precise and clinical, with a cross section of the ear canal snugly filled with a bud, and another, precise and mechanical, showing the plugs and sockets for which they were designated.

In the street these days it seemed everyone had wires trailing out their ears, nodding to their own private frequency, or conversing with phantom friends. Penny had no friends, phantom or real but

frequency problems she had plenty of and needed those wires as a way of proofing through a piece and still hear the bass. All without exposing herself to any more damage.

"I'll take these, and a fifty stack of CDs and two five packs of mini discs, please, thanks."

"You pay me for the duh buds, him for the disc, remembah?" the Chinese kid grinned up at her white and clean, reaching in the case for more buds to hang.

The boy hollered over to the back of the store in Cantonese where an old man was bent over a bowl of noodles. The shrunken patriarch creaked up from his plastic milk crate to a full stoop and shuffled to the front, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his padded jacket.

In the glass case were crammed every make of disc, from five inch dinosaur floppies to CD's, to minidisks. The old man reached in and brought out two packs of minidisks in their icy plastic cases, five to a pack, then a tower of CD's, adding it all up longhand with his abacus.

Penny put the pile of bills and change on the glass counter in front of the kid for the buds, grinned thanks and slid over to the old man, who pushed the piece of paper towards her without looking up. Another couple of green paper rectangles, no tax around here, that helped a little.

The porno guy's polyester encased gut spread out on the counter like raw dough as he resumed his badgering, his eyes locked on the creamy young neck and bobbing Adam's apple. "Okay, how about five hundred? Take five hundred?"

The kid backed into the display wall screwing up his eyes at the liver lipped perv. Shakily, grandpa handed Penny the bag of immaculately packed CD's and disks.

"Okay! Fi' hundred, you can have it for fi' hundred! Good customah! Back o' store, follow him, ring you up."

Old man followed kid and "good customer" into the back where the TV's and the porn were stashed as Penny slipped happily out of the store with her packages.

Back out on Canal Street, fluorescent bike messengers wove in and out between the semis that thundered between the Holland tunnel and the Manhattan Bridge. Penny headed east towards the heart of authentic, not tourist, Chinatown, into an alternate reality teeming with ancient women picking through piles of roots and greens along the sidewalks of Grand and Market streets. Most had shopping carts but

some were balancing bamboo poles across their shoulders, the ends attached with bright balloons of grocery bags that bounced up and down festively with every step.

At the corner of East Broadway she picked up half a dozen fresh dumplings from the Dim Sum GoGo take-out window, and crossed the street to Chatham Square to eat them under the statue of Lin Ze Xu, the Qing Dynasty Bureaucrat sent to Canton to stop the spread of opium by imperialist forces. In the end he was only partly successful, because the other benches of the little square were occupied by passed out junkies, many of Cantonese origin, and one old timer sprinkling crumbs to a mob of greedy pigeons. She dipped her dumplings in the sauce and tried again to decipher the Japanese specs on the new ear buds, without the annoyance of a shouting weirdo. Futile, she decided. They were probably just a piece of fancy junk and another waste of money.

She threw her trash (including the nasty blister pack) into the can before heading back west up the quieter Grand street. At a sidewalk stand, the Wa pears in their pretty crepe paper cups were irresistible, so she bought a couple to munch on along the way.

On the corner stoop, his usual place year round, the homeless Asian guy in his turban of black garbage bags, who could have been thirty or three hundred, read the paper. As it got colder, he wrapped his feet, legs, and neck until only his glinting eyes peeked out from the bundles of black plastic. Penny never figured out if he was a local nut or some famous performance artist from the seventies doing a survival piece. He seemed too on the ball inside his polyethylene cocoon to be certified.

Finishing the juicy second pear, she crossed Mercer and walked up to the graffiti covered elevator door around the corner. The dull red doors were still covered with vintage Samo, a.k.a. Jean Michel Basquiat, who had also hidden in a downtown basement creating public nightmares, but with heroin and paint instead of electrical current. Twenty years had passed since then and the foreign photographers still stopped by to point and click, get just the right streak of sunlight on the decaying paper, the fading paint. The elevator arrived with a clunk. Penny fumbled with sticky fingers to stick her key in the elevator door.

## THE LABYRINTH

The elevator door opened and just as Penny was about to step in, her neighbor, the downtown performance sensation Ula Nova, slid in beside her. The box inched down with the two women inside.

Nova was a professional narcissist teetering gracefully on the edge. Tall, glacially telegenic and on the nether side of forty, she invariably made a point of giving Penny the cold shoulder whenever their paths crossed. This time she added a little twist to her mouth.

That obtuse shard of smile was no surprise to Penny. More than other types, artsy people never took Penny seriously. A gangly five footer with a buzzed red crop and celadon eyes that could pin you down like a bug on a cork, she was hard to miss in a crowd but sent mixed signals at close range. A year had passed since she dropped out of MIT at sixteen after winning an obscure MacArthur type grant for her work with E.L.F. waves and difference tones, creating musical hallucinations in the audience, then putting on the fatal concert and becoming the sacred monster of academia in the process. When the men in black turned up, she could have ignored them and gone to a shrink, but she knew this wasn't paranoia and that somebody wanted something from her, something she wasn't about to hand over, and couldn't have if she wanted to. After skipping Beantown with the dough she decided on New York, the perfect hiding place for her and her grant booty, down here in the belly of the beast. Then 9/11 hit - a disaster for humanity, but a godsend for her. She figured they had better things to do now than chase after errant teenage prodigies, and Penny did look more like a schoolboy than a world famous, or infamous, avant-garde composer. Her uniform of ragged jeans and acid green Converse high-tops definitely lacked academic gravitas and were the perfect camouflage for city streets.

As for academic gravitas, La Nova's multimedia spectacles had plenty of that. Her exaggerated theater relied on backdrops of scrolling text over grainy video montages of bleak landscapes, either ancient or industrial. The one Penny found on the web had a Venetian theme. Canals drained and showing their arteries and struts. A canal flowing through a half submerged *palazzo* doorway. Reflected in the tarnished rococo mirror of a dim room somewhere inside, the masked La Nova

heaved and spun slowly out of control. Behind her, oil refineries rose from the lagoon mists like minarets, their black fossil smoke sucked back through the tarnished glass, expanding, morphing into clouds of baroque quill scribbles, rants of a madman, that tumbled down the screen to crush the flailing dancer under a curtain of ink. The choreographer did the videos, she danced and emoted. These sporadic performances took place in hip places like Berlin, Amsterdam, Prague and Tokyo, and in downtown Manhattan art theaters like The Knitting Factory, The Kitchen and La Mama.

Penny darted past the floating wisp of black with her pale swarm of patchouli soaked tangles and stuck her key in her door.

Down in her basement, in a space serving as both sound lab and crash pad, Penny went to her workstation, turned on the machines and eyed the level meters on the lowest rack of synthesizers, cranking up the decibels: spiking green, green, red and green, red, red, red. Ouch. She thumbed the wheel down on the keyboard. Pitch bends did that. They were unpredictable and she didn't want to blow yet another set of speakers, not now with industrial strength sub woofers custom designed to handle anything. Even the popular *Buttkicker* extreme low frequency tactile bass transducer was a mere toy compared to the monsters parked in the corners of the room. A pile of home rigged medical grade EEG trodes were stacked next to the phones for her ongoing research with the meditation propelled feedback loop that generated her music. Like any decent minded inventor she was her own guinea pig.

Over at the kitchen corner, she filled the kettle and flipped the switch when an urgent banging shook the metal door.

"Okay, okay!" She killed the sound, ran to the door, opening it a crack. Through the chain stood La Nova with mascara blackened tears streaming down her face.

Penny unlatched the door to let her in. "Sorry, didn't hear you. What's goin' on? You okay? Hey, come in, um, have a seat, tell me what happened." She swept a pile of EEG printouts off the futon to the milk crate coffee table.

The woman trembled from the top of her bird's nest down to her long skinny feet. When a lock of matted hair fell in front of her eye she just let it shiver along.

"You poor thing, you're shaking! Sit down, how 'bout I make you a cup of tea? Sweetened with honey from Italy? Hey, really, its okay, nobody's going to hurt you in here."

Ula Nova sat down like a sleepwalker. Penny, uncomfortable with physical closeness, grit her teeth and squeezed the woman's shoulder reassuringly.

Penny poured water into the cup and threw in a bag of green tea and a spoonful of the only luxury she allowed herself, Italian orange blossom honey, and brought it over to the hunched figure at the edge of the futon.

"Here, have a sip of this. It'll help warm you up. Then you can tell me what happened. Here's a Kleenex."

Miss Nova took the tissue and sniffled into it. She said into the cup, "Someone broke into my space. They want to kill me. I came back from Pilates and the door was wide open. The lock, I mean, viciously ripped out! Nobody inside. Oh my god, I feel so violated! They're going to kill me, I know it." She shuddered into her hands.

"Who's going to kill you?"

The woman shrugged, staring into empty space.

"Did they take anything?"

"I don't know, I haven't really looked." She glanced at Penny with her washed out bleary raccoon eyes, and squinted at the wall of blinking lights, twisting her soggy Kleenex.

"Well, have you gotten any threatening calls or letters? Are you worried about your work getting ripped off? Do you have any enemies? You know, ex-boyfriends, stalkers, crazy fans, people who might want to give you a good scare? How about the police? Want me to call, Miss Nova?"

No reaction, eyes wide on the machines.

"Do you want me to call the police? They should be alerted, don't you think? Have you told Ramón? Miss Nova?"

She just shook her head, mesmerized by the green and red blinking synth lights that were the only source of illumination except for the forty watt appliance bulb in the crusty kitchen unit.

"Miss Nova!"

"It's Ula," she whispered.

"Well, uh, Ula, I'm Penny, and, uh... tell you what, you can crash here until Ramón puts in a new lock. And we'd better call him, now, okay?"

Penny switched on the bank of industrial fluorescent tubes, figuring the glare, like a bucket of ice water, might do them both good. Penny speed dialed the super. "Hi, Bobby, is your dad home? It's kind of important. Okay. Hi, Ramón, it's Penny. I've got Miss Nova here

with me, her place just got broken into. I think you'd better have a look. She says the lock is totally busted. And someone must've gotten a key to the elevator door, too. No, she's okay. She's having a cup of tea. Okay, sure, I'll do that. Thanks, man."

She put the phone down and asked Ula, "You wanna stay here a sec, while I take a look, make sure your place is really empty?"

"I'll come with you." Ula rose and the two of them crossed the hall.

A crowbar must have been used to pry open the door that swung loosely on its hinges. The blasted hole was a work of art, alright, looking as if it had been blasted out from the other side by some arcane high velocity projectile. Beyond it was that empty dance space Penny had only glimpsed at when the renovation crew carted in or hauled out stuff. At one end of the room was a series of ovoid white fabric screens that hung on invisible wires from the black ceiling's sprinklers, giving the studio the look of a surreal theater space. In front of the screens at each corner of the room, gleaming needle speakers, positioned for design impact rather than optimal acoustics rested on the seamless maple floor. The convoluted arching panels concealed a rudimentary living area without seats or couches, just a low tatami, an alcove of shelves, and a counter. Well, more of a gurney with huge rubber wheels, on top of which were aligned a small electric heating coil with a Pyrex beaker, a compact high end stereo console, clip on remote control, revolving CD tower, tiny cell phone, and a slim silver laptop, wireless and shut.

In the alcove, where a refrigerator would normally have been, neat stacks of folded clothing filled the shelves, mostly black with some white. On the ground below was an orderly row of ballet slippers, both flat and toe, all black with the black satin ribbons wrapped tightly around the toe shoes. A pair of black rubber split toe boots ended the row, and a bundled fuzzy black roll, maybe a blanket, on its side at the end. That was it.

The white subway tile bathroom was just as obsessively minimal. A white ceramic bowl without a seat, white towels neatly stacked above the tank on a thick glass shelf. A dark coat or cape hung from a chrome hook on the door. Penny saw a mirror, but no signs of feminine or even human preening anywhere: no toothbrush, floss, soap, nothing, and there where no signs of anything having been disturbed or taken.

Ula, back in her element now, let her hand glide dreamily along

the gurney/counter top, pondering her approach with the super in scene two, act one.

Ramón Rodríguez, the gaunt, taciturn Cuban who hired by the faceless owners of the building, was already on his knees over the torn lock, a cigarette dangling from his thin lips. He squinted up at Ula through the smoke.

"Man, this is bad, real bad. I think have to put in new door! What you have in here someone want so much? It takes an angry man to do this. Boyfriend want back the diamonds? I thought he was rolling in the dough."

Ula rearranged that stray curl and blinking through her smeared eyes, sailed over to Ramón's side.

"C'mon Ramón, you know I'm just a starving artist or I wouldn't be living in a dump like this, would I?"

La Nova had him wrapped around her skinny finger a lot tighter than the flashy rock that flopped around on it as she rearranged her matted hairdo. There would be a new door within a day, but Penny did not look forward to spending the night with this flake, so she slipped out the door leaving the two of them to sort it out.

Back in her studio, she settled back into the chair, put on the trodes and dove back in. The softest of E.L.F. waves surged up from the deep, just enough to spook the senses. She breathed slowly and evenly, listening to her composition. Suspended in Alpha waves, she let the difference tones take possession of her and do their unpredictable sorcery.

As long as she didn't pass out, like at the first rehearsal, she would go on with her explorations. She really had no idea what she was doing. She knew that. But she had to find out so next time around nobody would die. Penny thought of Stravinsky, who said "I was a vessel, through which the Rite of Spring flowed." It may have been the outrage of the year, but nobody dropped dead at that premiere. Had she become a vessel for angelic, or demonic, forces? What was the fate of the artist who opens her imagination and unwittingly creates unimaginable things?

At the door, a gentle knocking this time. She ripped off her headgear, and of course, it was Ula, hugging the fuzzy black thing from the alcove.

"The door's not ready yet. I brought a sleeping bag."

She went straight to the sofa, sat down primly and began untying the bundle.

"Wait! Miss Nova, uh, Ula, get up, please! Let me open that up, you can't sleep on it like that, you'll wake up all stiff."

Ula stood up, holding onto the unfurled bag. Penny wrestled open the futon and brushed off any stray crumbs. It was no ordinary camping bag that Ula spread out but a luxurious satin lined cashmere sleeping bag with an Italian designer label. She removed her ballet slippers and placed them side by side, exactly perpendicular to the bed. In one movement she raised both legs and lowered her torso, then zipped the bag up with one hand, tucked in both arms and shut her eyes.

Penny pulled out a black sleep mask from one of the file cabinets and dangled it over the tight white face.

"I have some more work to do. Here, take this. You'll like it, its cashmere." From a thrift shop, but it matched the bag in quality.

Ula opened an eye, stuck out a hand and the thing disappeared.

Penny shut off the overhead tubes, sat down at the synthesizer, slid her custom designed noise cancellation headphones over the slime of the trodes and listened to her piece a couple more times without the trodes to see if she passed out, or if anything grated on her nerves besides the immediate situation. Well, that would do, only 12:58. Swiveling around, her knees slammed into Ula, who had been standing right behind her in the dark.

"Jeez, you gimme the heebie-jeebies like that!"

"Heebie-jeebies?"

"Yeah, you know, the willies. You always sneak up on people in the dark?"

"Haha, the willies. Not usually. That is interesting." Ula took a breath and raised her head an inch higher on its stalk.

Tilting it and looking off to the side, she continued, "Well, it could use less specificity, and more repetition in the rhythmic progressions, but I like way your emphasis is always off the beat. It has certainly has plenty of um, possibilities... but it's awfully harsh."

"Harsh? Oh, sorry, did I wake you? Guess I got carried away and it leaked out the 'phones."

Ula mused on, "I'm really glad I got to see, um, hear it. Where are you performing?" She asked, with downtown deadpan.

"Nowhere." Penny killed the last monitor, but left everything else running. "I've gotta get some sleep now, you gonna be okay?"

But Ula droned on, "*Sentics and The Role of Frequencies in the Music Theory of Pythagoras of Samos?*"

"Topic of my master's thesis, how did you know? It's all ancient history since I dropped out of school."

"And 20th century stochastic music? How does that fit into your music of the spheres?"

"Stochastic is a term used by my last teacher Iannis Xenakis. It means 'stretching irresistibly towards a goal' and is characterized by masses, clouds, galaxies of sounds too vast for the behavior of individual elements to be determined, more like an environment in which the, uhm, 'spheres' can exist. Designing clouds and streams of sonic events is what I do."

"Hmm. Sonic events, right. The Extra Low Frequencies you mention on your website. The military have been experimenting with these for the purpose of crowd and personality control for a while now. Isn't that risky?"

Penny was ready for this. Or was she? "Oh, you mean like *The Psycho-physiological Effects Of Subharmonic Sound Within The E.L.F. Range In Computer Generated Music Through the Use Of Directed Standing Waves?* My area of research at school, I devised a set of subharmonic gestures for triggering a desired emotional response in an audience implementing a simple artificial intelligence program which allowed me to evoke complex emotions using sounds derived from just tunings and overtones."

She had to get her off this track. "This Viennese scholar I started corresponding with several years before discovered a system of measuring essentic form, the shapes that emotional expressions create, and their use, especially in music and I began implementing it. This guy—neuroscientist, inventor, concert pianist, conductor - you name it, built this computer program to simulate an orchestra, well, he coined the term cyborg, so he invented this—"

"Orchestra of AI robots? You mean with actual virtual players?"

"Pretty much."

"Hollow out the hollow men with holo men! Haha! Wow! How fascinating, that is so fascinating..." Ula mused, staring off into dark space and twisting a newly escaped curl.

"Huh? Whatever. It's for classical music. Anyway, although principles of subharmonic gestures and emotional acton signatures were understood intuitively for eons, they were never studied in a scientifically reproducible fashion or developed in a truly artistic way with the listener's emotional response in mind. I did some experiments

and—"

"Sure, control is the artist's dream, not just audience appreciation—"

"No! *no* control. That's the beauty of it!"

"Okay, so, manipulation. Like Elvis. Or Rasputin, Hitler, Stalin, Sun Myung Moon, you know."

"Well, not exactly—"

"These super low sounds of yours create a unified mind body experience, possibly for the first time in some of these people's lives, and then it shatters it with emptiness and they're just not ready for it. Manipulating people's emotional states on a mass scale, that's dangerous stuff. So. Nobody approached you?"

"Was I ever approached by spooks? Is that what you're getting at?" Penny stiffened. She had dismissed this creature as too self absorbed to be that on to her.

"Spooks? Hmmm. Okay. But E.L.F.'s are unknown territory, like electromagnetic fields, so maybe I was thinking more in terms of the, um, you know, health hazards?" Ula looked away.

"Oh, yeah, gotcha, I guess. I'm sorry if it bothers you, but the building manager must've mentioned there was an experimental music studio down here," Penny said, yawning and pushing away from the table. "If it's okay with you, I really gotta get some z's. Bathroom's over there."

Ula nodded obligingly, slid back into her bag and zipped herself in.

Penny opened another file cabinet and pulled out her old boyfriend K.C.'s sleeping bag, now hers. Cabela's standard issue, lined with leaping flannel Bambis. She unrolled the bag over the raw concrete floor. Usually she just collapsed on the futon and went to sleep, but a night on raw concrete demanded a little padding, so she bunched a sweatshirt for a pillow.

The two of them had snuggled together in this old bag on a cold floor as hard as this one, at the back of his dad's garage/barn, in the classic seduction scenario. He tried upgrading to the back seat of the Ford pickup, but the fumes and the greasy vinyl killed the mood, to K.C.'s complete bafflement. He grabbed the sleeping bag and threw it at her along with a barrage of obscenities and she stomped home, bag under her arm. Next thing she knew he was off in his pickup to Alaska. What a prick, he was cute enough except for the chin zits, but he could barely read, making newspapers impossible, and there was no T.V. way

out there. This was his saving grace. He was blissfully ignorant. His brothers were so drug addled or wary of the big bad media they were no problem either. Every other guy she'd met was too scared to approach her except with snide remarks like "kill anyone recently!" Or grunts to the theme of Jaws whenever she approached.

Penny could never escape it, not down here, not anywhere. At her premiere concert, two people, both young and in perfect health, got hysterical, and while sobbing uncontrollably, keeled over dead. Then came the Wired interview "For Whom the Bell Tolls," and the weird rich people's parties. She really avoided those. When the "Men in Black" stormed her dorm block, freaking out the other students, she knew it was time to leave.

She bunched the sweatshirt into a better ball and tried a new position.

Oh, hell, she was never going to get to sleep like this, and she couldn't get up and dance herself into a stupor now, not with Vampirella over there on her futon.

"Dzzrt!" Penny jumped nearly out of her sleeping bag. Only the phone! There it was by the kettle. She stumbled in the dark towards it.

"Yes, Hello? Hello? Anybody there? Fuck."

Dial tone. Five AM? She flipped on the lights. Once she adjusted to the fluorescent blast, she saw that her guest and her cashmere sack were gone, and, guess what, so was the eye shade, oh, and of course the door wasn't bolted. The phone rang again. Penny pressed talk, smashed her palm into her throbbing forehead.

A guy.

"Hi, is Ula there? She leave a message, say she is at this number. Em, I hope I did not wake you."

Huh! Smooth breathy voice, fashionable foreign accent. French, Italian or possibly Spanish.

"Who's this?"

"Alessandro. I come from Paris, ahem, on the red eye, I call, em, from the, euh, plane around eleven, but there is no answer, and I find this hysterrric message at the hotel with this number. Is she there?"

(Definitely not French. His with and this were perfect.) And where was the aspirin?

"Um, no, she split. I'll check across the hall, maybe she's there. Hold on."

Penny ran out. The door to Ula's place was still wide open, so Penny went in. No Ula inside. No sleeping bag. Coat, cell phone and

laptop gone too. Stereo and speakers still there.

"The place is empty. Did she tell you about the break in? Yeah, she spent the night, but I just woke up, and she's gone."

"On the message she talk about the studio, broken door, that people want to kill her! But she was em, incoherent. She is very complex person, you know, an arreteestuh. Sometimes I cannot tell if she is real or nut. What do you know? Can you help?"

Ula had evaporated into thin air? Who was this guy? Oh, yeah, him. Where was her brain? Where was the aspirin?

"Alessandro, gee, well, Ramón, the super, he might know. He's fixing her door and he's crazy enough to work on it all night for her, but I kinda doubt it. His son Bobby is sure to be awake, though, he's a Playstation addict. Here's their number, 768-4420, they speak Spanish, too."

"I am not Spanish, I am Italian! I know Señor Rodriguez. His number again, please?"

Ten minutes later there was a knock at the door. Dressed in her standard sleep wear of T shirt and panties, she opened the door a crack to see a wild eyed guy clutching a cellphone like he just got beamed from a slick wireless ad into her seedy hall.

"I am Alessandro."

"Hold on."

She shut the door, slipped on her jeans and ran back to open it. Still frozen in the same pose, he met her eyes directly and shook her hand, then folded in a small formal bow, continental, not Japanese.

"I am Alessandro Tivoglio. I am so pleased to meet you, mademoiselle Penelope Bell."

He slid into the room and immediately paced back and forth, pivoting on his toe in exactly the same way every time.

"How did you get in the elevator?" she asked.

He took out a set of keys from his pocket and shook them without looking at her.

"Did you take a look in Miss Nova's place? Might be clues."

Penny hurriedly slammed the futon back into a couch.

He shook his head, brows deeply knit as if he were in an existential *film noir*, except that his hair was longer and he had his gadget.

Still pacing and pivoting, nervous as a ferret, he chattered on, "I call the airport before, they say she boarded the red-eye, for Charles De Gaulle but Max, our friend and SFX guy in Paris, he knows nothing, so

I called Dick, she lives with him when she is in town, and he knows nothing! I dunno. I telephone Thierry, the guy with the mo cap place by La Bastille, but he knows nothing!"

"Ah!" he said, pointing at the ceiling. "But there is another place, at Republique, now I remember, I search the number." He scrolled through. "No, I call Minitel." He punched in a number, pacing in ever smaller circles now. Muttering under his breath in Italian, he dialed again.

"Oh, that thing won't work down here, use this." Penny handed him her cordless.

Alessandro stared at it for a moment, then punched the long international code from his cell into Penny's phone. "*Allo? Le numero pour Cyber Ciné? Oui, c'est ca.*" He listened, following the ceiling's uneven patchwork maze of pipes and nozzles. He punched in another number, tucking his cell phone under the cordless holding arm.

"*Cyber-Ciné? Eh? Ah! Pardonnez moi!*" Squinting at his cell that he'd just dropped into his other hand, he punched in the number again and waited for the phone to be answered.

"*Allo? Etes vous CyberCiné? Bonjour, euh, bonne nuit. Avez vous une cliente inscrite chez vous au nom d'Ula Nova? Allo, monsieur?*" Long pause. The guy's French was certainly more polished and polite than his English.

"*Vraiment? Et elle a rendezvous a quel heure? Demain a quatorze heures trente? Merci, monsieur, et pourriez vous lui relluer se message quand elle arrivera? 'Alessandro et Penny sont en ville, chez Deek.' Oui, c'est ca, d'accord, merci, vous etes bien gentil, monsieur. Au revoir.*"

He handed the phone back. "At fourteen, em, two thirty tomorrow, she has appointment." Collapsed into the futon, he began appraising her as if she was an *objet d'art* in a museum.

"What's this about 'Penny chez Dahveed in Pahree? I'm not going anywhere! I don't know you, either of you. And she only acknowledged my presence for the first time yesterday. This has absolutely nothing to do with me. and even if it did I've got work to do here. I can't just pick up and jet over to Paris! Hey, none of this is my fault, okay?"

His eyes followed her like the Mona Lisa's as she paced and pivoted. What was he doing, searching for that microscopic breach of form like her gymnastics coach? Of course! Choreographer plus, what was it the New Yorker called him, her *metteur en scène*? But what was

this guy's part in all this? The boyfriend with the diamonds. That rock on her finger. But who was the boss? Who the hell was Deek?

Tapping his fingers on his knee to the rhythm of her steps, he scanned the windowless room in the flat fluorescent glare: the pipes and rusty sprinklers embalmed in dripping layers of semigloss white, the hodgepodge of street-find postwar office furniture, the new speakers, and the long uneven ribbons of EEG and score printouts taped over most of the concrete walls.

"Do you have coffee? Espresso? I must think. I must have coffee to think." He settled back into her futon, massaging his brow and stretching out his legs.

Penny stopped over him and blurted, "Okay. Your boss, or whatever, creeps up on me in the middle of the night, in the dark, giving me a serious case of the heebie-jeebies, then starts criticizing my work! I get no, like, 'thank you for letting me stay here', no explanation from her about what might have just happened. No nothing! I went ahead and let her sleep on my bed for crying out loud and still she creeps up on me like some kinda vampire while I'm busy working. Sheesh!"

He chuckled softly.

"What's so damn funny?"

He sat up and said, "*Mi dispiace*, I mean no disrespect, so sorry. Ula does not mean to cause you pain, but she is a complex person, she has strange behaviors. She does not see when others suffer. Believe me, this I know. She was perhaps curious. She thinks what you do is fantastic! What is heebie-jeebies?"

"The willies. Heebie-jeebies is willies. She scared me, okay?"

"I am so sorry. Yes, the weelees, hahah, touché."

"And where the hell did she hear enough of my music to make any judgment? Okay, some of it leaks out into the hall, but that's just a mess. The fire door and the concrete walls make this place pretty soundproof, and I just have little bits and pieces on the web. We got definite IP issues here."

He'd wiped the grin from his face and looked uneasily at his clasped manicured hands.

"Doctor Bell, I dunno, perhaps we can offer you compensations before you throw us to the wolves. I can speak for Ula, that she would be honored to work with you. It would be good promotion, and you need support for this work of yours, no?"

"What? Are you out of your mind, too? Anyway, you have to

find her first, don't you?" She stopped dead in the middle of the floor and stared down at the concrete.

"Eh, relax. We have coffee and then we can brainstorm this." He grinned and clasped his arms behind his head. "Ah! You know, you need to get out more, get some R and D. You bury yourself alive down here with your big machines. Ula tell me all about it. This is not a life! Emotions are not abstract science. You don't even have a boyfriend, yes?"

She chose to ignore that last remark.

"That would be R and R. R and D is exactly what I do down here. Research and dee-velopment. Rest and ree-laxation. I thought the Euro's were up on the whole acronym thing."

He nodded tersely at her correction and tossed his cell on the printout strewn coffee table that she'd made from plastic milk crates and duct tape.

She watched the phone slide across her jumble of scores, ice cold drops of rage trickling down her spine. She kept herself from decking him one across his plastic jaw.

Who the hell did this jittery piece of Eurotrash off the street think he was? And, hey, maybe she had a boyfriend, until he got it into his thick skull to go be a Yukon roughneck, just because the elk was better up there. But whose business was that, anyway? And what was the deal with the music? And Ula knew! He must know too. Were they thinking of using her like everybody else did who knew and didn't steer clear? This guy was pretty quick to offer her a job, acting like he was scared she'd slap him with a lawsuit, and come to think of it that wasn't such a bad idea.

The break-in next door had her totally freaked. A key was needed just to use the elevator, another one for the stairs to the basement. This was Manhattan, after all. At least she knew nobody wanted her dead. They wanted her alive.

At the kitchen corner she fished out a dusty Mr. Moka from the cupboard, its plastic handle long melted into a surreal glob. She washed the coffee maker, filled the bottom with water, and dropped in the basket. After rummaging again through the cabinet, she found an old vacuum pack of Bustelo, the local Latino brand. She tore open the top with her teeth, poured in the grind, patted it down with her palm, twisted on the top, and sat Mr Moka on the burner. Thirty seconds later, Mr Moka erupted like Vesuvius inside his faceted aluminum body and the aroma of fresh espresso filled the room. The Italian guy was

grinning ear to ear over on the sofa. Yeah, just like back home with mama mia. Espresso thimbles were stashed around somewhere, but Penny just grabbed the two tea two mugs and the honey jar. They'd have to forgo the lemon peel.

He'd stacked the printouts in a neat pile at the edge of the table to make room for the coffee. When she put had everything down he pointed back with his thumb at the two curled postcards on the white wall behind him.

"Who are these dudes?"

"Those dudes, are one dude, Pythagoras of Samos, the mathematician and philosopher, maybe you've heard of him?"

"Oh yes, that dude," he smirked, stirring his coffee, then raised his eyes to ceiling and recited, "*La place du hypotenuse d'un triangle d'angle droit est égale à la somme des carrés des deux autres cotés.*"

"The square of the hypotenuse of a right angle triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides'. That's pretty good, but you said it in French, I thought you were Italian."

"I went to school in Paris, first with the Jesuits, yes? Then at the *Lycée Henri IV*, it is specialist for the letters. *Louis le Grand* is for the maths, so you would go there, no? But also I learned the maths very good at Henri IV. My mother lived in Paris for the modeling, but we would go to Rome for holiday, Christmas, New Year, like that, but I missed the skiing always, real drag" he rambled, his eyes wandering around the room in a kind of dreamy disbelief. Penny poured her second dose of coffee.

Poor baby, well, that explained the French, and the manners. And he could rattle off the theorem like he'd memorized it yesterday. Jesuits! the Inquisition for dust and disorder, that explained the neatness. She sipped her coffee, felt it surge through her veins, through her brain as if the top of her head would pop off. Didn't seem to faze him. Funny they weren't more psychotic, those Euros.

She had to admit it, plastic or not, he sure was handsome, in a manicured Euro rich guy way. More like a statue than a store dummy. So that's what they looked like alive and not carved out of Parian marble. When he wasn't grimacing, his face was almost artificially symmetrical. He was a whole lot younger than Ula, who could have been his mother except there was no resemblance whatsoever.

Probably from his training, she figured, he had a funny way of holding his head, always up high as if by a string or high strength magnet from the ceiling, even when he tossed the hair out of his eyes,

which he did a lot. Of course there was no telling how Greek statues tossed their heads, they usually had those bands to keep the sweat off at the Olympic Games, or crowns of laurels or vine leaves if they were poets or gods. What about Michelangelo statues, melting into their own muscle bound glory? But that was another story, or was it?

Tilting his head to the side like a bird, he studied her. She looked away. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. Anyway, whatever his orientation, he had to be the vainest guy she'd ever seen. Not just a "let's check in the mirror" kind of vain, but floating in a perfect bubble where nothing could touch him, as if nothing outside of himself and his bubble were real.... or maybe it was just him who wasn't really real. But then again, Ula was about as unreal as it got, so maybe they were made for each other.

"Well, so," he was saying, "what do you say we fly to Paris, crash at Dick's and go find Ula at the studio? She will be there around lunch, so we can restore ourselves, have a bite and then we take the metro there, okay? You need a break, will be fun!"

He moved his eyebrows up and down like Groucho Marx and Penny wondered if he plucked them as he smirked again and stirred his coffee in perfect time to the clicking of his jacket snaps.

"Do you have Internet?" He swallowed his coffee and pointed to the monitors. "I will show you some of Ula's pieces. She is better in the flesh, but this is okay." He sprang up and was at the control center in two steps, sitting in her swivel chair.

Penny followed him to the permanent broadband display. He typed in a URL, swore, "*Merde!* English QWERTY clavier!"

He typed again, slowly, looking at the keys, pressed GO. Large Flash letters danced across the screen, spelling Ula's name, undulating in a slow virtual breeze, and shimmering like rainbow gossamer through layers of shifting fog.

"Can you make sound?" He asked, pointing to the speakers. He slammed the mouse around, really mad now, not in his magic bubble anymore. "This is a different piece, the work of amateurs!" he growled.

Penny thought it looked professional enough, commercial, run of the mill, even. She adjusted the sound to come through the speakers instead of the phones as she processed the other input. Whoa! This music she was hearing? It was hers! Pure and unadulterated. They were ripping her off! No wonder Ula was interested in the hazards of working with this stuff!

"Hey, that's my music. I haven't been alerted as to its being

used in a dance piece, not to mention receiving a check."

Alessandro looked up from his seat. "Check?" he asked innocently.

"Huh? I told you, I don't have more than a couple measures on the web, I don't know where she got this from, but it stinks."

"Yes, the video also, after the intro, it is not Max's, his work is exquisite, but she has changed her content, I dunno. I am analog man," he said, shaking his head.

Meanwhile a lithe figure moved across the screen, undulating like the letters. Layers of chiffon obeyed the slow motions of her body almost like an after image or ghost photography. The video zoomed in. Her hair floated like kelp in underwater currents, its tendrils unaffected by gravity.

That's when Penny realized this was not a video. This was all virtual. If his FX guy was exquisite, this new guy at least was on the pulse, really had the anime thing down. The nose had lost its sharpness, the neck was even longer, had a couple extra vertebrae, and the limbs were stretched to the limits of believability. A cheap trick, but it worked.

Virtual Ula lowered her lash-less lids and caressed her virtual face with long crease-less virtual fingers that were tipped with jagged angular nails, lacking both cuticles and moons. Writhing strands of kelp streamed through, mingling with hair and hand. Her lips parted suggestively. The teeth weren't quite right either, and her tongue was too spherical, hard and almost phallic. Then there were the eyes, when she opened them. Technology still had its limits and Alessandro was staring into it, into the eyes of his zombie girlfriend.

"Okay, I think I've seen enough. I'll come with you, but not because I want to help you, either of you. You'd have to have hacked into my system and my files are encrypted! This is a major breach of IP rights and you don't know what you're doing. I'm all for file sharing, I do it myself. The postmodern world is by its very nature kleptocratic, there's nothing new under the sun. Everything is up for grabs. Fine, that's nothing new. It's not like I'm an IP Nazi. I'm all for artistic freedom of expression, the dissemination of ideas. A healthy dose of anarchy keeps things kicking, but this stuff is still in beta stage and it's unknown territory. Um, I need some privacy, okay, so I can call my lawyer." (Not that she had a lawyer, or that they would even help her if they knew who they were dealing with, but she had to do this right, or at least make it look that way.)

Alessandro nodded distractedly, then asked without bothering to turn around, "Do you have a passport? If you dunt, I know a guy."

"Oh, really? One of your Henri for the letters buddies?" She asked sarcastically.

"He's an old friend from school, yes. He is a Saudi working for T.V. here."

"Actually, I have a passport, a real U.S. one, the best there is, that I got a while back for an electronic music conference I was invited to in Dublin. But, uh, thanks anyway. Just give me a few minutes to pack, okay?"

Where was all her travel stuff stashed? Come to think of it, farther away would be better even than here, even with these lunatics. And she had to get to the bottom of this, before anything too terrible happened.

Alessandro was still glued to the screen hopping from link to link. Now he was engrossed in a film short, perhaps a trailer for a game. A slithery Asian stripper with a fantastically bouffant geisha hairdo dressed in a black vinyl bondage getup was pumping a tattooed Japanese guy. Heavy breathing, moans and squishy sounds accompanied.

"That was her, that is how she—" he gasped.

"What are you talking about?"

He made an unmistakable rhythmic motion with his hands, clearly embarrassed, and furious.

"They are using her for this snuff porno game! He was Yakuza! They can kill her, they do this, you know. Yes, yes, they do." He pushed away from the console, stunned.

"Ula Nova moonlights doing Hentai in a mo-cap suit? Is she that hard up for cash?"

"Ah! *Putana*, why she does this? This is why she is vanished!" His hand dragged down over his face with dread realization.

"Oh, come on, don't get bent out of shape over a dumb cartoon! It doesn't mean anything! Hentai is for, like, stressed out businessmen, it's sicko, but it's not real."

Penny got back to her packing. Alessandro was watching another cartoon hooker enjoying herself on a large purple octopus sex toy and it was all pretty convincing except for the artwork. He clicked on the menu, scrolling down a list of possible adventures.

The firewall stopped any virtual VD viruses but not the gross spam these cesspools unleashed. Moving towards the computer, she

said, "Hey, do you mind? I've got a virgin system."

"Ah, yes, I am so sorry." He logged back to the blue green of the seaweed ballet and stared into the screen, his face bleached pale blue with shock.

Exasperated, Penny slipped into the bathroom with the phone to get into her plane uniform of crisp kid size Levi's and a clean sweatshirt. She was on pure automatic pilot now.

Her foot in one jeans leg, she pondered the situation. At first she had suspected it might be sound leaking out into the hall, that Ula heard, but that would just be a garbled mess. But now she had digital proof of theft.

She couldn't figure it out. With digital watermarking embedded throughout the data, her IP was unquestionable. But getting the law on her side was another thing, now. Penny pulled up her jeans. Zip. Snap. She checked her sweatshirt. Clean but covered with nubbles from its polyester content. Would have to do.

She brushed her teeth. How to get through to this Ula, the master manipulator? Penny knew that wrapping people around her finger was not her forte. He would be the one to work on. He was the guy behind her big splash, anyway. Swish, swish, spit in the sink, wash the foam away. The Hentai stuff was news to him. Poor guy, his girlfriend was making dirty cartoons behind his back. Pathetic. And the break-in? She doubted anyone would kill a virtual hooker in the real world. Case of mistaken door? Her spooks were more sophisticated than that. So, back to square one.

She came out of the bathroom to find him at the counter making a pot of espresso, and he'd found the thimbles.

"I see you bring the phone in there, but you dun talk, no answer at the lawyers? Maybe they are asleep at the bottom of the sea, with the flounders and the other bottom-dwelling-scum suckers, eh? I know a fantastic lawyer, for the entertainment industry, real scum sucking asshole. But the best lawyer. He has an office here on Madison, you wunt his number?"

"No thanks, he's probably a crook."

"Em, yes, I think so." He brought the coffee to the table. Had he been a waiter?

"I'll have all my stuff in there in a sec," she said, jumping to grab her carry on knapsack from the top of the file cabinet, and there he was at her side pulling it down for her. A bellboy? Then he was back on the futon again, sipping coffee, all in five seconds.

She whacked the dust from the bag, always packed and ready for a quick exit. She grabbed her day pack from the counter, checked the through the pockets, throwing out the local stuff, old metrocards, concert flyers, stubs, cap-less pens, last winter's waxy Chap Stick, a couple of Irish pennies, a token. A token? The passport, her wallet with a wad of emergency fifties and her bank card were in there, and her Palm Pilot was in its cradle by the computer, charging.

"*Benissimo*, put it all on the table, I tek a look."

"You customs?"

"New world. Now, less see what you gut, all of it."

She poured out the packed bag's contents: clothes, toiletry bag, survival kit, stack of white Fruit of the Loom panties, couple Levis, T shirts in various shades of green, two no-logo sweatshirts, one dingy white boy's oxford shirt from the Salvation Army and half a dozen socks of varying thicknesses. From toiletries essentials: microlight, Ziploc baggies, first aid pack with snakebite kit, out of date Bacitracin, Gerber thirteen function multitool, rolled Ace bandage with paper clip for attaching, splinter tweezers, Tampax, pack of rubbers, scissors, and nail clipper with bent rusty nail file/mini screwdriver. All got chucked out except the Tampax, tweezers, multitool, clipper and scissors—and why not, the Ace and paper clip for cobblestone sprains. No, no no. Alessandro's hand shot out from behind her and scooped up the nail clipper, scissors, tweezers, paper clip and multitool, threw them in the trash pile. He had been standing right behind her the entire time, she realized with utter embarrassment.

"These things will be confiscated permanently. Bye, bye, and you will be detained and interrogated. We are in a hurry. Remember, new world, new rules."

She'd forgotten about the post 9/11 paranoia, living in a permanent state of it herself. He placed the guilty items neatly side by side. Except the micro-light she threw the rest into a trash pile, that he eyed with a smirk.

"Okay, I get it, nothing pointy and metal, but jeez, it's not like I'm gonna hold up a plane with a paper clip!"

"OK, but you know bureaucrats are more imaginative than terrorists. They must stay busy, no?"

She picked up the PDA. "Uh 'right, what about the tech?"

"I dunno, I am analog man. I have one of those, Sony." He shook his head and turned away.

"Sheesh." She stuffed it in the day pack with the travel

recharger. "Hey, ever the hear this one? Uh, okay you may not get this. 'Guys have Palms, what do girls have?'"

"*Boccaccia!* Yes, Ula had one of those before she — it broke. Clié, and the Greek anatomy. Not so funny. You have filthy mind for such little girl," he snapped flipping out a Platinum card from his paper thin wallet. He slid back into her chair, logged on to the Air France site, hit the little French flag and typed some numbers and a password.

She'd never seen anybody drop one grand, or whatever two Air France fares were these days, like it was two quarters in a parking meter.

"Voila. eight o'clock," he said, sliding the card back in his wallet and swiveling around.

He walked over back down the futon, poking the wallet deep in the back pocket of his narrow slacks, and sank into the green canvas. Resting his head against the rumpled back of the mattress, he shut his eyes, then opened them and blinked at the sprinklers jutting from the ceiling. With a sudden jerky movement, he leaned over and poured himself a second, or maybe it was a third, demitasse of coffee.

Over by the machines, Penny pulled out the pack of minidiscs she had just bought, some empty CD's for copies and for her MP3 CD player. And there was the minidisc unit itself, good for recording anything, anywhere - tiny, indestructible, and with those new "extra noise canceling mega-bass" earphones that screwed into her ear, she was ready for anything. Her standard noise canceling, E.L.F. phones were too big and would go with the clothes in the knapsack. Ula had taken her cozy eye shade, but they usually had those in the complimentary airplane handout.

The computers went through their shutdown procedures. She packed her laptop and peripherals, and mini tech into the carry-on's padded pocket. Indian summer might linger here, but she had a feeling Paris would be more inhospitable, weather wise. From the metal locker, she brought out her Timber Camo Goretex and shook out the stray pine needles and a few pebbles bounced out and scattered on the concrete. Penny scooped up the pebbles lest she later slip on them and tossed them into the locker. Alessandro followed her every move from his futon throne.

"You are so graceful, tell me, have you ever taken the dance?"

"Graceful? You're kidding, right? I did gymnastics, long time ago, cuz I'm small, have quick reflexes, but contact sports aren't my thing. Like the dance. Okey-doke, I'm ready. Lemme stick a note on

Ula's door for Ramón, let him know I'll be gone for a while, so he can keep an eye on things." She drained her thimble and slid out into the hall where the super stood over a very sleepy Bobby fumbling with the drill on the doorframe.

"Hi Ramón, not wasting any time, huh? I'm going off for a while. Think you could keep an eye on things?"

"Are you going to look for Señorita Nova with Señor Tivoglio? He has located her?"

"Not yet. Just hope she's okay, wherever she is."

"I have the Paris number, if anything comes up. Is there anything else I can do?" Ramón said, squinting through his cloud of smoke.

"Thanks, you've been great, you couldn't blow through this door with a bazooka!"

Holding the drill like a phaser gun, Bobby beamed at Penny through his safety goggles. Penny gave old Ramón a big hug and he smiled his tragic smile, wishing her "buen viaje."

Alessandro waited for her at the elevator under the fritzing fluorescent. In his designer get-up he looked ready to transdimensionally vaporize with her to the outer galaxies.

He flashed a big white crescent at Rodriguez, who saluted back and said, "*Buen viaje Señor Tivoglio!*"

"*Eh, muchas gracias, Ramón,*" Alessandro answered, a frenzied, abysmal look in his eyes.

That's when the Moment of Panic hit her. Intellectual property was pretty much obsolete, right? She was traveling halfway around the planet with this character for what, exactly?

They jumped out of the taxi at JFK and ran through the revolving door into the Air France terminal.

He stuck his hand out. "Your passport." Too out of breath from keeping up with his long stride, she gave it to him.

Only when the pertly uniformed desk clerk handed them their boarding passes tucked neatly inside their passports did Penny realize they were not going economy class. Her eyes met his and there was that smirk again.

"Concorde, we get there faster. You will love the sound. It is - extremely low."

They breezed past the airport security troops to the rubber gloved customs. This gang barely looked at the X ray monitors when the three bags rumbled through the conveyor belt, but gave them the

third degree anyway.

Like a flock of magpies, the inspectors stooped and stared, hypnotized by the embossed gold hairbrush, razor, gold handled badger shaving brush, and a tiny comb and brush set for whiskers or sideburns. Some of the slots in the velvet lined case were empty where he must have gotten rid of any sharp gold objects, or the customs people had confiscated them.

Otherwise the guy packed as light as she did, with monogrammed white handkerchiefs on top a pile of silky undershirts and flimsy briefs in different colors. No, wait a sec, they were thongs. The guy actually wore thong underwear.

The long narrow plane's tubularity was instantly oppressive in spite of the off white interior and the upscale department store aroma that wafted from the air recycling nozzles. Fully boarded, it seemed they were last passengers, as the steward ushered them to their seats. So, this was Concorde - worlds away from Penny's usual steorage with its screaming babies and clogged up toilets. Why hadn't he said anything? Probably to get that split second look on her face at the ticket counter.

After stashing their bags in the slim overhead container, Alessandro gallantly offered her the window seat, then slid into the leather seat beside her with an exaggerated sigh, as if he were just another *über*-businessman coming home after a hard day's wheeler-dealering.

On take-off, the plane shook wildly, then jerked them back into their seats in the moment before it punched the sound barrier and sailed up into the stratosphere. The mach numbers climbed on the readout, engine's roar got louder. Penny wished she could be capturing it all on her minidisc, but it was forbidden.

A steward distributed a fancy snack-meal with individual salt and pepper grinders, a little pot of caviar and another of sour cream, fresh squeezed juice, and a rubbery pastry. Some people already had a glass of Scotch or bubbly next to their Wall Street Journals, real twenty four seven high rollers. Others were asleep under satin eye masks. A group of white haired Germans were chatting away in loud voices. Alessandro got himself a whiskey, asking Penny if she wanted something, as if she weren't just seventeen and it wasn't eight in the morning. She said no thanks, sipping her juice from the fluted crystal glass, and ripped open her package of plane goodies. First she pulled out a satin and fleece eye shade, mm, soft, but for a two hour ride?

Definitely a keeper. Handy little blue ear plugs, landing candy, a bag of fancy French skin care products, plane socks big enough for Sasquatch, what else was in there?

Alessandro, still not relaxed after his breakfast booze, explained tersely to the stewardess how he wanted his coffee. *"Et une tasse pour ma compagne, s'il vous plait, mademoiselle."*

He leaned over to her and said in a low voice, shaking his head, "The French do not know how to make coffee."

Later the steward passed around a menu, but neither of them ate the caviar or the rubber pastry, so she shook her head and smiled at the steward and Alessandro just made a small motion with his head as he was busy with a new whiskey and a little French book called *America* by Jean Baudrillard with Warhol's Marilyn on the cover, that made him chuckle between swigs.

Penny had her nose smashed into the window.

"Wow, this is so amazing, there's nothing out there," she said.

Silence.

She looked over to him and he smiled lazily, reclined in his seat with gaudy Marilyn cheering from his lap.

The next time she looked over he was asleep with one arm over his eyes, the other resting on his shirt.

The noise from the engines was deafening and even with earplugs she wondered how anyone could sleep inside such a rocket. She stuck her nose back to the window, where, above the curved horizon floated the moon, so hi-res she could almost feel the craters. Outside the cold air slid silently between them, faster than sound. She leaned back, feeling the vibration of the engines in her teeth, and shut her eyes. This was awesome, she was going to like this.

## CHEZ SCHWANZ

The two Eames chairs did look better facing the Milano sofa. Their biomorphic silhouettes etched a graceful asymmetry against the trio of tall windows and the new painting, *Fantasies IV*, a Pollockesque symphony of drips and splatters in brownish orange, brownish mauve and blood red on a creamy chartreuse ground. The canvas literally glowed in the silver light flooding the loft from the sky above the Seine. Positioned obliquely in the corner and pointing down at a stretch of Quai across the river along the Tuileries and not up towards to the stars that rarely broke through the layers of clouds, was a bulky white telescope.

During the summer Dick Schwanz amused himself watching the buff bodies sunbathing and carousing at this popular gay hangout, and until a few days ago they would still show up and light up his day. A digital video camera was permanently hooked up to the telescope, triggered by changes in movement to catch the action when he was away from his post. Until recently, he had sold choice clips of the footage on the web, but since he was under scrutiny from Interpol and god only knows what watchdog groups, he had decided to keep it all to himself.

Inez tottered in carrying a big bowl of fruit. Dick picked out the oranges he deemed too bright, and set the bowl on one of the occasional tables, handing Inez the offending fruit.

"*Mais, Senhor Schwanz—*" she squinted at the painting, shaking her head. There was orange in the painting.

Dick checked the crease of his white Gucci trousers, making sure that the knees didn't bag, smoothed the black Lycra silk blend turtleneck of the same make, and cast a self satisfied glance at the painting, that would not be hanging there long, as every Richard Schwanz painting was sold months in advance and he had a clear shot at the Biennale this year.

In 1997, Dick's young lover Angelo died after a long struggle with the HIV he'd contracted after a single indiscretion in Bangkok test driving his new female anatomy as Angelina Tivoglio. Dick, none too happy with the boy's transformation anyway, had ordered the Doctor to give the boy an HIV test. When the test came back positive, Dick

was tempted to kick him out there and then, but for the boy's fortune, that was willed to him. So Angelo stayed in his room to the ghastly, horrific end. The disease progressed swiftly and mercilessly, but in the end he still suspected Sandro of asphyxiating his brother with a pillow to ease his misery. Ula could never be approached on the subject, strengthening his suspicion that she was an accomplice in the crime, a suspicion confirmed when the two of them flew off to Rome with the urn. French laws regarding euthanasia were not something to get tangled up in, especially if they dragged out everything else.

This began with a series of campy soft porn photo montages that caught the attention of the art world. There is no publicity like the negative publicity of scandal and from the time they were toddlers the boys attracted their fair share of it. Back then Dick's new friend Salvador Dali had prints made of their little sphincters on wet rag paper to prove a pet theory of his, that identical twins had identical creases radiating from their tiny orifices, and in fact the two baby bottoms prints were virtually indistinguishable one from the other. Dick's complicity in the project galvanized his friendship with that eccentric genius, boosted his standing in the art world a few notches, and with these masterpieces of posterior art, the twins began their life of secret celebrity, leading to starring roles in controversial contraband movies that still lurked on certain Internet sites and on the shelves of specialty establishments, loci that with the ruthless pedophilia purges of the new millennium pointed directly back to Dick. The twin prints were now innocently framed in the living room, one above the other next to the large painting, and anyone who didn't know what they were would think they were a biomorphic surrealist soft sculpture.

Dick climbed up the narrow back stairs to the maid's rooms where he kept his photos and tchochkes. He pulled the framed Cibachromes from the racks to mount them in the hall next to the celebrity shots. They were harmless enough and the colors would pep up the long hall. Although Richard Schwanz was never a stellar photographer he did have a knack for attracting attention and with those photos and the two beautiful boys at his sides he'd found the keys if not to the town, at least to all the right parties in town. The photos would merely be seen as part of the autobiographical exhibit on the walls of the long corridor.

He might as well throw in that first full length portrait he'd shot of Angelo as Art-Deco drag queen. Not entirely his work, as it was styled by that ridiculous freak Madame D'Oc, hair dresser to the *Beau*

*Monde*, also the initiating cause of his lover's death.

Just a few weeks after Angelo's passing, Dick escaped to the States for a new perspective - okay, to mourn - and was immediately rewarded with a series of events that would change his life forever.

It was a gloriously sunny and mild Indian Summer day in New York, and dressed in the linen suit packed for his next stop of New Orleans, he decided to stroll from his host's Brooklyn Heights brownstone up along Atlantic Avenue to the "Sensation" show that had just opened at the Brooklyn Museum. Dick stopped first at the Lebanese bakery for a lamb patty, then further up the Street was tempted by a lime colored Caribbean pastry from a street vendor, just a block from his father's old E-Z-LAX factory, now refurbished into upscale condominiums.

Around the museum's classical facade small demonstrations were gathering including a group of angry nuns and their flock of mini kilted Lolitas to picket against Chris Ofili's sacrilegious elephant dung Madonna.

At MOMA later that day, among the Pollocks and Krasners, the ethnic fare from Atlantic Avenue rumbled deep in his gut. He sprinted to the Men's, but not quickly enough, as bright green diarrhea splattered the pristine stall the moment he dropped his trousers.

So struck his epiphany, sitting on the john in the MOMA men's room, unfurling yards of toilet paper to sponge the green globs from his cream linen trousers. And now the museum owned three of his large canvases, although sadly only one was on display at any given time and that next to a dingy Reinhardt white painting.

The postmodern axiom was to manipulate art historical icons using wry off color humor. The medium was the message and his medium was new and definitely off-off color. This kind of art got you into *Art Forum*, *Documenta* and *Art Today*.

Once he devised his formula, Richard Schwanz's rise to art world fame was meteoric. Containers of the "paint" were stored in the two Sub-Zero refrigerators in his Bastille quarter studio. To keep his palette fresh, after each workday, he would mix his raw powdered pigments, add a little powdered pectin for uniform texture and bring a vial of this alchemical powder home to sprinkle into his bedtime glass of E  
E-Z-LAX.

Using his powerful anal muscles, maintained by the yogic Asvini Mudra, Dick would deposit his "paint" on the canvas below, as

he swung from his ceiling mounted scaffold.

The Eureka moment for his technique had flown into his face later on that same fateful trip, when at the New Orleans zoo he watched a troop of mischievous howler monkeys throw handfuls of their own scat at each other and every one else, including one fragrant clump that landed smack on his forehead. The scaffold he'd bought that evening at a socialite's party where he met up with a guy in white robes and mala beads that he vaguely knew from a Paris sex club known for the caged fornicating couple swinging high above the (sadly heterosexual) revelers. The club's owner, a horny old alcoholic ex-pat, had renounced his booze and worldly possessions to come home to America a wandering yogi, and was only too glad to part with his contraptions. Back home in Paris, with the scaffold installed in his studio, Dick had his greatest asset. From his perch he could squirt out Gottlieb suns, delicate Twombly poems, wild Pollock fireworks, and not only make a filthy amount of money, but get a real kick out of doing it, too. Pity Interpol had caught up with him on his kiddie porn business.

Dick climbed the rickety ladder to reposition the wires for hanging the photos from the rococo moldings as Inez held it steady and looked on mournfully. She bent down in several stages and held up one of the frames for Dick to hook onto the wires, then they did the same with the other two.

He had to admit that he looked forward to spending a few evenings with Sandro, who since his brother Angelo's passing had lived in hotels. Needed the space, was his excuse. At least he was being cooperative with the doctor's new project, but then, he didn't have a whole lot of choice, did he? The Doctor had them all by the balls, now, didn't he?

The plane pierced through the blanket of clouds that stretched over the basin of Paris and slid into Charles De Gaulle Internationale, a lurid world of sci-fi saucer shaped buildings sprouting up haphazardly from the maze of cobalt lights on the runway. Rain streaked diagonally across the small windows.

The plane hissed to stop and an aggressive little vehicle backed up and locked onto its underside guiding the plane towards the swarm of big jets gathered in front of the transparent skin of the hive terminal.

Alessandro was still asleep next to her, his head flopped to the side, a strand of hair over his twitching lids, his mouth open a little bit.

He didn't wake when the stewardess told everyone to adjust their seats, so Penny did it for him and he still didn't wake up. The guy must've been up for days.

She nudged him, "We're here, mister sleepyhead."

He started, looked around in a panic, then seeing her he smiled and rubbed his face as if waking from a bad dream.

Inside the terminal the first thing she noticed was the smoke. Cigarettes. Everywhere, thin, nervous people flicked ash, talked on cell phones, dragged wheelie suitcases across the slick butt strewn floor. Up ahead, past a cluster of small navy blue uniformed customs officers, an entire sub Saharan nation, swathed in bright flowing robes, each group guarding mammoth cardboard crates of household electronics, waited to board a plane for Dakar.

He was already on his cell now as they skimmed ahead on the undulating mechanized walkway. At the end of the creosote covered tunnel a crowd of limo drivers was gathered, each holding up a magic marker sign, but no placards had their names on them.

"The car is late. We wait outside."

They went through the invisible automatic doors. The doors opened on a narrow sidewalk crammed full of super size Americans and their bulging suitcases. A cold steady drizzle prickled her face. Finding a clear spot of sidewalk a few feet away from the herd, they looked up the drive for the car, and, as if on cue a black Mercedes skidded up, they slid into the back seat with their bags and sped away swerving through the maze of airport roads. The sky outside the window hung lower and darker than any in Penny's memory.

Clean trucks and tiny new cars zipped through the rain along a backdrop of corrugated steel fences in an orderly procession like ants on a trail.

Alessandro gabbed away in rapid French. He'd been on the phone since touchdown, scrolling nervously through his menu. The car dipped into a tunnel. Through the tungsten glow of the tunnel, out of touch with his phone line, he watched her. She stared right back. He was eerily perfect in the pink glow.

The tunnel surfaced along the river on a wide street and it wasn't until they stopped at a light in front of the Pont Neuf and she saw the dark river flowing under the bridge and the cathedral behind it that she realized they were actually in Paris.

The doors hissed open to a rain-slick sidewalk. Alessandro thanked Yusef, the driver then got out, extending his hand to Penny.

They splattered across to a monstrous arched door painted a sick green. He punched in a six digit code into the lighted security panel next to the door, and a smaller door for humans and not horses that was set inside the larger one clunked open. Inside, it smelled like wet stone. A single lantern lit the passage, built wide and high for carriages. They climbed up several foot-worn limestone stairs to a landing and got into a glass Art Deco elevator that whirred up two flights to another landing, all paneled in carved wood. They got out and walked to the polished door. Alessandro pushed the brass button and waited, running his hand through his hair and brushing lint off his pants.

The door was opened by a bald sharp faced man in a tight black turtleneck and immaculate white trousers who instantly threw his arms around Alessandro and kissed him smack on the lips. As soon as his mouth un-suctioned itself from Alessandro's, the bald man said in American accented Euro speak, "*Ciao, Bello, alors, ça va?*"

"*Pas mal, Dick.*" Alessandro bumped cheekbones with the older man, but only met his eyes briefly, as if he couldn't stand the sight of him but had to be polite.

When Alessandro introduced Penny, the man squinted down at her, grabbed her outstretched hand and swooped down, pressing his lips and his nose against it. "The mirific Penelope Bell, *enchanté*, my dear." He sniffed as he came up. "Quite a big bang for a such a tiny squirt, who would've thought! Hangh, hangh, hangh, *mais vraiment, c'est adorable*, you're quite the little musical terrorist, now, aren't you? What's the body count, exactly? But first you must take off those muddy old boots so you don't soil my flotakis, and go freshen up."

"Have you actually heard my music, or is it just my reputation preceding me?" Penny asked, peeling off her Gore-Tex.

"Why, yes! But on the Internet, of course. Our Ula is also *énorme*, huge, on the web but more so here in, euh, whaddaya call it, 'meatspace' where it really matters and where you amuse yourself so... innocently! Hangh, hangh, hangh," he said and turned away.

She was more surprised by the Brooklynese popping out of that refined smorgasbord than by the content of his speech or the braying laugh. The guy fluttering around his exotic white palace was as shiny and bald as Yul Brynner but it wasn't the king of Siam he reminded her of as he stooped down to inspect her with his raptor eyes, it was Nosferatu.

Alessandro flung his arms around a leathery old woman half his size and three times his age, held upright by her crisp white floor length

apron.

"This is Inez, she will show you to your room," he said. The tiny housekeeper bowed and offered to take Penny's knapsacks.

Penny politely refused, following her down the hall past a collection of framed photos, careful not to bump into any of the white chairs with her wet things.

After dumping her knapsacks on her room's white bed, she wrenched her boots from her swollen feet and padded across the sisal carpet to a marble bathroom and was instantly struck by the only jolt of color in the pale room, a tiny painting of a nude be-jeweled girl dancing with a glowing, floating head that dripped long streams of taffy like blood from its severed neck. The painting was set inside a baroque gilt frame placed above the toilet bowl and just opposite the carved marble tub, a deep trough, more sarcophagus than bathtub with intertwined snakes or eels and fantastic spiky fish carved into the sides. Except for the tub and the painting, the room was elegantly spare and impersonal. A Plexiglas cube held an assortment of perfumed soaps, and fluffy towels were draped over a heated rod. Penny washed her face and hands in the sink, smoothed her crop, and washed her plane swollen feet in the bidet.

She came out to find a stack of folded dark clothing on the bed. Inez got out a terry robe from the *armoire* that dominated the room, and pointed to the black leather zip boots on the floor by the bed and motioned for Penny to try them on. A miniature pair of ballet type slippers sat primly next to these. She hesitated, but remembering the man's order to take off her hiking boots, she slipped on the new boots that were light as air, even lighter than her high-tops, that she now regretted not having brought.

"Try, yes, yes," Inez patted the pile of clothing next to the cotton nightgown neatly folded on the pillow.

Penny hesitated a moment before putting on the new things from neat black stack, but in the end got out of her rumpled jeans and sweatshirt. This was one of the weirder things she'd ever done. Don't take candy or rides from strangers, did that include transatlantic voyages on supersonic planes? That Dick character wiggling his scrappy ass around in those white pants was an eyeful, she could see him with lipstick, eye shadow, a pink tutu, but she doubted he could have guessed her size. Chuckling to herself, she unfolded the clothes, all her size, zero. Slinky zip turtle neck, slim form fitting slacks. Well, they all looked great in the mirror but it wasn't her. The pants made her legs

look impossibly long and skinny, like Japanese anime. But then it had been months since she'd looked in a full length mirror, so maybe she'd grown, and she was a jeans and T shirt girl anyway. Maybe this new outfit would help her blend in, that must have been their thinking. They were rich, so it was no skin off their backs.

Penny found Inez dozing on a chair outside the door with her head sunk into her apron. She must have been asleep because she started up in a snap.

Following behind her at one mile per hour, Penny couldn't help but see the photos, now. Three in a row were color pictures with two nearly indistinguishable naked boys against a phony blue sky, like in cheap old postcards. One was skinnier than the other but other wise they were almost carbon copies. Both were sporting identical hairless hard-ons and were laughing in the same dopey way as they horsed around a very diminished Eiffel tower. She didn't know kids could have them that big, even have them at all. The props, of the Empire State Building, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Eiffel Tower looked like those metal tourist souvenirs, but blown up by some sort of trick photography. In one photo, with the toy Eiffel tower, they were playing leapfrog, and she realized from the eyes, that the pumped up one was without a doubt Alessandro as a kid, so she looked away, embarrassed and a little sick. Further down the hall was a full length photo of a heavily made-up woman in an evening gown. The model/mother who took them to Rome for Christmas? She had pretty big shoulders for a model.

Moving closer to the living area were older black and white photos of a bespectacled tall man with people on a beach, pictures of him next to a lady in cat eye sunglasses and a guy with a curly mustache in front of a house with a big egg on the chimney. Salvador and Gala Dalí in front of their house in Port Lligat. In another picture the tall man was with a pretty blonde lady and Gala. Then came one of the guy in a crowd taking a picture of another photographer, all you could see was a white mop of hair. Andy Warhol, of course. Then there was a picture of the tall man again but much younger this time, with a head full of hair and almost handsome in a Jean Cocteau Marcel Duchamp kind of way, next to a short beady eyed guy in a striped sweater. Picasso! The tall man was definitely Dick. Rich people did that with photos of famous people to make themselves appear more important, as if having a lot of money wasn't enough.

In the big room, Alessandro was already slouched into the

white leather sofa with some kind of drink. Penny walked in and sat down at the far end, those curvy plywood chairs across from the white rug didn't look very inviting and the sofa faced the tall windows with the view. More rain out there, but now she was blushing crimson so she kept her head down and stared at the rain spattered glass. Across the river was an enormous palace, probably the Louvre, all lit up and shining like gold. The rain intensified into hail, rattling the windows. Inez wobbled in with a tray of hot coffee and a plate of cookies.

"*Muito obrigado, Senhora,*" Penny said, guessing she was Portuguese. This was all she knew in that language, it was Spanish she was more familiar with, living in Nueva York and being around the Rodriguez guys, but she remembered this phrase, it meant thank you.

"*De nada, senhorita, mais je parle Français,* and a leetle eenglish."

Alessandro poured some of the alcohol from his glass into his coffee, then bit into a cookie and took a sip from the cup.

Dick came into the room from the back somewhere swirling a fizzy clear drink in his hand.

Alessandro pushed aside his dish with the bitten cookie. Dick began moving in a sideways crab-like motion towards the window.

"*La situazione e pericolosa! Che imbecile sei di fare cosi!*" Dick snickered to the window.

"*E migliore per tutti, penso,*" Alessandro observed

"Better for everybody? And how's that? After what happened? What was THAT all about?" Dick snorted into the window, fogging up the pane.

"Hey, guys, mind letting me on this? I know what 'pericoloso' means."

He ignored her. "Ula blew in before. She dropped off her bag and left! Didn't say a word! Her phone's off, you may have noticed."

"She has an appointment at this Cyber Ciné. I called them from New York."

"Does she." Dick stood frozen by the window, big round discs of steam expanding and shrinking with each breath.

Outside the rain and the hail suddenly stopped. In the silence that followed nobody said anything.

Inez tiptoed in with a fresh pot of coffee and more steamed milk, and cleared away the plates. They stirred sugar into their coffees and sipped. Alessandro retreated into himself. Under the halogen spots his eyes were black holes inside their sockets.

Penny eyed the painting and its congealed globs of multicolored ooze.

"That's a cool painting, Dick, is it one of yours?"

"It is shit, all shit! Purple yellow red, rivers of his own stinking *merde!* *Quello merdaio!* was born in it and now in his senility he can only find happiness playing in an ocean of his own filth, *pas vrai, mon vieux?*" Alessandro proclaimed.

By the window, Dick chided, "Need we get so scatological, dear boy? You know very well that I use pigment mixed into an organic alkyl emulsion on the finest handwoven Belgian linen."

Penny walked over to the painting. Next to the large canvas were two frames with some abstract art prints of weird flowers or fossils on bumpy hand made paper. These three pieces were the only art in the enormous room, except for the furniture. Penny decided then and there that she would never understand modern art.

"Looks like early Abstract Expressionism to me, but with prettier colors," Penny ventured.

"Yes, Pollock, Still, and Gottlieb were big influences, abstraction before it became an empty vehicle for metaphorical bullshit, hangh-hangh."

Alessandro cut in, "'Shit as shit! Brilliant! A new 'ism'? No metaphor here. Oh, no! This? This is 100 per cent Pure.. bullshit! 'Shit as Bullshit!' We need the REAL today. No more 'isms!'" He slammed down his glass, stood up and began an aria in the style of Mozart,

*"A bigga mountain uhva merda,*

*Of kaka, an' of poopoooh,*

*O happy ol' colori,*

*For duh happy ol' cronori,*

*Is' still a mountain o' poopoooh!*

*O! Hoohoooh! O! Poopoooh!"*

And he sputtered out a stream of hornlike schoolboy fart noises through his fist. "Duh grand Butthorn finale!" He said, winking at Penny, who didn't know whether to freeze or flee.

"Watch your anal embouchure there, boy."

"Pffffffft. Pffffffft.Pffffffft," Sandro forced, through a face that made Penny almost lose her cool.

Dick spun around "You really shouldn't drink so much coffee, you're not at all pretty when you're angry and you're not funny, EVER! Did you get any sleep at all since you phoned from New York? No oh, of course not, look at those dark circles! And drinking my whiskey like

it was soda pop! You'll be dead before you're thirty, kiddo. Why dontcha start smoking while you're at it, or get banged up in Bangkok, speed things up! No use being half-assed about these things, no sirree!"

He turned to Penny and said in his pretentious, arty voice, "And thank you, Miss Bell, for the compliments, maybe you should think about art criticism as a respectable career alternative to, em - 'musical' composition? Or is it de-composition? Hangh, hangh. Oh, and don't listen to the Latin 'hothead' over there. You see, he's a diagnosed perfectionist-type narcissist, hmm, something like that, shrink says so, anyway. Doesn't trust a soul, not even me! And after all these years! I literally brought those boys up! Isn't that right, Sandro?"

Incredulous, Alessandro pursed his lips. "I do not have a shrink!" was all he could say.

Fingertips in his pockets, Dick spun back to the window and sighed into the glass, making those big fog circles. Alessandro also sighed and shook his head, punching in a number.

*"Allo, Cyber Ciné? Allo, oui, eh bien, j'ai téléphoné hier, cherchant Mademoiselle Ula Nova, qui a rendezvous chez vous vers quatorze heures et demi, je pense. Oui? Allo?"* Alessandro slapped the phone shut and grabbed Penny's arm tight.

"She is there now. We go to the studio!"

Dick minced towards them, his hands still in his pockets. "I'll call Yusef. The rain could start up again any minute, kids," he said in his normal, nasal, voice.

"No, it will take too long, we take *le Metro*." Alessandro turned to Penny and hissed in her ear, "Bring your passport!"

## ULA AT MADAME'S EARLIER

The hair had to go.

The star coiffeur swept into the room. "Ah! Madame d'Oc, *ma magicienne!*"

"Ula, *cherie!* Ah, the simplicity of the costume complements our masterpiece perfectly! Are you growing another?" Madame d'Oc tugged at the third sleeve of Maia's outfit that dangled off her shoulder and chuckled.

"Many more as I dance worlds in and out of existence," Ula joked.

"Be careful what you wish for! But you are radiant, as always. I take it Mexico agreed wit you?"

"He did a good job, Jorge, don't you think? I could pass for twenty-five. You know he trained in Milan as a sculptor before pursuing plastic surgery au Val de Grâce?"

"How eez his wife, Esperanza? She trained here, you know, many years ago!"

"I had no idea! But that explains why she couldn't enter the Miss Mexico pageant. *Eh, bien, Madame*, I want you to cut it off and shave it shiny smooth."

Madame gave a stifled gasp. Ula swivelled around in her lavender dentist's chair to face the old hairdresser directly, in 3 dimensions then spun back to the mirror, turning her head this way and that, and saying to no one in particular, "I have a good skull, so I think it just might work, like that Irish singer who screams at the pope. *Alors qu'ens pensez vous?*"

"It is not sexy!" Not what Madame had in mind.

"Oh, really! Who needs hair to seduce and enthrall in the twenty-first century?"

"But are you certain it will be good for the career? What we have now is what you say in English, 'a winner', *pas vrai?*" Madame cajoled into her customer's ear.

"The career is virtual now. I have been liberated from the material world into the immortal dimension. My exterior must reflect my inner purity."

"Ah? Hmmf! And what will the divine Alessandro think when

he sees you without your *sompteuse coiffure*, can you tell me zatt?"

"Oh, he'll die, but just the little death. Suffering tempers him like fire does a fine blade—most likely to be used against himself."

"*La belle dame sans merci!*"

"*Tondez moi!*" She ordered.

"*Ma pauvre petite.*" Madame shook her head in dismay and chopped away, then got her buzzer out from a drawer for the final polish.

Ula shut her eyes and listened to the mechanism humming along to the music of the spheres that filled her head all the time now.

Ula opened her eyes to see her skull revealed shining like alabaster. Madame brushed the back of Ula's neck of stray hairs and picked up the long oval mirror to show Ula the rear view, then the side: a cameo, chiseled in ice.

People would see the architecture now and the tight, translucent skin. Ageless. Irresistible. She could be any gender, any age, so he would love her more, and they could once again be a triumvirate of celestial *éphèbes*, terrible in their perfection and their art.

"*Alors?*"

"You are a genius, Madame."

"*Eh bien*, non, zeess was a crime. I cannot charge you for zeess, Ula *cherie*." Madame kissed the top of her new head. The poor hairdresser was on the verge of tears.

"I make a wig for mademoiselle with the locks, for if she has a change of heart, yes?"

"Sure, whatever."

Ula got a manicure and a pedicure, even got a little peach polish on toes that were beginning to thicken and yellow, letting them dry as she watched the spring collections on the lounge wall screen, relaxing under the oxygen mask.

An hour later bald Ula sailed into the crowd of shoppers on the Place Vendôme, Yohji's loony black layers flapping behind her in the wind.

## CYBER CINÉ

Back on the street, Alessandro and Penny hurried past the antique shop and turned into a narrow street lined with more antique shops. The blue sign on the corner said rue Bonaparte. Penny thought they could've used that name on one of the big important streets. The sidewalk, barely wide enough for one, overflowed with scrambling people. At the top of the hill the street widened into the large square surrounding the cathedral of St. Germain des Prés. Yellow-leafed plane trees shimmered in the spotlights. The swanky café at the corner that couldn't have been called The Two Maggots was full of tourists and rich Parisians getting together before a night on the town.

They ran down the stairs into the Metro, where Alessandro bought a stack of green cardboard tickets at the booth, and gave Penny half of them. He stuck a ticket in a slot and the gate thunked open when he threw his weight into it. Penny did the same, and got through on the second try, catching up alongside him through the undulating maze of white tiled corridors. They followed the arrows spelling "Clignancourt" and got on the hemispherical platform as one of the sleek green trains slid into the station on its rubber wheels. Alessandro opened the incongruously retro latch to the car, and Penny and a dozen other people crowded in behind him. The train whirred through the tunnel, and in an instant they were at "Châtelet." He grabbed her hand and they leapt from the car like two fugitives, following the arrows to Château de Vincennes, and jumped on the waiting train. This one was newer and longer with accordion joined cars that curved around the bends and huge picture windows that gave a good view of the graffiti in the wormhole tunnels. Another five minutes to "République," where he yanked her off the train like the cork from a bottle, releasing the contents of the car along with her, and they both raced down the corridor in front of everyone else and then up the stairs two at a time to the surface.

Above ground, they were instantly dwarfed by the gigantic statue of a woman with her arm raised that stood in the middle of the square. Alessandro spun around 360 degrees on his right toe to get his bearings, and sprang from the sidewalk that headed north into the narrow streets towards Rue du Faubourg du Temple. Cars skittered

around, slamming on their brakes, trying to squeeze past each other in the narrow street. Still running, he stopped under some signs, the words "Republic Alley" spanned the way in round letters and above it, an obnoxious "Gibu 5" whatever that was, stuck out like a gas station sign. Above that blared a sleazy sign of a top hat. They slid into the covered alley of grimy glass block window walls and exposed steel struts that crisscrossed up and over the glass roof. The center of the alleyway was jammed full of awkwardly parked cars and three wheeled delivery trucks, and smelled of motor oil and paper. A swarm of insectoidal dot com types clutching cell phones and laptop cases were pooled like ants in front of the entrance of the place with the blinking black and purple top hat. They were all wearing those black framed glasses that make even morons look smart. The place was probably a club or a bar, and with all those pale dark shaded characters hanging out in front could've been the entrance to "The Rabbithole" in "The Matrix." Towards the end of the alley, through a jumble of haphazardly parked delivery trucks, Alessandro spotted the blue and black letters of Cyber Ciné emblazoned on one of the doors. He ran up to it and rang the bell, his hair plastered to his forehead. A squat Asian man with a pushed in face, greasy ponytail and the requisite goatee of the dot com world opened the door and brusquely ushered them into a room crammed with electronic gear.

Squinting up at Alessandro, he said in a cooler than thou California drawl, "Oh, ri-ight, you wanted to see Ula, well, uh, you're too late, she's gone, flew the coop, man. Yeah, so adios, amigos." He started to push them back out.

Behind the hyper hip door Ng Van Hung made no pretense of order. The tiny reception area and the rooms visible beyond the orange plywood counter were a wonder of electronic chaos. Extension cords crisscrossed the floor from sockets hidden behind towering piles of CD's and tapes. Some chords were spliced and bound with black electrical tape, others were just taped in bunches to the floor with different Dayglo colored duct tapes. Even the walls had generations of electrical wiring attached to them. Silicon Allée itself probably dated from sometime between the world wars, but there were even antiquated fabric covered wires peeking through the mesh of rubber, vinyl and PVC coated arteries that crawled up the corners, along the glass block wall, and across the ceiling.

"Ya know where she mighta gone?" Penny figured she had a better chance at getting something out of him than Alessandro, who

was frozen into a cardboard cut out.

"Hey, man, I dunno where the crazy bitch went, oh kay? Why dontcha try that old faggot she lives with? Hey, I gotta lot goin' on here, so get the hell outta here!" And he shoved them towards the door, clomping over the cords in his army boots.

On the street away from the alley, Alessandro, still in shock mode, pointed to a small café teeming with activity. "Le Temple d'Or" was the local hive node.

"We go there. I call Max, we eat something, and I need *un demi*. If he is home now, he will know where she is. She always goes there first when she is here, to see Maia, her best friend, eh, her only friend."

"Max, Maia, fill me in."

"Max is *mon copain*, em, my 'pal' and also our digital artist, very good. Maia is Max's sister. The father is Swiss, photographer, the mother, a princess from Gabon, is lost, long time now. They share a floor on the Rue du Dragon, just across the Boulevard St. Germain, near Dick," he explained.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her across the street, slithering liquidly through the chaos of honking cars and into the noisy smoke-filled café, crammed with a mix of local blue collar workers and those same pale, trendy Internet types. Just inside the door, a guy in orange and green camo bungy cord pants and a ratty fur vest with wires trailing out of his ear shouted into a hidden microphone as he stirred a thimble of espresso. The café was decorated with framed black and white photos of movie stars, many of them French *film noir* stars from the forties and fifties, and there were some jazz greats on one wall: Ray Charles, Howlin' Wolf and the only white person, Woody Allen.

At the bar, portly red faced guys downed glasses of wine and smoked unfiltered cigarettes, spitting tobacco bits on the floor and arguing about the latest soccer scores that were displayed on the monitor jutting down from the corner ceiling across from the bar. Below the TV, framed like religious icons or third world dictators were large photos of Sting and Arnold as Terminator, both in eerie chiaroscuro, watching you.

Alessandro's eyes were glued to the scrolling scores. Everyone cheered for Marseille, the winner, but not him, he just muttered under his breath in French. She noticed that he switched between the two languages all the time, often in mid sentence. Every other word of his now was "*Putain*," which she knew meant whore in French. She asked

him, to get him back to reality, what whores had to do with soccer. He explained in a schoolteacher voice, (even for the swear words) that it was used as a generic expletive, "lika fuckuh." Well, that worked because he stopped scowling and grinned at her and then went on joking that they used real whores as cheerleaders here, to raise team morale. That wasn't really funny, but he sure thought so, and thought that with her "bad mouth" she would too.

The waitress, who in her Cleopatra makeup and mass of black braids looked like one of the movie stars on the wall, came up to their table. "*Un demi, s'il vous plait,*" he said.

"I'll have some hot tea, thanks," she said to Alessandro, but the waitress smiled and nodded, and disappeared before he could say anything.

"I call Max again, he will help us." He sat there looking blankly at the phone in his hand and drumming his fingers on the table, then, punched in a number and waited with his brow all crinkled as it rang.

"*Dude! Bon, ben, ons est arrivées, où est tu? Quoi? Merde, alors. Eh, ben oui! Ciao, à demain.*" He slapped the phone shut. The waitress brought their drinks, his beer and her Lipton and walked away swinging her hips, holding her tray high above her shoulder.

"Max is in Versailles. I think he is at his dope dealer, so who can say when he will return to Paris, the trains stop running at midnight. Maia is in bed, it is, you know, that time, ahem, and she runs all around before. Are you sleepy?"

"No not at all."

"Hungry?"

"Not really."

"Eh, would you like to go to church?"

"Huh?"

"Notre Dame? You want to see the monuments, no?"

"What about Ula?"

"Ula can go pffft." He did a thing with his fist and his elbow.

"First I take a brandy." He waved to the waitress.

"*Donnez moi une fine, s'il vous plait.*"

He sat away from the people, facing Penny, the wall and the monitor, inhaling his "feen," and with his nose in that glass looking like some kind of fiend, too.

"You look uncomfortable, would you like some of this? It will relax you."

"I'm only seventeen, I can't."

"Well, here, you can, so have a sip, it won't kill you, not so quick."

She took a sip. The fumes hit her nose before the liquid, that burned like acid on her lips and down her throat.

"Whooh," she said and he laughed, a real, friendly laugh, with dimples and two little lines at the side, so she felt a little better.

"Let's go to the cathedral." He put some bills on the dish and they left.

At the statue he hailed a cab and they slicked over the wet streets down to the river. They got out in front of the shining cathedral, walking over the slippery flagstones to the entrance that was bottlenecked with plastic poncho'd tourists.

Inside he dipped his hand in the basin of water and made the sign of the cross on his forehead and chest before taking her straight down the center. He bent on his knee and made the sign again before edging in to the straw woven chairs that lined up in rows to the empty altar. They sat down and he began pointing out in a whisper how this was the geographic, historical, and spiritual heart of the capital, and how people had sought shelter here during war and pestilence for centuries.

Tourists shuffled around the penumbra like zombies. In the center were the faithful, kneeling and praying. The organ started up with Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor. He sat very still with his hands on his knees and listened to the music with his eyes closed. The music filled her head and she felt herself catapulted up into the black arches above, by the power of the low chords. That had been her plan for the E.L.F.'s, but somewhere it had backfired. She scooted down so her neck could rest on the back of the chair to look up into the vaults. She shut her eyes feeling the acoustics of the space warp the sounds ricocheting through the arches and vaults. When it was over she opened her eyes and he was sitting in the same position, but looking down at her, with that enigmatic smile.

"We walk around with them now?" He slipped his hand through her elbow and they merged into the international stream inching around the cathedral aisles. As they passed each darkened window he whispered its story to her, even though she could hardly see.

"It must be spectacular in the day," she said, tense from the arm resting so nonchalantly in hers.

"Yes, but there are more people, then." They were whispering

like everyone else, so their voices blended into the hiss of the other voices and the feet.

Walking up the right apse now, the organ started again with Olivier Messiaen's *Apparition de l'Eglise Eternelle*. After this, a soft improvisation was swallowed up by the escalating ambient noise of the crowd and they slipped out into the cold night before the priest could yell at the crowd to pipe it down.

The cobble stones were wet and shiny with refraction from all the spotlights. Penny looked up at the spires and at the famous gargoyles grinning down at her from their black perches.

They walked along the water until they got to the Pont Neuf which bisected the tip of the island. On the other side a small park cut into the river like the prow of a ship. The buildings of the Louvre were ablaze up ahead on the right. She imagined where Dick's must be, beyond the dark bridge on the left, practicing his fog circles. What must it be like, to wake up everyday with such a view?

"It is nearly ten, earlier New York time, but I woke you so early, you must be sleepy, no?"

She yawned. "Yeah, now that you mention it."

"Are you hungry?"

"I don't know."

He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Come, I take you back, I think you are very sleepy, and tomorrow we must, how you do you say, be on our toes."

They walked along the Quai past the *bouquiniste's* closed boxes to Dick's, which was not very far. She drifted in a dreamlike state back to Dick's aerie.

Inez opened the door for them. Alessandro said goodnight and bowed, as if it was two hundred years ago, when people really did that, and in this building, too. Passing by the pictures, she suddenly felt like laughing, everything was so out of wack.

The high pitched trilling of the gray euro-phone woke her. "I am sorry to wake you so early, but it is almost eight o'clock, Inez has a lovely breakfast here in the kitchen for us. Dick is still asleep. What do you prefer, tea or coffee?"

Through the gauze curtains it was barely light.

"Huh? Oh, good morning, um, tea, no coffee."

"Okay, both. Follow the aroma."

She splashed the hand shower over herself in the stone tub, first warm, then ice cold to wake up. She slipped on the new clothes,

zippety zip, and ran down the hall.

The kitchen was huge with high ceilings, and had a fireplace she could have stood in, except it was taken up by a big red stove with lots of knobs. The table had a linen cloth on it embroidered with tiny blue and red flowers. The fine china settings were at the ready for the mountain of bread and croissants, homemade jams, a bowl of fruit, a platter of sliced ham and a thick rope covered salami that had its own cutting board and serrated knife. A pointy origami napkin sat on her plate.

Inez steamed her milk using an antique contraption on the stove. An equally quaint espresso coffee maker was also on the stove. She would have expected a slick machine, and there was one in the corner behind the tea tins.

"Would you like Darjeeling, Keemun or Earl Grey? There is no green tea, *mi dispiace*."

"Whatever, anything you like. Is that a furnace or a stove? It's kinda scary looking!"

"A stove. It is all about the esthetic, right, Inez?"

Inez shakily poured boiling water into the tea pot, cackling to herself.

Alessandro sliced through his croissant, spreading butter on one half, jam on the other before joining the two. After dismantling her napkin and spreading it on her lap she tried the same with a croissant and ended up getting jam all over the table cloth. He took no notice and stared out the window at the pink dawn rising behind the mottled tile rooftops. A cat slinked along the verdigris copper gutter, stalking some invisible prey. He was chewing his croissant when white feathers exploded in the air.

Beyond and below the little cloud they could see into the complex of the École des Beaux Arts. The huge buildings were surrounded by a tiny manicured park and looked abandoned, panes of the glass roof were broken and pigeons flew out from under the eaves where they had their nests.

"Le Palais des Études," Alessandro pointed out. "In '68, the statues were smashed when students stormed the school. This is a barbaric age we have been born into." He tore off the second horn of his croissant and chewed on it thoughtfully.

The bells of a nearby church began ringing forlornly, a dull ding dong, ding dong. Then louder bells, took over, more sonorous but farther away. Inez strained to hear.

"Again, the rain!" Rubbing her hip, she squinted at them and recited, "*Les cloches de St. Germain, il va pleuvoir, les cloches de l'Institut annoncent le beau temps.*"

"Old wives tale." He harrumphed as he put down his pastry and dabbed at his lips with the napkin.

"*Non, c'est le vent de l'ouest, venant de l'Angleterre et de la mer, qui amene la pluie. La Nature etait la meme au Moyenne Age que de nos temps, non Sandro?*"

Sandro nodded.

"The bells of the cathedral have announced the rains from England since 1163," Inez cackled to herself, folding fresh linen napkins from a stack into the origami fairy princess hats that lined up like a small army on the sideboard.

Penny drank her tea Anglo style, with milk and sugar, two cubes per cup. She wasn't awake yet, her eyes felt puffy and they stung. He looked the same as always. She took a slice of bread, spread butter on it and put on a slice of ham, that was easy and felt more like a real breakfast.

She poured herself some coffee, this time. He was still deep in thought, then suddenly picked up his phone from next to his plate and made a call. He waited, then shut it and gazed out the window again.

"Were you calling that Cyber guy?"

"Yes, there is no answer. I call Max now."

He thumbed in a number. She looked at the red stove sitting inside the carved limestone fireplace like a Jules Verne time machine. Where a wicked time traveling witch would stick little kids in and roast them. Ines looked like a witch with her crooked back and long nose that nearly touched her chin, but the evil vibes Penny was getting weren't from her. A braid of garlic hung next to the fire place, and a wreath of dried herbs, mostly plucked away. The floor was made of hexagonal terracotta tiles, polished and cracked in many places. Instead of counters there were heavy tables with marble slab tops. An odd screen dome covered an assortment of ripening cheese whose aromas wafted over now and then over the fruit and the toast and the warm pastry smells.

"*Allo? Dude, c'est moi, bon, ben, écoute.*" He went into a long animated discussion, mentioning Ula and Penny and *Cyber Ciné*, then said ciao and slapped it shut.

"Okay, we go back to *République*, same place, they will meet us there, bring your laptop."

He drained his cup and disappeared. Penny went to her room, grabbed her laptop in its neoprene sleeve and put on her jacket.

Walking back from her room, she forgot not to look at the photos. No doubt about it, the boys were not horsing around. This kind of photo should not be on somebody's wall, this old guy was a real pervert, and how could they do that, anyway? She wondered if Alessandro knew these things were up and that she had seen them. Somehow she doubted that he knew, he didn't seem that sleazy, and he had a girlfriend.

She waited at the door. He was having an intense argument with Dick, who countered every jab with high nasal snorts until he turned on his heels and disappeared into the back.

Stalking down the sidewalk, Alessandro just about had steam coming out his ears. Fog, rising from the river enveloped the stone buildings into the fuzzy monochrome of an old black and white movie set. They passed by a small courtyard belonging to the art school, enclosed behind a series of heavily barred arches and lined with some statues spared in '68. Here and there discarded drawing tables warped with happy abandon. In the center, atop a pile of dirt along with some old truck tires, a bright blue coil of plastic hose struck the only note of color in the grainy fog soaked browns of the courtyard. Chunks of broken modern sculpture peaking from the dirt convinced Penny this wasn't another art project.

They turned around the corner and walked up the rue Bonaparte. Long haired students, their throats wrapped in yards of scarves and carrying black portfolios were scuttling down the street and filing through the gate to the palatial and from this angle, well preserved *école*. The scraggly students each scanned Alessandro with cold raw envy as they turned in, but he was inside his bubble and took no notice of them.

The Metro, packed with sleepy workers, smelled like perfume, toothpaste and coffee breath, snaked its way through town, above and below ground like some fun park ride, with panoramas of the city stretching bleakly beyond the floor to ceiling windows. They were disgorged at République along with all the dot comers and fell in step with the mass trudging up the narrow sidewalk towards Le Temple d'Or.

The little café was as packed as the night before, but there was less smoke, and a lot less shouting. The crowd was different, too, less trendy, a lower social stratum was in here this morning, mostly

storekeepers. The red faced blue collar guys at the bar must have lived there or had real jobs in the area. A few sorry souls huddled in the corners scratching out lotto tickets, reading newspapers with magnifying glasses, or holding stubby non-filters with shaky yellow stained fingers.

Alessandro took a seat facing the wall, far from the door and slid his phone onto the green Formica table.

"How you gonna see them when they come in?"

"You will see them."

"How long do you think they'll take to get here?"

"We have time. Tell me if you see that *petit con*."

"Excuse me?"

"Ng, *Cyber con*." He said it fast, "Seebear coh."

"What's a coh?"

"A creep."

They ordered coffees, the waitress recognized them from the night before since he left a wad of a tip.

His phone rang.

"Dude! *Au, ben oui, mais qu'est ce que vous foutez?* Ciao."

"Max and Maia are on their way, the lazy bones. They will help us. You will love Maia, she is really sweet. Maybe she can show you around today. Forgive me for being such a bad companion, but I feel it is my duty to watch over Ula or she will fall off the edge of the world, you know? It is always like that with her, I am what keeps her in the reality. And now she has gone over the edge again, eh!"

"You didn't seem so concerned last night."

He shrugged. "She is *un fléaux*, how do you say, a cross to bear, but she is not my life."

"Still, you're the one made her famous, that's what the reviews say, anyway."

"Fame is relative, irrational and ephemeral. Who can say where she takes you or how far? Oh, right..."

He grinned at her again, showing his teeth, this time. They were probably fake, too.

"Tell me how you arrived at your music."

"Hmm, I remember my mother singing to me and my baby brother when I was little, she got into early music staying at this, um, don't laugh, 'Gnostic' commune in the Sawtooth. They lived in these buckyball domes, growing giant vegetables in manure and making goat cheese but also fasting a lot and singing to purify themselves and the

world. That's where she met my dad, the extreme agnostic. He was the dome engineer, empirical science all the way. He still teaches electrical engineering at University of Montana in Missoula and science is, like, all he knows or cares about, period. Mom home-schooled me, devoting all her energies to getting me a good start in life, but also to forget about my brother whose disabilities were so severe they had to put him away. Between her musical knowledge and my dad's leaving all this extra stuff around from his inventions—that's like his hobby, inventing cutting edge dead-end gizmos like this anti-gravity thing he's been obsessing over these past few years—I had all the raw materials for my projects, like for building instruments that could make the sounds I was hearing in my head, in nature, wind sounds and bird sounds, sounds that made me happy, that made me sad, that sort of thing, and then I realized I could use this essentic form, that's the shapes emotional expressions create, and maybe help people like my autistic brother to discover the emotional richness of the world. I was already at MIT when mom got cancer and read this book on Death and Dying by this woman, Kubler-Ross, who mentioned a Theano - 'Mrs. Pythagoras' and her use of vocal intonations to heal people. That's impossible to verify, like everything connected to Pythagoras, who was considered semi divine even during his lifetime and whose reality is totally obfuscated by the absurd legends that are attached to him, kinda like with saints."

She took a gulp of air and a sip from the now cold thimble.

"You mean, this discovery is all from the tunings of Pythagoras! He is better known as a mathematician and a philosopher, but also as a healer, yes, yes." It dawned on him now how deep in history all this went.

"Well, he was one of the first to document and explore these. That's why I have the postcards up, more than the math. So, the philosophy was already tampered with by the time Plato and his followers wrote everything down, and it's hard to tell, even with the beans issue, you know, like does the corna da butto sing with soul?"

He smiled, blushing, and flung his hair aside.

"So," she continued cautiously, "my mom got a little better then a lot worse. I was still refining the process, fine tuning, so to speak, with the trode improvs, in preparation for my dissertation and debut concert. You know all about that, right? (He nodded solemnly.) Well, my mom died just before the concert. There were no questions asked, because her heart was weak from all the chemo, so I had no clue. Then came the concert. When all the stricken people turned out to have been

really depressed and needy types, it all became painfully clear to me what I had done."

"Yes, yes, yes, I think perhaps I know a little how you were feeling. But your motives were correct and pure!"

"What's the difference? I don't know any more! So I'm just poking around, making music that can take me up, up and away, you know? Hey, that was awesome in the plane, huh?" she said, draining the sugar syrup from her cup. She had never told anyone the whole story, still, she wasn't going to let anyone know she was still on the project, not yet. She looked up from her cup.

After silently studying her with his chin in his hands, he straightened abruptly up, nearly tipping the chair over, "To fly directly into the sun and lose oneself—the divine madness! Sin burnt away by Art. If only this was true."

Penny got the feeling that maybe this guy was completely bonkers.

Suddenly, all heads in the café turned to the doorway where a black skinned super hero in a yellow Spandex cycling suit scanned the café. The pupils of his eyes, black pins inside white slits, moved over the crowd like the Terminator, whose multiplied image ricocheted on the mirrors from the corner photo by the TV.

But the eyes in the café were riveted not to this giant but to the woman beside him, a blond Amazon whose wild jumble of curls tumbled over a champagne mink stole that covered but left a glimpse of deep cleavage. Her snake skin jeans tapered fiercely into matching stiletto boots, bringing her up to her companion's height. Her face was African like his but her skin was lighter, the same dark caramel as the under-strands of her hair. She must have been riding on the handle bars, because there was only one bike attached to the iron railing outside, and he was the one beaded with sweat.

Alessandro saw Penny's face and turned around. The woman spotted Alessandro and waved, breaking into a big movie star smile.

## MAIA TELLS PENNY A STORY

"Sandro!" She gushed and in no more than three strides the couple was standing over them.

"Dude!" Max slapped Alessandro's shoulder and high fived him, his laughter resonating through the café as if it would blow out the windows. He slammed down his helmet and sat down next to his pal who was getting smothered by the woman with kisses. After an added pinch and a wink, she sat down, waved down the waitress, fished out a tiny pack of Marlboro Lights and a tiger patterned Bic lighter from her tiger skin handbag, flicked alight a cigarette and swung towards Penny, all in one continuous motion.

"So, are you a friend of Ula's, or did you just come for zee ride?" she asked, slithering around in her chair and squinting her amber eyes through the smoke.

Penny froze under the feral gaze. "Intellectual property rights, that's...that's why I came." Her throat locked up.

The guy scooted his chair closer to Alessandro and nodded every so often, his keen eyes darting around the café.

Maia's eyes locked in to Alessandro's, but he spoke first.

"Be nice to her, okay? Ula has robbed her artistic identity. You know, you divas, you are all alike, what are the little people to you?" He said with a theatrical flourish of his hand. He lifted one eyebrow, to make sure she got it. She blew smoke in his face and flashed her diva smile back at him. Her teeth were too fat to be fake.

"Pfoowah! *Le suicide des lâches*," he sneered into her cloud. Waving the smoke away he continued, "Max thinks it is a good idea if we go investigate that little porno-pimp at Cyber Ciné."

"Beat him up!" Max smashed his fist into his palm with a snarl.

Sandro rolled his eyes. "It is closed today. But we can check it out." Looking back at the two girls, he said, "Why don't you make yourself useful and take mademoiselle Bell sightseeing until dinner, she wants to see the medieval buildings. We went to Notre Dame last night, but she must see La Sainte Chapelle, Cluny, tout ça. Her mother was a singer, maybe you can talk about music, something beside the bling-bling, for once, eh, *carina? Bene così?*"

Maia exhaled more Marlboro Light, and crushed the half

burned cigarette into the ashtray. She stood up, smoothing her sweater over her curves and shook out her curls. She had the whole café mesmerized, but he ignored all this theater and turned to huddle with Max.

"*Saluts, les mecs, Forza!*" And Penny to followed her out.

"Okay, so, Sainte Chapelle, then Cluny, across the river?"

"Well, first I need to get some cash."

"Okay. Do you have a card, or traveler's checks?" Maia asked, pushing the door open with her hip.

"Bankomat, that's what I used in Ireland, and the rates were great. There must be one around here somewhere."

They found one on the corner at République, and Penny punched in for ten thousand francs. The machine spit them out. Soon they would be worthless as the Euro took over.

They took the metro to Châtelet and walked to the Île de la Cité across the Pont Neuf. Lovers and a few lonely winos with bundles were sitting in each of the half-moon seats carved into the sides of the bridge. Maia said nothing the whole way, she was too busy being herself. Guys stared at her from every corner, even from their cars, from across the river, it was like a bad movie. Penny had become invisible. Small people know the advantage of this, to see without being seen, to slip in between the cracks, but this was like walking through Paris with a giraffe.

Upstairs in the Sainte Chapelle a tour of German tourists pressed against them as they all craned to see the famous painted ceiling of the diminutive cathedral. There was no advantage to being short here, they were all a head or two taller than Penny. Around her the men's shutters clicked at their wives, making sure to get a shot of Maia in there somewhere. To them this glass gem of a cathedral was merely a backdrop for a prurient souvenir to sneak back home to Dusseldorf. The pigskin aroma of the Germans' new coats filled the air, what air there was. Dizzy and a little nauseous amidst all the choppy chatter, Penny zoomed in on the universe of gold stars that protruded from the lapis ceiling above her head.

Downstairs in the gift shop Maia bought a large transparency of the windows. "I know the perfect place for this!" she giggled. "Tell me, Penny, are you Catholic?"

"I'm nothing, you?"

"Oh, I am spiritual, I believe in Love, always, forever. I never find it, though, hah!"

Back on the street, Maia suggested they go to St. Germain, to the Buci market in Dick's neighborhood, before going to the Cluny museum. Penny could see the buildings of the Louvre lit up ahead. They walked past a red shop front with the word MUSIQUE above the door, and Penny made a mental note, not hard with that much bright red. Down the street was an Internet café—could come in handy. They turned in towards St. Germain at a covered archway, just before Dick's. A decrepit medieval street too narrow even for the smallest car curved off from the arch like an appendix. It was called *Nevers*; a real dead end.

They passed a stomach churning delicatessen window with rows of dried up pork chops, the rib bones stuck with greasy paper frills and next to them a platter of gray peas and brown carrot disks bordered with slices of green edged hard-boiled egg and baroque swirls of translucent mayonnaise. Penny found her mouth watering, even so.

Maia first pointed to her left. "That way is Cluny, we can go there later."

But finding Penny in front of the food in the window, she pointed right and said,

"First, let's get a bite, okay? This café has great salads, even better *charcuterie*, and nobody bothers you. We could go to Deux Magots, or Lippe, but they are places in which to be seen and they won't leave us alone. We need some tranquility, no? I love Jade on weekends, such cute guys, and of course everybody goes to Café du Marché. But this place has the best food, and the chocolates are to die for!"

The outdoor market of Buci was in full swing. Vendors yelled out the prices of their beautiful cabbages. Quinces, fresh dates and cactus fruit sat next to melons she could smell from across the street. Pears tumbled from the stalls and figs the size of apples were stacked up in paper cups next to a cornucopia of red and green grapes. Penny's salivary glands went into overdrive

Around the corner in front of trendy café Jade, a table loaded with every kind of seafood was manned by a scrawny white bearded geezer, an oily watch cap shading his eyes. An elderly lady inspected the array of oysters with a large mahogany handled magnifying glass. Three quarters of the length of the table was stacked with various species, as neatly arranged as gems. The lady, certainly once a great beauty, picked out two dozen of the largest barnacle encrusted specimens as if each promised a pearl the size of the ones she had casually thrown around

her neck over her navy blue house dress. The vendor, who was more old hippie than old salt, picked up each oyster, and placed them artfully around the Styrofoam platter as if he were Manet arranging a still life. The two exchanged some words, but money was not seen, and he offered the platter to the androgynous page/maid/poor relation who accompanied the lady to carry it back to their creaky historic apartment nearby. The codger bowed low with the words, "*Au revoir, belle dame*," to the older woman, and the two left, making a very Renaissance cortège as they disappeared around the corner of the rue Mazarine.

Penny took in this bit of street theater. Maia scanned the café "Jaded" beyond, where the testosterone levels were advertised and could be accurately gauged by the ring of motorcycles parked conspicuously on either side of the seafood stand. The old oyster vendor winked at Penny like an old satyr, or rather like one of their flipped cousins in the myth-o-sphere, so she walked back over to Maia and tugged at her mink thing to get her to move along.

At the corner of rue du Bourbon Chateau Maia strode under a yellow awning and into the café, Le Chai de L'Abbaye. They sat down at a booth under grape cluster sconces and a leering sculpture of the god Pan who looked just like the oyster guy, minus the watch cap. Grape chandeliers dripped from the ceiling, with painted vines meandering from them down the walls. The place was set up for a bacchanalia, not a quick bite on the run.

Doing a pretty good Brigitte Bardot *moue*, Maia checked her appearance in the mirrors that were hung between the glowing grape clusters and ordered a *bière blanche* and a *salade niçoise* from the waiter, still breathless from his recent motorcycle commute. Penny went for the charcuterie plate and a Perrier and watched the people walking past the window in the little street.

"Be careful you don't ruin your appetite," Maia said, as Penny let her eyes, ears and nose wander.

A long haired art dealer type dressed in a fancy but no longer fresh black outfit paced up and down in the middle of the narrow street, married to his cell phone.

The little waiter rushed in with their order, one eye on the shiny motorcycle parked on the curb. Behind them the cooks were gathered around a long table with a platter of broiled potatoes arranged around a roast, a large salad bowl and wine - the whole nine yards.

"*Pas mal, ces patates*," muffled the guy in the apron. The others

laughed and poured more wine.

Penny attacked her plate of cured ham, sausage, pâté, tiny little pickles and thick slabs of the same bread she'd had earlier at Dick's. Normally, she was more or less a vegetarian, but she was letting that slide for now.

"So, do you and Max live around here? Dragon Street, that's intense, you live in the same apartment, right?"

"No, no, yes, yes, we live in the "*quartier*," on the Rue du Dragon, but we have adjacent apartments, you know, not so big, just the floor, it is very expensive around here."

"Expensive? You dress like a million bucks, what are you talking about?"

"Oh, the clothes, well, this is Paris, one must look good, no? Our place is not so—the *quartier* is convenient but also *richissime*. Our place is not. It is converted *chambres de bonnes*, like garrets, but we have an elevator, so rare for old buildings."

"Yeah, I live in a fancy part of town too, and it sure is convenient. Little Italy and Chinatown have everything I need. Have you been to Manhattan?"

"No, no, not yet, but Ula has told me all about your neighborhood. All the best shops are there now, Chanel, everybody, just like here."

"Yeah, the designers. I hate shopping, I get every thing mail order," Penny said. She'd been waiting for this.

"Your hunting jacket is too big, No zero in the catalogues? But the outfit and the boots are perfect, yes?" Maia winked at Penny.

"Alessandro got those. I guess he thought I would blend in better in these than jeans and hiking boots."

Maia's laugh rippled out, and she drained her beer to the slice of lemon at the bottom.

"*Quel drôle de zèbre*. He is a strange one, Sandro, so serious, really. I must tell you about him."

She pressed her lips together and fished her cigarettes from the narrow purse.

"Cigarette?" She offered Penny the pack, then without waiting for an answer, lit one for herself and took a long drag. Maia exhaled, leaned in confidentially.

"So, Beatrice, the famous Roman model is Sandro's mother. She has an affair with this married older man. He is *richissime* with a title, a real catch, so she thinks he will divorce and marry her if she has

a son. But then, what do you know, not one but two baby boys come out! She thinks she has it in the bag, no? Yes, so for a while, *il marchese* has two *ménages*, one in the Eternal City and one in the City of Light."

Penny bit into a *cornichon*.

"Then, the wife dies, and Beatrice think, oh boy, I get him now! And the title, *marchesa*! A symbol only, because in reality the *marchesato* is only a pile of earthquake rubble on either side of the *autostrada*. Ah, but no, by then *il marchese* has her figured out, that she is a conniving bitch, and also a bad mother, you know, after the scandal with the Jesuits."

"Huh?" Penny almost choked on her *cornichon*.

"When she goes to launch her movie career, spaghetti westerns at Cinecittà in Rome, she leave them here with Jesuits, for the discipline! Terrible, terrible, what happened. To treat little children that way!" Maia took a deep breath.

"So Beatrice decides to keep them home out of trouble, while she lives her jet set life in Rome and New York and the Riviera. The boys they pretty much live alone in the house with the servants and it gets very strange, with Angelo always in his mother's high heels and Sandro playing renaissance courtier with his lute and the swords, and then learning soccer from the chauffeur, of all people! So she has Deek, her very dear friend, keep an eye on things. Okay, she is a busy woman, but, I mean, Deek? Oh, he keep an eye on them and better than the Jesuits!" She blew a cloud of smoke into Penny's face.

"Then, *il Marchese*, he dies of infarctus, like that!" Maia snapped her fingers. "So, everything goes to Sandro, not a crumb for the others!" Maia leaned back, exhaled and watched the swirls rise to the ceiling, waiting for a reaction, but Penny was busy folding her napkin into a pattern of tiny isosceles triangles.

"Hey! Do you know what Sandro does? The perfect gentleman, when he becomes adult, he split the fortune three ways, fair and square, and he restore the house for Beatrice, even though the crazy bitch kick them out! Good boy, but a little mixed up, no?" She shook her curls and exhaled, glancing around to see who was watching her.

"Gee, guess I'd be pretty mixed up too," Penny stammered.

Maia leaned forward again. "Mixed up, yes! But with a big heart. (She struck her chest hard.) It broke when his brother died, and you know, his mother never reconciled... Yes, terrible."

"And Ula! her career was nothing before, nothing! She wastes

his talent. He is better dancer than her. The man can fly." Her eyes hovered in the cloud of smoke above her head as they were following a tiny Alessandro.

"How long have they been together?" Penny asked.

"Difficult to say." She blinked slowly. "We all know each other since we are small and Ula has always been around and had a thing for him, but then there was his brother."

Maia leaned back, exhausted, and crushed out her butt in the Ricard ashtray.

"I'm sorry I was mean before, I thought maybe you were a lesbian, because of the jacket and the short hair, the way you move, like a boy. But you are just shy, like him, and that is your act, right? 'Little American tomboy prodigy don't mess with me!'" She chortled to herself, tapping out a new cigarette.

"The clothes, size 0, they fit perfect, no?" She winked again and pinched Penny's cheek like a baby's, just as she had earlier to Alessandro.

Embarrassed, Penny munched on another miniature pickle, then rolled up a piece of *Jambon de Bayonne* and popped it into her mouth. The ham was tough as beef jerky.

With undisguised amusement, Maia watched her chew, lighting up another. Penny looked out the window and chewed and chewed, getting really thirsty now.

"You know, I am not surprised Ula stole your music. She steals from me all the time, clothes, mostly. My little Yohji top disappeared last year. This year he's not doing those, so she's out of luck, ha, ha! She only wears black, so now I'll think to hide all my black stuff before she visits. She doesn't think, she is so *dingue*, em, so out there. You know, her mother Irina, the famous ballerina, got pregnant, between Giselle and the Nutcracker, she had the baby in secret but kept on dancing, career first, just like Beatrice. The guy who knocked Irina up, you know this term? What a jerk, so Schwanz took them both under his wing, to live with him. That's where she killed herself, like the ancient Romans, in the bathtub. Ula found her, she was ten."

Penny stopped cold, mid chew.

Maia paused too, and summoned the waiter. "Lucien encore une!"

Lucien saw Penny working on her dry ham and dared her with a simple look. The beer would do the trick and there was no age issue here, so Penny, nodded and grinned.

Lucien chuckled and left for the beers, Maia already in mid-sentence.

"Irina was big in the gay scene after the war, and Montparnasse, she knew everyone, all the artists: Picasso, Dalí, Ernst, everyone. So did Dick. So, little Ula, she grew up crawling under the feet of giants, or on their shoulders, or bounced on their laps, very bohemian, no discipline, bedtime whenever she like, you know, and thinking she is little miss genius. That's why she is so messed up, besides the other thing. It's not her fault, you know? So she must be worried she is too old to pull it off! She should be thankful, maybe she looks OK, thanks to science! And now the oldest profession, how is she going to pull that one? *Non, mais vraiment!* But she is a good friend, really."

Penny ducked her head just in time. Lucien arrived with the two hefty mist covered goblets and slammed them down on the table, winking at them both. Slapping his towel over his shoulder, he returned to the front of the café to take orders from a group of silver haired men who'd come in for their postprandial espressos. The beefy group stood sipping and watching Maia, exchanging ribald stories.

Penny drank from her goblet, peering over the rim at the people in the room. In the corner a one armed guy scribbled furiously on a yellow legal pad. The seat next to him was occupied by a bulging bag of laundry. Beyond was a table of giggling high school girls, in the middle of a coffee and cigarette fueled gossip orgy. On the other side of them in the corner by the window an old man in a faded, greasy beret scowled at the schoolgirls from behind his Figaro. The *garçon* brought him a carafe and a glass with a thick yellow liquid at the bottom, and Penny wondered as he dribbled water into the glass, creating a milky cloud, if the guy had ever been an Absinthe drinker.

Maia must have sensed her drifting. Licking her pillowy lips, she said,

"Delicious, no?"

"Yeah, gets you really high," Penny said as she drained her goblet.

Maia looked out the window where Lucien waited on the terrace crowd and suddenly two more full goblets appeared with Lucien. Maia blew him an air kiss and began her third beer.

No mention yet of her fateful talent, what was she driving at? All of a sudden Penny had it figured out. Maia the matchmaker! As if Alessandro wasn't Ula's fiancé, lavishing her with diamonds the size of walnuts. Maybe Maia was one of those Cosmo types who felt you had

to snag a man to be worth anything, and snag him from any one, including that good friend you couldn't badmouth enough.

Maia raised an eyebrow.

"You are thinking about something, what is it?"

"Hmm? Oh, I don't know, it's just that I came here to find Ula and talk to her, and here you tell me all this stuff about Sandro, but I only just met him-her-them, and I have a boy friend, back home, if that's what you're thinkin'."

"Really? Is he cute?"

"Yeah, sure. Blonde hair, blue eyes, great smile, hot bod, well, now that he's all grown up. That's so weird, we grew up together, and now he's this huge hunk and I'm, like, about the same as always, just structurally different, you know? Anyway, he's real, not all cleaned up and manicured like a magazine person." Penny was well on her way to getting totally plastered.

"So, where is he now, your hunk of manhood?" Maia teased.

The scruffy art guy was settled down with two Africans who stared uncomfortably into their teacups. The Parisian made a big show of squeezing his lemon with his spoon as he talked, but his lesson in European table manners was met with scowls and it looked like one or the other would spring up and strangle him at any moment.

"He's off in Alaska, working in the oil fields, so he can make a lot of money, and hunt caribou, that's elk, huge prehistoric size deer," Penny continued.

"Ooh, and how old is this cowboy, whass eez nem?"

"K.C., it's from KC and the Sunshine—"

Maia broke in, "That's the way, uh huh, uh huh, I like it uh huh uh huh. They were great! Snoop Doggy Dog uses their samples all the time."

Maia jived in her chair, drunk as a skunk, now.

"And what do you have in common with ziss guy?" Now Maia looked downright amused.

"Nothing. He knows a lot about animals and trees. His grandpa was Salish from the Bitterroot tribe. Montana, that's where I'm from, Darby, Montana, so him and his brothers are into all that native lore."

"There are many native Americans in the US? Are their lives as difficult as the American blacks? You say some are blond? As light skinned they must blend in OK, no?"

"Depends, it's hard getting away from the reservations, and once out, you're poor just like everybody else. It's all about money,

education, and motivation."

Maia nodded absentmindedly, leaning back in her chair and squinting at her through her veil of smoke.

"America is fascinating, I would love to go to California, the beaches, the surfer dudes. Tell me, do you love this boy?"

"Huh?"

Maia sat up and fluffed her hair.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I am being, how do you say, nosy?"

"My music is my life, that's why I'm here."

The room spun, the people a blur.

"Yes, it is really impressive, what you have done in your life, I have been such a lazy bones, you give me a real kick in the ass, you know?"

Almost two thirty. She yawned, then Penny yawned.

"Look, it's dark out, does it get dark this early?"

"More rain," Maia said, wrinkling her nose. A rooster crowed inside the tiger purse on the table. Maia pulled out a tiny gold phone.

*"Oui, bon, quel salaud. Ha ha ha, incroyable! Oui, on est crevées aussi. A t'a l'heure."* She put the phone back in the bag.

"We go back to my place, wait for the boys, refresh the faces. First we have a coffee here, they have cute candies with the coffee."

Maia waved to Lucien. *"Deux petit cafés, Lucien, O.K.?"* and she opened another mini pack of Marlboro Lights, tapped out a cigarette. She seemed to require one in her hand in order to talk.

"The place was locked up so Max broke the lock, he is talented like that. He should be a thief. They found all kind of shit in there. They bring some of it back. Max says the place was full of illegal porno stuff, he says, and they found the motion capture suit of Ula, it goes inside her, all plugged in with hydraulic pressure sensors, can you imagine? I always thought she was, well, not very talented that way. Men are so sick, I don't 'get it!'"

Penny nodded, thought it was more than just men.

The demitasses came with a gold foil wrapped oblong. Inside was an edible jewel, a perfect walnut dipped in chocolate and dusted with cocoa so it looked like a miniature brown velvet brain. Maia popped hers in her mouth. Penny nibbled at hers with each sip of coffee. The coffee was perfect.

"Sandro said on the plane that the French don't know how to make coffee, what's that all about?"

"Poor Sandro and his Italian fetish, he never lived there, you

know, it is a sentimental mannerism, he was born here and he went to school here, but he never lived there and his French is so much better than his Italian! He swears in Italian, it is so cute. Have you seen him do this? He looks through his eyebrows like this, oooh." She made the face and started laughing and coughing, crushing out her half smoked cigarette.

"Yeah, but he said *merde* to my computer," Penny said, chuckling.

"He should 'wash his mouth out with soap,' that one, is this the correct expression?" Maia howled with laughter as they zigzagged out into the drizzle.

On their way out they passed a small, hole in the wall shop crowded with African masks, and inside, half hidden behind a curtain, was the guy again, arguing with his two suppliers. The streets were shiny with rain and the market scraps were getting slurped up by automated bright green trucks. Even the curbs were scrubbed by machines, helped out by sullen guys in safety green coveralls and matching plastic brooms: it was definitely Brave New World over here.

Maia wobbled stoically up the hill in her stilettos as the rain drops got bigger and heavier. After crossing the busy Boulevard St. Germain and winding around another a corner they stopped at the small door of a building that slanted steeply back from the street, it was so old. Maia punched in her code, holding onto the sodden mink around her shoulders.

A single neon strip zapped at the chiseled limestone walls. An early Otis prototype, crafted as finely as a harpsichord, sat inside an iron and brass filigree tube inside the spiral stone staircase. Maia lifted the curved brass latch and the two of them squeezed into the wood and glass coffin, Maia ducking and gathering her volumes of hair so none would get caught en route.

Gears and pulleys churned above and below them, the box shook, then lifted up, squeaking and swaying up through the dim spiral staircase, smelling of machine oil, dust, floor wax and bourgeois banquets with lots of butter and tarragon. The elevator convulsed to a stop and they got out in the cold neon of the landing, painted in black lacquer like a sleazy nightclub. A framed poster with the words *Mueller und Voodoo* greeted them between two doors, one stainless steel with a combination lock, the other with carved panels painted with cheap gold paint. Maia stuck her ornate key in the keyhole of the gold painted door.

A leopard canvas futon strewn with fashion magazines and fake fur pillows dominated the living room. Next to it rose an impressive stereo system with a whole wall of shelves devoted to CD's and DVD's. A plasma screen filled the other wall.

Penny sat on the futon between magazines, her knapsack at her feet. Maia whisked a butt filled ashtray teetering on the sofa arm into the kitchen, and came back with a stick of incense and a clean ash tray. She picked up the fashion magazines and dumped them on an African stool, then sat down on a fur ottoman to unzip her stiletto boots and wriggled out of her steaming sweater, revealing a red lace bra. Picking up a towel from the floor, she patted her dripping curls.

"Oof!" She offered Penny the towel. "We made it. Look at you! Not even wet, how do you do it?"

"Gore-Tex, the hi tech wonder fabric! Could I use the bathroom, please?"

"Oh, yes, the beer. After, I will put up the pretty window glass!" Maia showed her the toilettes, a small round room in tiny turret with a single window angled into a conical limestone ceiling. The window was covered with a matron sized 1920's satin teddy. The bowl had an ancient teak seat, and a high cistern for water, activated by a carved wooden handle that hung at the end of the long brass chain.

When Penny came out Maia was standing in the door with the transparency from the Sainte Chapelle. She tore the teddy down and tossed it in the wastebasket and stuck on the transparency, transforming the tiny gothic room into a prismatic time capsule.

"Let's put on some music until they return."

After lighting the incense, Maia went through her collection.

"What do you like? I have some lots of World, folk songs, West African instrumentals, Central African percussion, vocals. Shanghai, Indonesian and Classic rock, Japanese rap, real rap, (Snoop Doggie Dog, Eminem, Puffy, classic R and B), Allyah, jazz, (fusion jazz, Cuban jazz, Brazilian jazz, Samba.) French pop, Air, more Rave, I have a lot, I mean a lot of Techno—"

Penny cut in, "How 'bout some Techno?"

"Fantastic, I will put water on the gas for tea, and you can look. Are you cold? I am. I will turn the heater on, brrr."

"Where did you get all this, on the web?"

"Max burns them, he never labels them, only with the date. I'll put this, British, 6-9-01, there." Maia strode into the kitchen.

"Have you shown Ula these world CDs?"

"Ha! She has my gamelan. I had this Indonesian boyfriend, so I had lots. He went back when the new economy crashed, good riddance. A Moslem, you know, huge ego, minuscule manhood. She took his kung fu flicks, my Ravi Shankar, Aborigine songs and the didgeridoo! All gone!"

She came back with two cups and saucers with Lipton bags in hot water, and slices of lemon next to the spoon. A bowl of raw sugar lumps. Little linen napkins. Very proper.

Outside the door were voices then a sharp knock. The thieves were back with their booty.

Max blew in first, carrying a bulging messenger bag, followed by a fried looking Alessandro.

"This dude, he's a maniac. The place was locked tight. It's good he wasn't there, because in the back room, there is an arsenal of knives, fat swords, numchuks and even this!" Max pulled out an automatic pistol and stuck it in the waistband of his cycling tights. Alessandro slumped into the futon, rubbing his face in his hands. Max took out the pistol and started playing with it.

*"Non mais, putain, ça va pas! Et qu'est ce que tu pense faire avec c'machin la, hein?"* Maia screamed at Max, pointing to the gun in his hand.

Max read the writing on the nose, "Beretta, 9000 S."

"Lemme see that." Penny held her hand out. Maia rolled her eyes, hands on her hips.

"Do you even know how to use one of these, Max?" Penny asked.

"No, do you?" he sneered as he handed her the gun, pointing it right at her.

"Yeah, well, the Magnum Desert Eagle, Mark XIX component system, and the .440, the Corbon, 'the ultimate hunting machine'. Got a real kick. Thanks. It's much heavier, and bigger than this thing, you wouldn't wanna stick it in your pants. Whoa, smart. See this doodad here?" She flipped on the safety. "Max, you just stuck a fully loaded gun, with the safety off, in your pants, um, tights." She handed it back to him, nose down.

Alessandro was frozen with terror.

Penny poked around the pile of disks with the handle of her spoon.

"Well, Maia, here are your boyfriend's Kung Fu movies. I bet the didgeridoo and gamelan stuff is in here too. This stuff over here's

contraband, the labels are in Russian." She looked up at the gun sticking out of Max's waist.

"Hey, you know, we should be using gloves for this, but you've had your paws all over this stuff, haven't you?"

Alessandro raised his hands, and shook his head, pure Harpo Marx pantomime.

Max was so pumped he was stupid. He scratched his jaw and threw his messenger bag on the leopard futon next to Alessandro, who literally jumped a few inches up from his seat, he was so edgy.

Still in her red bra, Maia stomped around the room, tearing at her curls. Suddenly she pushed Max into the kitchen, where she ran the water to muffle her voice, not that it did anything.

All Penny caught was prison and *c'est vraiment con*. Max mumbled something back and one of them banged stuff around in the kitchen.

In the living room, Penny poured Alessandro some cold tea. He drank, breathing a long sigh of relief. Plunging his fingers into his eyes, he mused them around as if to erase what he had seen.

Maia came back with a collection of red vinyl colorist's gloves and tossed them on the table.

"We can use these. Max, get your laptop. I find the video player. And I make some more tea, a big pot. *Va bene, Sandro?*" She mussed his hair, kneeling in front of the cabinet to pull out her cheap video cassette deck, grimy with use.

Max argued with her. "Non! I have better equipment."

"Your place smells like feet and this equipment is okay. Here we have tea, it smells good and it is warm."

Max ducked back out to get his gear. Penny decided not to pull out her laptop yet. No telling what was crawling around in those disks, and she didn't want any trouble aiding and abetting.

Max came back with his laptop, equipped with the best DVD player money could buy. He still had the gun tucked into the waistband of his spandex cycling suit. Maybe he expected company. He slammed in the top DVD, that playing, of all things, the very video that had brought Penny all this way. The under the virtual water footage with Penny's music filtering through the speakers.

Maia stood in the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a checkered dishrag. Alessandro gazed enigmatically at Penny. Max looked up from his screen, "This creep is transforming Ula into a cartoon! This is nothing like what I was doing with her, remember?"

That was lyrical, this is, junk. You say you saw this on her site?" Max looked up at Alessandro.

"Yes, Penny and I saw it before we left. It did not look like your work." He was in a passive implode against Max's manic high.

Max's narrow eyes popped out of his head. "Look at the hair! The nails! The teeth, you never show the teeth. It will be years before the teeth are credible."

He pulled out the mini DVD and plopped in another. This one turned out to be classic Bruce Lee, unlabeled. He removed it and frisbeed it across the room, then tried another. Just what Sandro had been waiting for, it was one of the bump and grind videos, only this one went strait into the nasty from an enhanced cyber-stud. At the bottom of the screen were buttons for faster, deeper, circular, elliptical, and readouts for moisture and stimulation levels. Alessandro's face was blank.

Maia watched silently over Max's shoulder as he ran through random clips. He asked without looking up, "Hey, dude, do you see what I see? What's the deal with Ula and this character?"

Alessandro gave a helpless shrug. Max watched the video to the "money shot," when he exploded in laughter. Maia rolled her eyes and turned away. Alessandro daintily pick up a loose CD with his red gloved hand. The marker scrawl was illegible, but he held on to it anyway and turned it over to ponder the shiny surface, or his rainbow reflection. Either way, he looked remote and very sad, and Penny felt sorry for him, as Maia must have, watching him balefully as she sucked on a curl.

Alessandro's phone rang in his jacket. "Ciao, Dick, yes, we are fine. At Max and Maia's. No, we have not eaten. *Oui, pourquoi pas?* Have you heard from Ula? Yes, I will ask."

"Dick has invited us all for dinner, you want to come?" Max and Maia both shook their heads. Alessandro was waiting, so Penny shrugged her shoulders.

"I hate that old crocodile, and those paintings, *quelle merde, hein?*" Maia groaned.

"What about all this loot? Aren't you afraid Ng will track you down?" Penny nodded towards pile in the middle of the room.

"We can put it all in the *cave*. Or keep it here, but I don't think he will find us so soon. And, I have the gun."

"I'd stash it in the cellar and throw that thing in the river," Penny said. Maia dumped the stuff back in the bag and kicked it to the

door.

"We will call tomorrow, early is okay?" Alessandro asked, zipping up his jacket

"*Bien sure.*"

"*Bene.*"

He kissed Maia and Max, on both cheeks, and Max slapped his shoulder.

He squeezed into the little cage with Penny and the elevator swayed down to the ground. She felt a panic attack closing in, everything crashing down on her at once.

"Are you okay?" he asked, looking down at her.

"Yeah, fine. Weird elevator, kinda like a coffin."

"You are claustrophobic?"

"No! It's really cool, I wish we had this in New York, instead of that iron monster."

Alessandro chuckled as he unlatched the delicate doors.

Although it was only a five minute walk back to Dick's, the weather had turned with a bitter wind.

Tiny Smart Cars splashed past them, the only vehicles that fit into the tight medieval alleys. They went down a different street this time, Rue des St. Pères, turned a corner at the *quais* and there they were at Dick's place. In the elevator on the way up, Alessandro rest his hand on Penny's sleeve.

"Let us not say anything about the gun, maybe not about what happened at all. I do not trust him so much, okay?"

"Sure, no problem, it's kind of less complicated that way, right?"

Inez opened the door, and fussing over their dripping clothes, suggested a bath before dinner.

Penny kept her eyes on the floor as she went down the hall to her room. In the bathroom she washed her hands and face, but no way was she going to step in that tub now.

"Inez says dinner will not be for a while and Dick is on the phone. Do you want to go for a walk? The weather is clear again now." In his dark suit, and with his hair combed back from his forehead, Alessandro looked like a vintage movie star, missing only a cigarette on a long holder.

"There's this music store down the street, I walked by it with Maia."

"Musique! Yes, I get my Lute music there."

"Lute?" So Maia wasn't just making stuff up.

They put on their coats and slipped out the couple blocks to the little shop.

"We take the *passeggiata*."

"What's that?"

"In Italy before dinner everyone goes for a stroll, like this."

"When did you ever live there?"

"I did not ever, but I am still Italian, and this is a civilized Italian custom."

The shop was floor to ceiling wooden shelves, all with handwritten labels. Lute music and prepared piano, every instrument in creation and some that existed only in theory. At the end of the polished wooden counter was a guy with pipe and coke bottle glasses scribbling in a notebook. No cash register, everything to the last detail was quaintly analog, and Alessandro, with his retro slicked back hair and his roman nose in the lute shelf, fit right in.

Books, the more popular ones for students at the front the store, the dust covered esoteric ones for the hardcore customers at the back, were sold there too, also hand priced. In the window were the boxed editions, and Alessandro locked on those as Penny scanned through the pile in the back. One caught her eye, it was hard to miss. Xenakis, *Les Polytopes*, with the X-man, in profile as always on the cover. Yellowed pages. 1975. Smelled like it just hauled up from someone's basement. Alessandro hovered, clutching a linen bound set: *Opere Complete per Liuto, Francesco da Milano*.

"We get those and we hurry. Come." He paid for the bunch in cash, gave the guy a big smile, and ringing the little bell over the door they exited into the twenty-first century.

Inez, more bent over than usual, took their coats and disappeared in the kitchen.

Dick came into the living room, cradling a glass of the same clear liquid as before, deep into happy hour, but he wasn't smiling.

Alessandro took one look at Dick, made for the bar, and poured himself a full tumbler of whiskey.

After having been short-listed along with three other, much younger artists, Dick had just moments before been turned down for the Biennale, which, like the Turner in Britain, this year going to an empty room and a light bulb, was focusing on younger, more extreme artists.

"Dick, it is not so important, everybody thinks this prize is shit!

It is an honor to lose!"

"Yeah, conceptual art's cool as long as it's funny, like Duchamps, or like when it blows your mind," Penny said.

"Oh? And when is it, dear girl, that something blows your mind?"

They moved into a narrow room with a long table made from a lengthwise tree trunk plank polished on top but with uneven natural edges, very Japanese. Origami princess hats stood in each plate. Glasses, or beakers, one narrow, one tall and wide, stood with a carafe that looked like a Klein bottle, full of water.

The aesthetic was pure Ula, but she was absent, and Dick had other things on his mind.

Inez brought in a plate of that peasant bread and another fizzy drink for Dick. Then a plate of *paté* with slices of ham and a big fat salami, more of those little pickles, a pot of mustard in the middle. A meal for alcoholic bachelors. Then she brought in a bottle of wine.

Alessandro nodded and tore off the foil, twisted in the corkscrew, stuck the bottle between his legs, and wrenched out the cork with a boink. He finished his whiskey and poured some wine in the bottom of his beaker, sniffed it, stuck it under Dick's nose, but he shooed him away. Alessandro filled Penny's beaker, not thinking to ask her, then his. He placed his hand above her glass.

"It must breathe a moment."

He poured water into all of the tall beakers, even though it looked like Dick never touched the stuff.

So this is where he'd gotten the waiter routine, waiting on Dick. Who did the brother serve? Nobody, he was the jester, flittering around. And Ula? She could see them both being waited on at table by him, a picture forming in her head.

She took a slice of bread and a slab of ham, a dollop of mustard.

Alessandro cut a big chunk of truffle *paté*, slammed it on his plate and smeared half of that on his bread. He cut some slices of the salami, arranged them on Dick's plate, sprinkling a few *cornichons* on the side, then sat down and began eating his *paté*. All this was done in the existential silence of the windowless room. Beckett moments or was this Sartre?

"I took Penny to Musique and she found this fantastic book, on Xenakis, all about his designs for spaces and monuments."

"Yeah, he introduced a whole new concept of spatial design,

space no longer defined by walls, but by immaterial qualities like light and sound. This space is multidimensional and dynamic, differentiated into often overlapping but contradictory areas. Polytopes. It's a virtual understanding of space, and works even better inside cyberspace, the way I'm thinkin', where you have infinite dimension at your disposal."

Listening attentively, Dick unwound the skin of his sausage slice.

"But in our world, of nuts and bolts, this is one of the defining characteristic of modernism. And the evolution of open space living, where space is defined by its activities, by light, focal areas, paintings, televisions, stoves, conversation or the bed, has been phenomenal, thanks to new materials and technology." He popped the slice in his mouth and chewed, deep in thought.

"May I take a look at the book?"

"Sure, it's in French."

*"Pas de problème, ma chère."*

Penny went into the living room and grabbed the shopping bag. At the table she fished out the books.

Alessandro opened one of the da Milano volumes.

"When was this guy?" she asked.

"Em, he was born the year after Columbus discovered the new world and died in 1543. His music is known for its grace and ethereal atmosphere. He was known as 'Il Divino,' a title awarded only to Michelangelo!"

"All in the family, are we? Hmph, I thought the lute was in the shop," Dick said from behind the pages.

"Yes, it needs to be repaired, but it is a relaxing hobby."

"Yeah, well none of your other hobbies are what one would call relaxing, are they, my boy? (He waved the book.) Mind if I look at this tonight? I'll give it back in the morning. I'm going to hit the sack, kiddos."

Dick got up, and grabbed the back of his chair. He was none too sure of himself after all those gin fizzes. Alessandro got up and led him out, one arm holding him up by the waist. Penny saw Dick slide his hand over Alessandro's butt as soon as he was through the door. She picked up the fantasia and read through it after she poured herself some more water from the Klein bottle.

Alessandro slipped back in.

"Okay, he is in bed now, I do nut think he will read it. Is better this way."

Penny stifled a yawn.

"You want to sleep now, or would you like a coffee?"

"I think we gotta talk."

"I make us some coffee, Inez is asleep."

He came back with a tray: coffee, a bottle of brandy, two snifters, a plate of chocolates decorated with drizzles of vanilla glaze.

"Okay," Penny said. "So the Muellers have all this stuff at their place, including a loaded semi-automatic pistol, which I'm sure is a whole lot more illegal here than where I come from. How's all this gonna help us get to the bottom of this and find Ula?"

He shrugged, his nose in his glass.

"If this cyber *con* guy was an expert hacker, then it would all make sense, but I doubt that."

He put down his glass, covering it with his hand to keep the fumes from escaping. Penny took a sip from her glass. After the beer, the wine, why stop now?

"I think he is, em, a simple crook, not a hacker, but a middle man in the porno business. I said to Max, leave it alone, but he did not listen, that is Max."

"Yeah, if Ula's going down that road, there's no telling. Sure won't be good for her career, be sure of that."

"That is the big problem, her career is not in so good shape nor is she. She is old for a dancer and desperate. The act, too, *managgia*."

"OK, I get the picture."

"Whut?"

"Mid-life crisis."

He rubbed his brow, shrugged.

"More than that. Dance is in terrible shape, like the symphonies, companies are closing everywhere. The electronic medium may be the only way to survive, but it is two dimensional and does not live, it is frozen in time. And performance film is marginal. It does not generate capital and so is a losing proposition for the media."

"I know what you mean, it's like what happened to improvisational music with the invention of the phonograph. So much was lost, became fossilized or was chopped up into easy listening sound bites. The same is bound to happen with performance unless it can exist in real time, the way musicians now can improvise entire concerts, real time on a real stage using just a laptop and a sound system."

He grinned, took a bite of chocolate and a swig of brandy to swish around and melt the candy.

"For our immediate concern, it is interesting that Ula is obsessed with the ideas of interface and reproducibility. She believes that she will become immortal, as her mind is assimilated into the dimensionalities of the computer. Inside the Singularity she can dance forever using her virtual body, many bodies, and be admired for all eternity. I never take this seriously because I do not think this possible without total immersion of the gathered audience. But pornography is private and not habitually a group experience. Now, inhabiting infinite bodies, all young and attractive, she can seduce an infinite number of immersed audiences, audiences of one. And now she is so consumed by this idea of immortality she believes it is biologically possible also. I dunno."

"Yeah, According to Kurzweil Utopia is downloading the contents of your brain to a hard drive. He should stick to synthesizers. Big picture is, one man or woman's fear of death and their denial of the social nature of humanity. Of course for them the answer is in tech. I don't buy it, it's like cryogenics, it's all a big pyramid scheme. Living here and now's more important than immortality."

"Pyramid scheme? You mean like the sphinx? I dun't understand."

"A con, scam, fraud. A joke!"

"OK. But at Cyber Ciné, in the kung fu room, I saw some charts for a Chinese longevity discipline. I think they are a joke as you say, but I believe this is what is going on there, as well as the motion capture. I saw two suits, his and hers. I think she is having an affair with that little mutant, all from inside the suits, is funny, no? I wish I knew more this guy's plan for her before he gets his numchucks into us."

"Yeah, looks like we got our day cut out for us, tomorrow. I'm gonna crash, hope you don't mind."

He accompanied her as far as the hallway, gave his anachronistic bow and she made her way down the half lit corridor, careful not to smash into any priceless antiques or framed photographs.

## DICK SCHWANZ HAS A CHANGE OF HEART

Wrapped in the terry robe, she drew aside the drapes. Blue sky. The pane was cold. Art students bustled in the small courtyard on the other side of the building so it had to be around nine, schools were universal that way. Where was Alessandro?

She dressed, the system was designed for speed, or for maximizing one's makeup applying minutes. Penny used her makeup minutes to make sure all her tech was recharged and ready for action. Then she went down the hall towards the kitchen. The pictures jumped out in all their tawdry banality. In the living room, Alessandro was already pouring himself a drink. Dick marched up to him and stopped not a quarter inch from his nose.

"I've had about enough of this, of *you*." He was drunk too.

They had the look of people who had woken up fighting. She didn't want to know any more. Spotting Penny, he added, "Both of you, I don't run a hotel here, you and killer elf there, yeah you, you gotta clear out! Your stuff too. Brain zapper, all of it. Now, beat it!" He spun on his heels and marched back into his quarters.

Alessandro didn't move. He glanced at Penny and Inez, who had hobbled in from the kitchen. Inez patted him on the arm before fading back into the kitchen.

This left the two of them, marooned on the white flotaki island.

He rubbed his eyes. They were red and circled in brown.

"Did I miss something?"

"Get your stuff, we go to the hotel, an improvement, I promise. No ghosts," he said in a hollow voice.

Penny crammed everything into her carry-on, including the hiking boots, and walked back through the hall to the door. She did not look at the photos.

She stood by the door with her bag and looked out at the Louvre and the yellow leaves shivering outside the window in the pale morning sun.

He punched in a number as they waited for the elevator. He kicked in his bag and leaned back against the etched glass. A few foot tapping moments, someone answered.

*"Quoi? Pas encore reveiller? Mais, putain, qu'est ce que tu*

*fous?*" He shut his eyes. "Max. Still in bed, the lazybone."

"I need coffee, do you need coffee? We go to this little place by the school. Tranquil."

They walked up rue Bonaparte in the chilly air. The art students seemed to have piled on more ratty sweaters, wrapped yet another scarf around their necks. Alessandro had a long black cashmere coat on over his suit that was looking a little rumped this morning.

Opposite the entrance to the school was a café in the middle of a small narrow block, somehow devoid of antique shops. La Charette was a tiny hole in the wall, still covered in Art Deco tiles. The café counter was crowded with truck drivers in blue jumpsuits, guzzling wine. Alessandro and Penny sat down at one of the half dozen tables. A perfectly coiffed middle aged woman asked them what they wanted from across the counter.

*"Deux grand crèmes et deux croissants, s'il vous plait, madame."*

"The coffee is nut so good here, but it is all real, the way Paris was before."

"Before '68?"

"Before it became Disney." He pronounced it Deeznay.

He made another call. Shook his head. Dialed again.

"I am finding a hotel for us. Angleterre is *complet*, full."

He spoke again, no luck.

*"Complet, complet, complet.* Antique dealer convention.OK, I call Le Crillon." He frowned more.

"Merde, I forget, they are still in renovation. I call Duc de St. Simon. They have cute suites and are close to Max's."

He crossed his fingers, called, and talked for a long while, seemed to know whoever was on the other line pretty well.

"Okay, we do nut have to sleep under the Pont Neuf with the hobos tonight."

"Don't Max and Maia have extra futons?"

Alessandro shuddered. He went up to the counter and paid.

"Okay, we go shake them awake, what do you think?"

Dick poured himself a jigger, squirted seltzer from the blue glass bottle and slumped into the leather sofa, staring blankly at the painting on the wall.

Who was he trying to kid? Without the Biennale his career was on its way down the toilet. The art market had toppled worse than the towers, and he was getting too old for this roller coaster. He rubbed his hands over his face, moving the loose flesh to ease the tension, then swept them over his prickly morning skull. Disaster upon disaster—when would it ever end? Why the devil had he tried that last night? It was those buns, those hard sweet honey buns. He needed time to think. Hoped kicking them out wasn't going to backfire. There would be a call any minute.

Architecture, no hit and miss there. Clean living. Abstract, convoluted mind-scapes like that Greek the little muffin idolized. Furnished how?

Dick found the book and poured himself another gin fizz from the bar, a Jean Michel Frank block that loomed like Manhattan against the wall.

The block, the cube. Walls and corners. The corners were the problem, and modernism, no, civilization, was full of them, not just on walls, but on beds and sheets and pillowcases, on tables and books and picture frames!

He drained the glass, felt his bowels move like clockwork, but felt no joy in it. The thought of working made him want to puke. He rushed into the bathroom with the book, and an entire morning of gin fizzes poured from his mouth into the bowl. To hell with the paint. He turned around and dropped his trousers.

Dizzy from drinking before ten. He flipped through the Xenakis Polytopes book, pages of swooping kinetic drawings swirled before him. This book did nothing for him. Cyber design was the new thing. Blobbism, Biomorphic shapes. More livable than that Greek cyclop's parabolic utopias.

The king of the new blobbism designed everything on his computer, without corners, splashing the Pantone palette with a toddler's abandon. And, cyber design was clean, clean, clean.

Aah, more on the way! The Cerulean blue layer, mmm, courtesy flush, floral spray, for his own serenity. His art career was effectively down the toilet. Had to face facts, let the young turks flush out the old guard! He would turn to Design, something easy to clean up. First off, redecorate the loft. Get written up. *"Le Blobbisme translucide de Dick*

*Schwanz, la solution moderne de vos rêves.*" He needed a female partner, but Ula's tastes were too spare and she had no head for money.

The boys' mother was another matter. Bed, bath, and boudoir. The dame was still a knock out. An aristocrat, minor celeb: made it all legit. Family that sleeps together stays together. With the new blue pill, he could even try that.

Last blue turd, plop. He pressed full flush then back spray wash, dryer, fragrance, aaah. He got up and zipped, whistling softly to himself as the seat closed silently behind him.

Start small. For the table: cutlery, dishes and oh yes, zany napkin rings. Call Beatrice, first thing. Get his mind off all the nasty business. Oh, what a delightful project! What a wonderful new life!

The phone rang. It was the Doctor.

## DISTURBING DISCOVERIES

A greenish glow oozed from under Max's door. He opened it just as the elevator rattled to a halt. Max's narrow eyes bore into hers. "*Maia à ses règles et elle me casse les pieds! Bref. Entrez, make yourself at home.*"

Inside, the open live-work space was painted matte black, including the ceiling, and all the electronic paraphernalia was lost in the blackness, except for the lights. His bicycle was mounted to the wall next to the door like a sculpture, and was probably worth as much. His flat panel displays glowed with moving video. He rolled from one machine to the other, propelled by his long powerful legs. The chair was a vehicle, not a repository. He moved around, pressing the enter key on one, spinning volume wheels on another, a giant black spider checking on its glittery web.

Against one wall was a black leather futon riveted to a tubular aluminum frame that made it look like a piece of sports equipment. Surrounding the coffee table were more of those mystery fur ottomans like the ones at Maia's place. Across from the sofa a ghostly white African mask loomed, guarded by an assortment of fully functional spears. Below it were some drums and several low carved stools. Above the stereo and the shelves of CD's hung a large, framed psychedelic poster of Jimmy Hendrix. The place smelled of tires, old socks and cannabis resin.

Penny pulled her laptop and peripherals, wires, and converters out of the bag, and set up on the yellow Lucite table next to Max's laptop as was probably intended. This was, after all, what she had come across the Atlantic for.

Max had organized the loot by medium with a number sticker when the title was undecipherable. Audio CD's in one stack, CD ROMs in another, floppies, Data CD's together, and a low stack of DVD's on top of two video cassettes. The material running on his machines now were copies, he'd first run the originals through a crappy system to test for bugs and booby traps. Penny usually did this too, but her crappy system was a big old CRT desktop.

"Hey, Max, have you checked in this stuff over here? I only want to run the clean ones."

Without looking up from his console, Max answered. "I have checked everything. The floppies are copies. The originals, I have in the bag, so I can take them back. I have copied all the CD's, they are all ready to go. The originals of those are also in the bag. The labels are all mine, over by you. If you want to see the original labels, look over there, in the corner by Jimmy, the bag is there. The DVD's on top of the two cassettes are the originals, I don't have a functioning DVD copier for the new, so called 'protected', ones. And the cassettes are the originals. I will have to use Maia's machine to copy them, it works better."

She ran through the finished, marketed products first. Most of the originals were labeled in Cyrillic, and were of passable quality Ukrainian black market labels, but Max didn't read Russian, so he just numbered them as he went through. The betas, originally in Ng's, angry magic marker scrawl, were also illegible to copy down, so Max had numbered them, like the others. She looked into the floppies first. From the general to the particular was better, but this was where the truth lay.

The code was a mess, it was redundant, full of garbage, would take weeks to decipher.

"Which one are you looking at?" Max asked.

"Some code."

"You write code?"

"I can read most code, I haven't done a whole lotta programming but I can tell the difference between elegant code and crap. This is crap."

She highlighted about twenty lines of it.

"See all these brackets and strings of symbols, like it's a mathematical theorem, if  $x = y$  then  $q$ , etcetera, for twenty lines? Redundant. But I see a pattern, how this could be edited down to maybe two lines, using Java. Lean and mean. Curly brackets, coupla colons, info. Even better! I could do it in Perl..." Ratatatat, she typed it in at the speed of light,

"Voila! You see? Same thing, one line of code. But it's from seeing the patterns in music that I can spot something like this when some hot shot programmer might not. Guess I won't go hungry if the music doesn't pan out. Anyway, these disks are done by several different guys just as incompetent as this one, so it'll take like weeks to sort it all out."

"Is that why the video freezes up?"

"Yeah, could be."

"What's on the video?"

She dropped a DVD into the drive, at random. She skipped around the disk. A pretty slick presentation, on the surface: all shimmery translucence, ghosted overlays, slow, vertiginous camera pans, fleeting shadowy clips. The colors were either icy or of low wattage warmth and in the auxiliaries of chromatic orange, nothing primary, secondary, or directly complementary on the color wheel. This made up for the lack of sophistication in the animations. The music, of course, was a collage of her own work, plus incidental sounds from reality, urban and industrial mechanical sounds, and mangled human, artificial and animal voices human, discernable in the cacophony. At times it made her stomach turn, likely its calculated objective.

"The video is pretty standard stuff, the colors are nothing special. The sound, what is that?" Max made one of those Gallic faces of disgust. "Yeah, that's bad."

The CD's were all of the unedited raw material in MPEG format for what made up the DVD's. One of the DVD's was of her at work, grainy night vision footage from a microcamera placed somewhere between her and the door, with the ambient sounds of her apartment and music on audio.

"Shit, I don't believe it!"

"What?"

The guys were staring at her from across the room. They looked very far away, but in high definition, like with 'shrooms or a fever. Micropsia it was called.

She let herself out the door. The last thing she wanted to mess with was the elevator cage. Max poked his head out the door, and slipped her a piece of paper. She took it and galloped down the winding stairs.

Once out on the street, none of it seemed real. She glanced at the note, it had two series of numbers on it, the security code for the door, and a telephone number, how thoughtful. She stuck it in her coat pocket. Damn, she couldn't breathe. At least they were sympathetic, however ignorant.

She crossed the Boulevard St. Germain and ran down the rue des St. Pères to the river, then galloped down the stairs to the shiny cobbled walkway along the water. The clouds had crept in low, hugging the banks in a freezing mist. The opaque gray water lapped against the algae-covered river walls to the slow rhythms left from the passage of a

Bateau Mouche moments before. A black barge, heavy with coal, groaned upstream. At its back, a sail of white laundry flapped in the wind under the gloomy sky. Outside the cozy lace curtained windows a row of scarlet geraniums lit up the river, and Penny almost forgot what she was doing there.

Penny's worst suspicions were confirmed. Someone had sneaked a camera into her place and was spying on her, using night fucking vision! Had to be Ula and that little shit, no coh! She kicked an empty Fanta can out of her way and echoing into the urine steeped shadow of the Pont Neuf. The spires of La Sainte Chapelle and Notre Dame shot up over the bridge. She would go to the cathedral and collect her thoughts. She walked up the stairs and crossed to the prow of the Isle de la Cité and down past the police buildings of the Quai des Orfèvres. She toyed with the idea of walking in there, but nobody would have believed her anyway.

Penny suddenly found herself on the wide square leading up to the cathedral. Inside the church, there was no music, so far, just voices and shuffling feet. She joined the stream of tourists down the side aisles and around the apse and thought back to the way the sound distorted the Bach the night before. Of course! The convolution of sound within a space would only enhance its effects! Xenakis had exploited this in his *Polytopes* at the Abbey of Cluny in '72 and '73. There was that early project on inharmonics. By recording the precise calibrations of simple sound spikes traveling within a given real space, transposing the data into a virtual space, then directing and augmenting an inharmonic series of sounds towards a specific field, you could produce performances of unimaginable acoustic proportions.

At that moment a priest stepped on the altar and shouted in four languages, "Please be quiet, this is a place of worship."

The hubbub simmered down for about thirty seconds. Penny looked up at the windows where light filtered through blue, red and gold into this vaulted cave. She had forgotten the stories, his stories last night as he walked with his arm in hers, but not the history of the place, how it was a sanctuary, not just for praying, but from the darkness of the world, and that the light came through to save us from the darkness of the spirit. Easier to feel this without this vociferous crowd, whose primary concerns were sore feet and an empty stomach.

This time she took the creaky elevator up, and Alessandro opened the door before she could even knock. Inside, Maia was sprawled on the futon, dressed in a suspiciously familiar black unitard,

her feet in dirty white bunny slippers. She held a hot water bottle across her abdomen.

Penny's equipment was laid on the table in front of Maia, who looked at her stupidly between resounding nose blows. Penny decided to pull out the coffee table and sit on the floor. This done, she looked through the laptop's memory.

"Hey, everybody, I think I've made a discovery about this audio. This is gonna be really unpleasant, okay? Maybe you can tell me what it does to you."

She switched on the player, layering several notes so they could phase through and let it rip through the room.

Maia cried out, "I am nearly dead already, ok!" and stomped out, back into her apartment, swinging her hot water bottle. Max peered from his console. Alessandro leaned back on the table looking blank and remote.

"Hey! That was one of the good guys!"

"You isolated one of the sounds, why that one?" Max wanted to know.

"It's not the sound, but the environment in which it's released! Sorry, just trying something I discovered just now, has nothing to do with any of this." She went back to the disagreeable task of sorting disks. Hours of green and black night vision surveillance! Of her making tea, of her taping up sheets of printouts, of her dancing in the middle of the floor with her headphones on. That one got undivided attention from the two guys, who crowded around her screen.

Max went back to his Aeron chair and leaned back with his hands folded across his chest. They had obviously had a pow wow in her absence.

Alessandro followed Max and leaned back on the table as before, trying to look nonchalant, but he looked scared, and as if he was holding something from Max, from her.

Penny looked back down into her screen and continued, "Ng?" she gestured around to the stuff strewn about. "All this? Come on, I met him. He's not that smart, but he's connected to some outfit that is."

Max just said, "Aren't we being just leetle bit paranoid?" and Sandro said nothing to contradict him.

Maia appeared in the doorway. "*Paranoid!* You are accusing Dr Bell of MIT of paranoia? You! The *paranoid par excellence!* The amateur Photoshop-junkie pothead who is a real expert in only two things, delusions of grandeur and *paranoia!*"

She bumped open the door with her hip and they heard her from the other rooms.

"...who thinks Jimi Hendrix, who drowned in his own *vomit*, is God!" Her laughter boomed right through the walls.

"HENDRIX IS GOD!" he shouted back at her into the air. He got up, went to the stereo.

"Nothing like Voodoo Child to chase away the evil spirits. And this." He got a long wooden box from on top the stereo and laid it ceremoniously on the coffee table.

"It is time for the peace pipe." He got out a long black pipe, a small silver box and an obscene looking pink rubber thing that opened with a sphincter. He began stuffing hashish paste into the pipe from the silver box, mixing in a little tobacco from the rubber pouch.

"What is that thing?" Penny asked, pointing to the pink pouch.

"A *blague a tabac*, a traditional French holder for tobacco, keeps it moist," he said, and he put it in her hand. It looked and felt like a miniature douche bag and was stained with brown resin around the sphincter closure, so she gave it back to him, making a face.

Both Alessandro and Max smirked, and Max lit the pipe. Max offered it to her. She hesitated then took a tiny puff, but then couldn't stop coughing like an idiot.

The guys laughed. Alessandro smacked her back, then took a long puff himself. Max stared at her through his white eye slits. The stuff was a lot stronger than anything she was used to, not that she was really that experienced, and hashish was one herb she had never sampled.

In the negative image on her closed lids, Max's face became a white mask like the one on his wall. She shut her eyes tighter so everything would go blue. When she opened them he was still looking at her through the cloud of blue smoke that streamed out of his mouth and nostrils. He extended his arm again with the pipe, but she waved it Alessandro's way and he took it deftly by the stem with three fingers, the pinky up. She watched the smoke curl away from his mouth as he leaned back on the futon and closed his eyes, still holding the pipe. He looked like some decadent *fin de siècle esthete* in his disheveled black suit and loosened tie. Then she saw the metal tubing of the futon and the bicycle and all the computer crap strewn around and the spears and the mask, and nothing made any sense anymore at all.

"Hey, don't hog it! This stuff costs me." Max grabbed the pipe. His fingers wrapped around the hot bowl, he screwed up his face and

sucked in his cheeks as he vacuumed in a huge hit. He held it in his lungs until his eyes popped out big and round from his head, and then slowly he let the smoke out, shutting his eyes in rapturous bliss

Alessandro sprawled out more on the futon, one arm resting along the top behind her head and the other dangling languidly over the arm. They were both looking at her through half shut eyes, expecting her to say something, but paranoia had tied her tongue in knots.

Alessandro sensed her discomfort and got up.

"Hey, dude, *grazie*, we go say good night to Maia, if she's still up, okay?" Max nodded, his eyes shut now as he listened to the Hendrix playing softly in the background.

They had been at it all day with only a croissant in their stomachs, and now this.

Penny followed Alessandro out through the door to Maia's.

"We should let you rest, so you can be all better tomorrow. Thanks for sticking up for me, back there."

"Stay, it isn't so late. I can make you some soup! Look at you! You are too stoned to go out on the street like that. I'm going to make a hot spiced wine. Good medicine. Can I make you one too? Or coffee? Which would you like?"

Alessandro raised his eyebrows slightly at Penny. His eyes were still half closed.

"Sure, the wine sounds like fun, we're pretty fucked up already."

The mulled wine was delicious, but it could have been the munchies. A cinnamon stick angled out of the gold flecked mug. Maia was well into her first helping when she began kidding with Alessandro, punching his arm and egging him on in obscure French argot.

She leaned over to Penny and confided. "I did not tell you that it was me who turned this buffoon into a man? Eh, pas vrais?" She poured herself more wine.

"Oh! This is really going to my head!" She said as she wobbled her head.

He ran his hand through his hair, obviously embarrassed, still not fully alert.

"This is true but we were just kids, you know, but Maia, eh, she was just being charitable, I am not her type." Alessandro swirled his wine around, smirking sadly.

"You're everybody's type, stupid, you were just a boy. Didn't stop Ula! She got her hooks into you as soon as Dick looked the other way! Ooh, la!"

Suddenly, he glared at her and looked at the floor.

"*Au, mais, n'te casse pas la tête!*" She kissed his cheek and rumbled his hair, then swept her hand back over it in one long sweep, like a lioness licking her cub.

Just then, there was a light, sharp knock at the door. Alessandro, seated on the futon and closest to the door, leaned over and opened it.

Ula swished in covered in her long black cape coat, the collar jauntily up, a black tricorne hat smashed down on her head. She looked as if she had just escaped incognito from the guillotine. Once in the room, and sure that all eyes were on her, she lifted the hat, revealing a shiny bald skull.

Alessandro could not have looked more stunned had she lifted her severed head off her shoulders.

She tossed her cloak and then her hat smack in the middle of the futon between Alessandro and Penny, and glared down imperiously at them all. With a theatrical sweep of her hand, she declared, "Well, here we are."

From somewhere in the middle of her back an empty sleeve shivered as if the outfit was on wrong, although both arms were sheathed in sleeves identical to that one. Ula stood very still over him, pressing up against his knees, and watched the tears spill out from his tightly shut eyes, brushing them off with her thumb every so often. He remained motionless, with only his jaw muscles working under his skin each time she wiped his cheek.

After a while she drifted to the toilettes, avoiding Maia who stood now, arms crossed, in the kitchen doorway. Blindly, Alessandro got up to follow his fiancé, but Maia shook her head, and suddenly remembering all the stuff at Max's, he disappeared in there. From Max's den voices could be heard over the Voodoo Child and when Alessandro returned a few seconds later making the okay sign with his thumb and forefinger he sat down on the fur ottoman, the seat closest to Max's door and as far as possible from Penny.

Ula returned and settled into his old place on the futon, her gaze fixed on Penny as she arranged her folds. Maia, her faced clouded, poured more wine from the saucepan into the cups and prepared to pour some into a new a bumpy handmade one she had placed in front of Ula, but Ula placed her hand over the cup and waved Maia's saucepan away. As if pulled up by a string Ula rose and stepped around the coffee table into the middle of the room.

Maia drained her cup hurriedly as she lay the empty saucepan on the floor. Max entered from his rooms and stood in the entrance, silently stooping, his hands anchored to the door posts.

Oblivious of everyone, Ula lifted up her arms then brought them down caressing her long bony body as she swayed to some internal music. Before she got too far down, Alessandro got up and threw his arms around her, his hands cradling her bald head.

Her eyes to the ceiling, she lifted his arms from her head and brought them gracefully down around her hips, and began chanting in a faraway voice, "I am the phoenix rising from the ashes to the music of the spheres. Immortal I approach the spiritual firmament."

She spun slowly away from him, raising her arms high as if she was levitating. He took hold of her again, though not as tightly as before.

She hissed into his ear, "The jade girl rides a blue phoenix—"

Max, disgusted, slam his door and returned to his rooms, cranked up the decibels. Maia pulled Penny into the kitchen and hissed, "You see what she did to herself now? But she has lost more than her hair, this time!"

## REVENGE OF THE NERD

The timbers of the ancient building shook. From the other room came a deafening crash, a howl, the sounds of a dragon gone amuck.

Maia and Penny rushed in to find Ng land on both boots after a flurry of kick-boxing Alessandro. Blood spurting out his nose, Alessandro pulled himself up from the floor, fists clenched, but Ng's right heel smacked into the side of his face and he fell back into the door and crumpled out cold on the floor. Ng grabbed Ula by her third sleeve, kicked Alessandro aside to open the door, and pulled her out to the landing and down the stairs. The whole thing had taken less than twenty seconds.

Maia threw herself on Alessandro's limp body and slammed her head against his heart. Penny knelt to the side and checked his carotid. Yes, it pulsed against her fingers. Maia sat up and stared at him, dazed. Blood gushed out his nose in bubbly spurts, spilled from gashes on his cheek and brow, through his hair, spreading into a dark shiny pool on the floor beneath his head.

He opened his eyes, started to get up, gasped, and lay back on the floor. Maia ran into the kitchen.

"Pudain, I dry do zdop him," he told Max, who was clearing the hair from his face.

Maia came back from the kitchen with wet towels and began to gingerly wipe the blood from his face, but soon dashed to the bathroom. She had seen the white of his crushed cheekbone. Max calmly replaced the flap of skin over it and got up to examine the door.

"The lock is *foutu!*" he growled. He smashed it closed, but it just bounced goofily back, so he kicked it furiously, the seventeenth century carpentry giving up in long splinters.

He was still at it as Alessandro crawled onto the futon holding a wad of Maia's tissues over his nose.

"Can you see okay?" Penny asked. He blinked an affirmative, his eyes going off in different directions.

"Will somebody please call an ambulance? We need to get him to the emergency room, I think he has a concussion," Penny said, but Maia, back from the toilet, was freaked out, and Max had disappeared.

"Hospital? You can wait eighteen hours to see a doctor in the emergency room here, it's a big joke, and they are on strike now! Even Samu is the same thing, you bleed to death waiting, waiting for the little truck!"

Max returned with the Cyber Ciné materials bag and the gun. "The stuff is here, he just wanted her."

"He needs medical attention. Now, Max," Penny said.

Alessandro mumbled through his tissues, "Why don' Penny and I go do duh hodel, bring duh bag, day have securidy dare, I will be okay."

"Are you crazy? I mean, really, duh hotel?" Penny said, exchanging the blood soaked wad for a fresh one.

Maia, calmer now, held her phone and mentally flipped through her options, but it was Max who spoke up.

"Here's what you do, okay? You're not going to like it, but it's perfect," he said as he sat down on the ottoman next to Alessandro.

"Dude, call your mother, pronto, ask if we can all stay at the house, because of the door, you know, and we bring the bag with the stuff, okay? She will be so happy to have her wounded *tesoro* back home. She can get her doctor, you know the fat one, to check you out, and we can relax and use the house as a base of operations."

Maia cut in, "He's a homeopath!"

"He has his own clinic!" Max snapped, turned to Penny. "It's a nice house, with a garden. Not far from here."

Alessandro groaned. "Bede, *addiamo*, bud you phone."

Max fished Alessandro's phone from his jacket and scrolled through until he found the number.

"*Allo, Madame Tivoglio, bonsoir, c'est Max a l'appareil.*" Max hemmed and hawed in French until Alessandro snatched the phone from him.

"*Si, baba, vivo, vivo. No, baba, si, baba, Tre bersone, o capito, bene, ciao.* She will send duh driver and will call duh docdor. She says she will be happy do pud you up."

Penny went back into Max's to gather up her tech. When she returned Alessandro's eyes were swelling shut. Max sorted through some odds and ends of lumber to nail shut the busted door. Maia had disappeared into one of the back rooms.

"Stay awake, okay?" Penny said, nudging his arm as she sat back down with her knapsack on her knees.

Maia came back head to toe in beige plaid, dragging three

pieces of Vuitton luggage, a duffle, a smaller overnight bag and a makeup case.

Max hammered away until the door was totally covered with planks.

"Hey, Max, couldn't Ng kick your door down just as easily?"

"I have metal door with security code, Maia adores the cute little key to the cute little door of her cute little apartment, and so now, we pay big time, yes?" He pounded in the last nail, and scooped up all the bent ones and his tools. Maia picked invisible lint off her coat.

"You are not bringing all that with you, a change of clothes only, toothbrush, nightshirt, in the small bag. Get real, pussycat," He said from his doorway.

"Here, I'll help you. I'm a wiz at packing light." Penny dumped the two bags and packed it all into the smaller bag. Maia threw back in a few things from the pile. Alessandro's head was flopped to the side. Penny slapped his hand.

Max came back in as the intercom trilled. "Okay, are we ready? Sandro, how are you for walking?"

Maia answered the intercom and buzzed in Mario, Signora Tivoglio's driver. The wiry little man came in jabbering hysterical Italian and heaved Alessandro into the elevator. Maia, with the makeup case, and Penny with her knapsack, took the stairs. Max followed two seconds later dragging his, Cyber Ciné's, and Maia's suitcase.

## BEATRICE

She stood back lit under the limestone arches of the entrance at the end of the circular driveway. From behind her appeared the portly doctor. She clutched her robe tight, so she must have been asleep before the call. An ambulance was idling to the side, and two antiseptic medics appeared with a stretcher. Alessandro grumbled something about going to his rooms, but the white coats eased him onto the stretcher before he could finish his sentence and into the ambulance with the doctor.

Alessandro's three friends followed Mrs. Tivoglio to a maid with a lace tiara pinned in her hair who led them up a spiral staircase, then down a corridor lined with busts of long dead poets, to their rooms.

Penny hesitated to drop her stuff on the bed as it was covered in shredded cut velvet that spewed dust when she sat down on it. The room walls were also covered, but in musty satin. Above the bed hung a large painting of winged babies frolicking above a sea full of pink bottomed mer-people and friendly sea monsters. French doors opened to a lawn that disappeared into the night. She felt as if she had walked into the Venetian bedroom at the Metropolitan museum, minus the plaster cherubs. She dumped her stuff on a small bench at the foot of the bed. Just opposite hung a gilt frame mirror that had slowly been oxidized into fractal shaped patches, the glass so mottled Penny could barely see herself in it. Beneath it was a rickety desk of inlaid exotic woods. She knocked at a door she thought was a bathroom as she heard some water running.

Maia answered, foaming at the mouth, toothbrush in hand. Her room was in the same style, but covered in tan and gold damask and her painting was a triumph of Bacchus, complete with elephants and giraffes. The smiling blonde Bacchus rode a chariot, pulled by very large leopards and filled with gargantuan grapes. In the background was a medley of creatures, some fabulous interpretations of hippos and rhinos and crocodiles. Manic Maia couldn't stop pointing out all the different animals with her toothbrush. She also had nicknames for the rooms.

"I have *le Zoo*, (she said *zoh*), you have *Spish*, *Splash*, and *Max*

has *le Sacrifice*."

After spitting in her bathroom sink she skipped over into Penny's room. "Perfect for a pajama party!" she giggled.

Maia knocked on Max's pajama party door, but he wasn't there, so they went back and Penny sat at Maia's boudoir mirror as Maia took out and hung her clothes.

When Maia took a break and opened the French doors to her balcony and pulled out a cigarette, Penny took advantage of the opportunity and retreated to her water wonderland and flopped down on the bed in a daze. Next thing she knew Maia was sitting on her bed, shaking her. Apparently it was already afternoon.

Alessandro had been back over an hour, and Maia urged Penny. "We have to tell him that bitch is interrogating Max!"

"Don't you think you should let him sleep?" Penny asked, but Maia was set, and the two of them creaked down the dim corridors to Alessandro's wing of the house, built earlier, in the seventeenth century, had unadorned vaulted ceilings instead of fancy sculptured plaster ones.

Maia, at least, knew her way around, and stopped towards the end of the hall at a door that glowed yellow along the bottom. She put her ear to it and knocked, but there was no answer.

"Maybe he's asleep!" Penny whispered, but Maia was already further down the hall, to another line of light. She knocked.

"*Endrez!*" He was seated on the floor propped up against a massive trunk. His nose, brow and cheek were all covered with bandages now as he searched through some boxes. Books were piled on the floor around him, and plastic wrapped paintings leaned against the trunk that looked like it was filled with metal junk. Of course it probably was not junk, gold flashed out here and there, and none of the stuff looked like theater props.

"Sandro, you should be in bed!" Maia scolded, looking over the contents of the trunk. A glove made of steel plates and chain mail jutted out like a drowning hand from the jumble of what were actually gold handled swords and pieces of tarnished armor.

"I know it is here, I put it here for safety, I know it is here, I know," he rambled feverishly. "And I found these!" He waved vaguely to the books, plopped his head back against the trunk, nearly passed out. The bare bulb dangling from the central stone vault put the room into harsh relief.

"Where is Max?" he asked Maia, without opening his eyes.

"Max is under interrogation with your mother," Penny said, still

standing in the doorway.

"Ah! *Managgia!* She will think it is all his fault! I will go down and explain to her!"

He started to rub his eyes, thought better of it and got up painfully. Maia was at his side, unsure where to hold him, but he valiantly stepped ahead and the three of them made their way back down the service stairway to a burgundy and gold salon where the grilling was under way.

Max was scrunched into a low chair that was too small for him, looking like a naughty schoolboy as Signora Tivoglio prodded him with questions, and he repeated his story, again. Two men, the little driver, and Antoine the gardener/handyman, a dour fellow with a walrus mustache and big tuberous hands stood at her side.

"Alessandro, *carino*, why are you not in bed? Max tells me this *malvivente*, Ng van Hung, broke into rue du Dragon and abducted Ula, and while that poor girl was having one of her episodes. *Sei bravo, ma per Ula, veramente.*"

Max rolled his eyes at Maia. Signora still didn't realize Ng had bashed the door down, grabbed Ula, and destroyed Alessandro's face before anyone had a chance to blink, or that Max had been in his rooms with the stereo blasting away at the time, and had been stoned out of his mind.

"Yes, Ula must have given Ng the security code and told him where she was. Why he took her is a mystery, I think she was as surprised by his actions as we were!" Max said with forced alertness as Alessandro nodded stupidly.

"I must tell Dick!" Signora exclaimed, picking up the ivory and gold receiver.

"No!" Alessandro made to lunge at the phone, but thought better of it, clutching his side. "He has betrayed us all, including Ula. He is a supreme egotist. This is the proof."

"*Carino*. We call." Her voice was final. She dialed Dick's number on the rotary phone. Holding Alessandro's chin, she inspected his swollen eye and the black stitches above and on his cheek, waiting for the phone to be answered.

"*Allo, Inèz? Beatrice Tivoglio. Pardonnez moi, je dois parler a Monsieur Schwanz, immediatement. Il n'est pas la? Alors, Bon. Dites lui que mon fils a été agressé et gravement blessé par un employé d'Ula chez les jeunes Muellers et que cet homme vient aussi de kidnappé Ula. Oui, Ula, elle même. Merci, Inez.*" She hung up. "Dinner at eight,

*bambini."*

Max's room, the most baroque of the guest rooms was also a little sinister. Hanging from the plum velvet walls was a huge Flaying of Marsyas, a slapdash copy of Titian's masterpiece. The room screamed with the agony of the martyred satyr. Gold braid trim around the doors and on the curtains only brought out the yellows and reds of the painting. The Muellers weren't fazed and relaxed into the mass of cushions that were piled up on the king size bed, bunching them into the right shape for relaxing and talking.

"What is this horrific painting? How can any one go to sleep with a thing like that hanging over their head?" Penny asked, sitting on the corner of the bed.

A flashback of the barn after a good hunt, the smell of blood and of deer entrails and Mr. Clean filled the back of her head. All the blood, matted hair and bone glimpsed earlier that day blend in with the painting above the bed. Carcasses hanging from the rafters like laundry, rough tongues hanging out sideways. Bowie knife in hand like golden haired Apollo she had felt her fear take over—the dry sound of skin tearing from muscle as she pulled down the skin of the buck she had killed. The flayed skins were piled up on the black hefty bags in the corner. First the crack of the gun, then the realization that the animal crumpling in the bushes was her doing. Her doing. And she had killed again. And the violence had followed her here.

Maia shrugged and slapped out a Marlboro Light. Penny looked up at Apollo with his crown of laurels and his slash of white blade, crouching like a common criminal. The angel violinist was the only character who didn't look utterly demonic, even the little white dog greedily slurping up the satyr's blood had red spots for eyes.

Max laughed, looking at the painting upside down from his pillows. "Isn't it wild? I always stay here. That's his copy of The Slaying of Marsyas by Titian from his days at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. You know the story?"

"Yeah, it's pretty gruesome," Penny said. The ferocious brush strokes swooshed and leapt over the surface of the canvas with sloppy but accurate abandon. Maia had said he was a better dancer than Ula. He certainly was a better painter than Dick would ever be.

Max droned on,

"I see it as symbolic of the struggle between the primordial forces, the raw purity of pastoral and hunter gatherer cultures and the invading values of western civilization, that is, agriculture and

urbanization. This is how our poor Alessandro civilizes me, with bloodcurdling special effects." He lay back into the pillows.

"Ha! just be glad he doesn't skin *you* alive," Maia said.

"*Never. Sandro adores me!*"

Maia threw a pillow at him.

"Oh yeah, you didn't bring the gun did you?" Penny asked.

Maia readjusted herself, stretched her arm out to the night table, found her cigarettes, slapped out another and lit up. Max rolled his eyes, no doubt used to her stinking up his rooms with foul Marlboro smoke, and not sweet cannabis.

"So, did you?" Penny persisted.

"Bring the gun? In the bag. You know, we need security."

"I'd get rid of it first thing. Having possession makes Ula look like an angel."

"From hell. Poor Sandro."

"Did you know she stole my Yohji top the one I wear with the Chrome Hearts leather jeans for that deconstructed Hell's Angel motorcycle chic look?" Maia bitched.

Max sighed heavily.

"Lately, I don't know though," Maia went on to herself.

"He's got to move on, man, this isn't healthy, he's not a kid anymore."

"None of us are, except Penny, and look at her!" Maia turned to her brother and slapped his chest. "We have to get serious, Maxi. Poor Sandro, he could have died tonight! It gets me thinking, you know, I don't want to waste my life. Before we know, we will be dead... or old!" She crushed the stub of the burnt out cigarette

He squinted warily at her. She rolled on top of him and said up close to his face,

"Maxi, let's do it! The band, I sing, you play and Penny will do keyboards!"

"No way, I'm not doing pop music," Penny said.

Maia stared, incredulous. "But that's where the money is!"

"I'm not really into money. But you should definitely go for it. I mean, you got the look, that's half of it right there. Then you need a name."

"Like what? Something funkadelic, R&B. I will sing in English, Maxi can be my Supah Jimi! Oh, babay!"

She rolled over and kissed him on the mouth.

"Maia," Penny said, getting up, uncomfortable at the siblings

embracing on the bed.

"What?"

"The name. You know: Madonna, Bjork, Beyoncé," Penny said, yawning.

Max was immobile except for his eyes that were looping along the plaster swirls of the ceiling. "Lose my gun! Lose my name! What else do you want from me, huh, Penny Bell?" he chanted with a gleam in his eye.

"Maia. MAIA! Mah-yaah!" Maia repeated in different voices, her eyes also dancing on the ceiling.

Wiped out, Penny got up and went to the door.

"Yeah, well, it's a really cool plan! Sorry, guys, gotta get some z's."

Penny woke to sunshine, shimmering through the voile curtains that framed the windows, reflecting ghost-like in the tarnished mirror. Over her head the mermaids splashed with the sea dragons in the clear frothy sea and the winged babies fluttered about more like butterflies than seagulls, their pink satin sash billowing behind them in the wind. Her Palm Pilot on the bedside table said a quarter to eleven.

She dashed into the marble bathroom and turned on the shower, then speed dressed and ran downstairs.

A different maid, chubby, but in the same crisp white apron and tiara ushered her with a big smile into a sun drenched breakfast room overlooking the garden, where a round table glittered with cutlery and porcelain and starched fairytale hat napkins.

At one end of the large room, next to a potted tree dotted with tiny oranges, was a grand piano, the hood raised, layers of well thumbed music sheets on the stand. The maid brought in steaming pots of coffee and tea.

After her peaceful breakfast of coffee and croissants and jams to get her out of her hashish fuzz, she sat down at the piano.

In the garden frail yellow leaves trembled in the breeze.

Chopin, Schubert, Schumann. She played through the torn pages of Chopin's nocturne in C sharp minor, opus 27, number 1. An old favorite.

Then she tried the Schubert impromptu No. 4 in F Minor. Penny looked behind her to find Signora standing in the doorway. She entered with clapping flashes of red.

"*Bravissima!* But you capture the essence of Schubert absolutely with that light, poetic touch! Do you also know the Grand Sonata,

Fantasy in C Minor? I've been waiting such long time to play it with another pianist."

This was not what Penny had on her agenda that morning.

"I'm pretty rusty with all of this, but I see you have the music right here, so, sure! Which part would you like to play?"

Penny took the bass, and Signora the top, and the carmine nails clacked dutifully through the monster piece, the Bösendorfer shaking the room with its deep chords.

The last measure resonated into the leaves of the orange tree and signora took a deep breath.

"Ah, thank you, signorina, that was absolutely delightful!" She looked at Penny's hands. "And such tiny hands, I am surprised you can span an octave!"

"Practice. It's all in the tendons, and the muscles along the outside of the palm, the '*minimi digiti*' group, see how they bulge?" Penny's short ragged nails made her self conscious in front of the elegant lady.

Signora laughed. "*Per gli minimi digiti, il massimo lavoro! Lavoro, lavoro, sempre, lavoro! Veramente.* It is hard work, eh, to make beauty."

Now as she laughed in the soft sunlight it was impossible to ignore how beautiful she must have been, and still was.

"How's Sandro doing today?" Penny asked when they stopped laughing.

"Oh, Mario took him in to have more scans. But he is in good spirits, and even grumbled when I mentioned the plastic surgery. He wants so to be imperfect, he thinks it will solve all his problems. Ah, but he will be imperfect soon enough. Time spares no one, and, he has his father's hair line! Ah! Here are the two misfits." She turned towards the door.

"*Bonjour mes enfants. Il est bien chouette, ton petit costume Burberry, Maia. But, she is the perfect lady, is she not, Penelope?*" The note of sarcasm was hard to miss.

"*Merci madame, vous etes bien gentille,*" murmured Maia.

Max had shed his spandex for a sporty camelhair turtleneck and skinny trousers. His long arms dangled awkwardly at his sides.

"*Mais assieds toi, Maximilien, I am not going to eat you!*"

Max eased into a chair next to Maia, Signora joined them at the table.

"*Benissimo*, now we can powwow, you tell me the whole story,

of how this infernal Ula has gotten you mixed up in all of this." She rang a bell for the maid.

They sat around the table in uneasy silence waiting for a sign from Signora.

"Penny, maybe you can tell us something about this project of Ula's that has caused all this trouble. We all know how unstable and reckless Ula can be, how inconsiderate of her friends, yes?" Signora made a point of this with her raised eyebrows.

"I don't know anything about Ula or her project, Mrs. Tivoglio," Penny began, then she went into a much abridged account of the last night's events, emphasizing everyone's heroic efforts.

Signora cocked her head attentively, listening and watching them all in turn, but they had been over it all before.

Penny poured steaming tea into her cup as the Signora continued,

"This is a complex situation. I have hired security forces to protect the property, to protect our persons and to accompany us when we leave the house. And I will see what can be done about arresting this brute. Max, Maia, you must call have security doors installed for your apartments and have your gate code changed.

Max listened like a soldier, alert but guarded, Maia sulked into the depths of her chair like a cornered animal.

So they were now prisoners in a gilded cage, Penny thought as she looked around at the chandeliers, the yellow and gold trellised wallpaper, the tumble of damask curtains and then outside through the sheer voile panels to the peaceful garden and the birds chasing each other around the trees. Hard to believe she was in the middle of a big city. She was okay with that, it would give her a chance to fine tune her piece in her head away from machines, even try some new ideas on that great piano, all in all, things could be worse.

She dipped her spoon into the silver sugar bowl just as Alessandro sauntered into the room, half his face and both eyes were purple and a big rectangular bandage covered his nose, stitches tracked down the side of his swollen face. His mother glanced at him, her forehead striating into parallel ridges.

"They say I will live, no need to call Père la Chaise yet. Ah! But I am starved!"

He sat down at the head of the table, rubbing his palms together, and from its purple pool, his good eye winked at Penny, who couldn't take her eyes off the transformation.

From Greek god to cubist collage, his face was a jumble of odd angles and garish colors. Was it Blake, Bacon or even Shelley who wrote "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in its proportions?"

He was all strangeness now. With the mask of perfection ripped off, he blazed. Whorls and arcs leapt out as from the surface of the sun. Yet, at the inner core of this neutron star of rage was a cool pearl—small, desolate, and still.

The pale sunlight danced through the curtains behind his head. He reached for a croissant from the pile on the plate, and his hand hovered, as if it to change course and rest on top of hers, still holding the spoonful of sugar. She had forgotten all about it when he entered, that she was going to put sugar in her tea. Twirling the sugar particles into the tea, the spoon created a vortex in the cup that continued spinning after she had removed it and replaced it at the edge of her saucer. She picked up the cup and took a sip, halting the motion of the tea.

When she looked up, Signora was talking to him a mile a minute in Italian with her eyes skewered into Penny. Lowering her eyes into her cup, Penny forced another sip of tea. She couldn't breathe. Her cold sweaty fingers were slippery on the porcelain handle. She was afraid she would drop the cup. She did not.

So, that was it, she loved him.

The four of them filed out, regrouping in the grand salon to discuss their plans, and how they were going to at least keep a semblance of freedom in the days to come. Maia's mood went from bad to demonic. The security guys were getting briefed in the adjoining petit salon where plans of the property were laid out on a long marble table. Their squeaky boots on the parquet and the stiff sounds of the new uniforms were louder than their murmuring.

Penny sleepwalked behind the others into the red damask room, where Alessandro was collapsed on the divan. Even under the incandescent sparkle of the Murano chandelier, she could see dark chartreuse spreading around the purple across his face. Ng had kicked him in the gut and chest as well as in the head, and his liver would be showing the strain. Languishing in his cloud of burgundy velvet, he watched her approach with glazed eyes. She stopped and stood in the middle of the room, gripped with panic.

Did he know?

She had felt it first when she touched his neck on Maia's floor

to check his vital signs, the throbbing blood under the warm skin, the unthinkable panic that he might be dead in the moments before, but she had been so stoned and confused none of it had registered. Everything was different now and she was at a loss how to behave.

Alessandro decided for them. He excused himself, mumbling something. On his way out he gently squeezed Penny to him before going up the stairs.

Max was too busy to notice anything as he led Maia through the French doors and under covered arches by the garden so she could have a cigarette.

Penny was left alone in the red room, with the indentation on the down of the velvet cushions slowly disappearing.

Ng dragged Ula into Cyber Ciné and locked the door behind him.

"What the hell were you doing over there? You gotta to keep your trap shut, sunshine, they're not going to cut you any slack. They're not your friends, so stay clear of them, got it? And I mean loverboy, too. Now, help me find those disks, I can't remember where I put them, I coulda sworn they were over there. Shit! Hey, watch it with those wires, you'll get us electrocuted!"

"I'm stepping over them, Hung, dear. I'm not a clutz, I'm a dancer, remember?"

"And where the fuck did my Beretta go? I wanted to surprise your little party back there but I can't remember where the fuck I stashed it!"

Ula picked her way through the mess like a cat avoiding puddles.

"By the way, those eighteen therapies aren't challenging enough for me, do you have that booklet, *The Way of the Tiger*? Thought I'd try that next. You know, darling, I really am going to be immortal, I can feel it my bones. It's like they predicted about the future, you know? But it was around all along."

"What the hell are you talkin' about? Hey, hon', make yourself useful, help me look. Like over there." He pointed to a pile of cassettes in the corner.

"You're such a slob. Didn't you have them on your hard drive, anyway? And didn't you make backups? I thought you were a professional."

"You don't make backups."

"That's different, I trust my karma."

"Jeez!" He pulled on his chin hairs, there weren't enough to call it a goatee. "Well, those were the master disks. There was a stack of them, with written labels, I didn't get a chance to print them out yet. They were over there with the Kiev stuff."

"Maybe somebody stole them. Remember, someone just broke into my place in New York, maybe the same outfit did yours."

"You said they didn't take anything, so maybe it was just your

boyfriend trying t'scare ya!"

"He was here, stoopid. You know, now that I think of it, they could have downloaded anything they wanted from my laptop, I have DSL."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Ng said, standing in the middle of the rearranged chaos. He disappeared into the martial arts studio, so Ula turned on the front desk monitor and logged on. She found her site and began watching one of her bio clips.

"Fuck, fuck and fuck!" Ng yelled from the practice room. "It's just fuckin' gone!"

He ran back in, shoved Ula aside, fumbled through a drawer in the desk and retrieved a small pearl handled revolver.

"Oh, calm down. See? You found it."

"This piece of shit? The automatic's gone! This thing's a toy!"

"Does it shoot bullets or water?" Ula asked, nonchalant but still nervous.

"Oh, it's a real gun, alright! Shit, I've had this baby since my Garden Grove days." He kissed it. "But it's not for serious business, it's you know, for shooting jealous lovers in the *coglioni*, huh, huh."

He slung it around and aimed it at her groin.

"Ha! I think that gun's a little small for his endowments," she said, unflinching.

"It could have 'im singin' soprano for good, girl, you know it."

"Why didn't you surprise us with that before?"

He scratched his head, looking around. "Fuck, I am so dead, man."

"It's no big deal, relax, you'll make more disks, it'll just take a little time, that's all."

"You don't get it do you! I gotta deliver, I got customers. If they're not happy, I'm not happy. I am so fucked!" He kicked his combat boot into the plywood of the reception desk, destroying it.

Ula watched from the side, her arms crossed in front of her chest. She tried to edge her way to the door but Ng's arm shot out and grabbed her.

"Hey, wait a minute baldy, not so fast! I need you right here, girl, cuz we're gonna get to work now! Into the mocap, c'mon."

He dragged her by her empty sleeve into the motion capture studio.

"Okay, honey bunch, show time, here's your costume, strip, put it on, you know the routine. Lube's over there."

He tossed her the suit from the floor.

She looked around. "Got a hanger? This outfit's worth two grand, I'd like it to last."

"Get real, girl, the suit's worth ten times that, and its doing just fine on the floor, okay?"

Ula methodically took off her layers and folded them into a neat stack, then looking around for a place to put them, just put them on the floor in the corner. She dabbed a glob of lube between her legs and slithered into the hotsuit, careful not to kink the wires or disconnect any of the sensors.

"Hey, can you help me with headgear? And check these wires, before you plug 'em into my head, I'm uninsulated now. Don't step on my clothes, please."

He stomped over and jerked her suit around and checked the connections, then gave her a little spank on the butt. She ignored this and adjusted the hood and the goggles and slipped on the gloves.

The mocap room was taped into a three dimensional grid pattern, Dayglo yellow on black, switching to red along the edges, and there were scuff marks up the wall from Jujitsu game sequences. A Plexiglas wall taped with the same grid pattern separated the "performance stage," including the "bed" platform from the control center, where the blinking modules and chunky CRT monitors were crammed together on a row of wooden sawhorse tables that lined the wall.

Ng checked the crackling microphones, and Ula did a few stretches and practiced some moves on the grid.

"Okay, now, we're gonna try something new, really edgy, are you with me? Oh, and you gotta be real careful with that left leg, the one you say you got arthritis in or somethin'. Christ how old are you, anyway?"

"It'll fuck up the whole thing. Remember, you can't fix an animation, it's like improv. It's gotta be perfect right off the bat. And you gotta work on that muscle memory, every take's gotta be exact so the sequences can fit together. Ever take mime? Lotta dancers do, helps with that."

"Mime, hmm? Nope, but I know who could teach me."

"Well, think about it. And remember to count this time, god dammit! Ready?" He went into the booth and checked that all systems were running.

She stood in the middle of the room with her goggles up and

her hands on her hips, looking at the footprints on the wall. She lowered the goggles and stepped towards the bed. This went into Ng's realtime setup and he adjusted the markers and fine tuned the algorithms that calculated the 3D coordinates. He was still not that familiar with the new Diva workstation and there was a steep learning curve with these sophisticated new products, so this was taking a while.

"Wait a sec, Hung, I've been thinking this over." She walked over to the control booth and had to tap on the Plexi, her audio out was jammed now. Ng was too absorbed by his software to notice.

"Oh, yeah, new project! My customers sent me this outline, more S&M, double penetration, group shots. We'll have to hire more actors. And we'll need to modify the suit for back door action. yum, yum, deeper, deeper, like that, yeah, ooh, giv'em what they want, baby, baby!"

He wasn't even looking at her, he had his headphones on pumped in his chair to the groove.

Without turning around, he lifted his hand, unaware of her pounding on the Plexi.

He yelled into his microphone, "Stand upstage left, D3, got that?"

Ula removed the goggles and hood, ripped off the gloves and came through the swinging plexi door.

"This sucks. I'm sorry, Ng, but this wasn't part of the deal."

"What wasn't?"

"Hate to pop your bubble, but you're one crappy choreographer, or whatever you call yourself, director, designer, pimp! I'm sick of your adolescent fantasies, this whole scene is so disgusting it makes me want to become a lesbian. You make me want to become a lesbian. Take that in your *coglioni*, you with your *piccino cazzino!*" She unzipped the front of her suit and began peeling it off one limb at a time.

"Quit showin' off, I know where you got the vocabulary, and it ain't from the Jesuits."

"Oh, but it is, my dear Hung. It is from the Jesuits, you poor, stupid brute."

"Whatever. It isn't just the Japs and the Russkis that are into this big time, it's Hong Kong, Mainland, even gay Paris and the Big Apple! Everybody's crazy about it, and quality's not so important as, you know, quantity and variety, can't forget the spice of life! Oh, sure, meat porn still rules, but this stuff's for connoisseurs. It's art, baby, it's

right up your alley, my alley, our silicon alley!"

"Well, I'm not playing anymore. Get some other sucker to wiggle around in that thing for you. I'm out of here." She kicked the empty suit into the corner.

"You can't go, we have a deal!"

Hastily slipping on her clothes, Ula declared, "We don't have a contract. I'm an artist, I make art, and I don't care what you say, this stuff is not art. You conned me. Virtual love goddess? More like virtual love slave! I thought you were cutting edge, I thought you were useful! But you're just an amateur, you're nobody. I don't have time for this bullshit!"

With a swoosh of her cape Ula slipped out the door and sprinted down the stairs and through the parked *camionettes* down through the iron entrance gates of Silicon Allée. It took Ng several seconds to extricate himself from his tangle of wires, and by the time he ran out the door she was gone.

Ula stepped into the first bus headed for St. Germain, and rummaged in her bag for her phone as the crowded bus lurched through traffic. She couldn't find the phone. She would find it eventually. Dick wouldn't have gotten the prize and would be in a horrible mood.

There was no answer at Max and Maia's. Once upstairs she could see that Maia's key would be useless as nails pierced through the wood from a hasty fix of her bashed in door, but she knew Max's combination. Inside, Maia's floor was covered in smeared blood, blood and had soaked into the floorboards. Maybe he was dead.

She broke through the coagulated film on a channel between the irregular floorboards. The blood was sticky on her fingers. It tasted alive. Her panic subsided. She was filled with a sudden flush of arousal, but lurking behind that was a nasty wave of nausea. She ran to throw up in the little bathroom, but her stomach had long been empty and she could only wretch long threads of bile, that, kindled by the prismatic light of the tiny window, shimmered deep into the bowl. Had Maia gone religious on them after all these years? Had to be li'l miss E.L.F. Dry retching now, scraping her throat raw. It was just hunger, no weird pathology happening here. She swished her mouth with water and went to peek in Maia's barren fridge, finding nothing but a wrinkly apple. She grabbed that and her cape and her tricorn from under the futon, and rang the elevator.

She decided to check on Dick anyway. Not the apartment but

the studio. If he was in a decent mood he would be there, if not he would be drinking himself into Mr Hyde back home. She rang the bell, but no one answered. About now he would normally have been preparing his "palette" for the day's work.

It was a fine day for walk in the Marais. Ula could walk for days in strange cities, or in familiar ones, absorbing the atmosphere, turning ideas over and over in her head. The obsessive mind is never at rest. She still had doubts about those Chinese immortality disciplines. At least she could forget about the divine whoring at 'CyberSin.' What a downer that had been, after having such high hopes. She was the Invisible Muse, the angel of the modulating signal that transmutes men's masturbatory experience, their fantasies made real, enhanced exponentially through her mastery of the apparatus, now turbo charged with the E.L.F. infused music. It could have worked.

Once on the Place des Vosges she felt much better. Nannies pushed prams, pigeons chased sparrows, dogs chased all of them and the abundance of life swirled around her, taking her with it, and she swirled and twirled around the park. What freedom! She threw the tricorn into the trees and crossed the Rue de Turennes. She got to the Cathedral of St. Eustache and the giant head. That hat had been a mistake, too *ancien régime*, and now her head was getting cold. But there was Yohji's on the corner, so she stepped down into the boutique. Just inside the window on the faceless mannequin was a piece of winter headgear inspired by a medieval helmet. More of the moment than the tricorn, for the dark ages were back, with the crusades in full swing.

Ula turned at the Rue de Rivoli that flanked the Louvre. She could check out the sculptures of sixth century mathematicians in the palace. She walked along the gilt spiked fence of the museum and turned in at the Passage Richelieu entrance. Waited for a brief moment with a busload of Japanese tourists who identified her in her Japanese costume as a particularly offensive subspecies of Gaijin. After the requisite inspection, she flashed her multipass and stepped onto the escalator down into the glass Pyramid where she removed her helmet, stuffed it into her bag and rode up another escalator into the Sully wing.

## AT THE LOUVRE

Penny got her knapsack and slipped out without anyone noticing. She would pay later, but she had to get out. She hadn't yet been to the Louvre.

Once above ground at Palais Royale, she crossed the Passage Richelieu to the glass pyramid and the fountains with the sprays of water sparkling in the sunlight.

After waiting on line to get a ticket, (that cost nothing because Penny was under eighteen), and getting her stuff rifled through by two giggling security guards who weren't much older than her, she made it down into the well of the faceted pyramid. The Denon wing's Victory of Samothrace was advertised by a big banner and an escalator stuffed with a certain percentage of the planet's biomass converging towards the Venus de Milo. In the adjoining rooms, that were of no mass interest, sulked such Roman emperors as popeyed Commodus with his pile of girly curls and beefy self-satisfied Vitellus. And there also, surrounding the emperor Vespasian, was a congregation of philosophers, including a third rate roman copy of one of the two posthumous, yet authentic portraits of Pythagoras. A thrill ran through her just the same as she stood before the sorry bust, and the past few days came crashing down on her, wave after wave. Dizzy and slightly sick, she held on to the pedestal of the statue.

After a while she felt someone standing behind her. Afraid it might be a guard, she straightened up and turned around, but it was Ula, with her sphinx-like gaze.

"Hi. I thought I might find you here."

Penny caught her breath and walked with Ula down the deserted marble hall.

"Wouldn't Pythagoras have disapproved of your research, not to mention its results? There are a few things I've been meaning to discuss with you. Is this a bad time?"

"That depends." Penny was in no mood for this. They walked on in silence for a minute or so, Ula's eyes fixed on the floor about ten steps ahead.

Ula brought her own peculiar ritual wherever she went, but what seemed pretentious and out of sync in the streets of New York fit

right in here. Every movement was an iconic gesture, each careful step had the cadence of a hundred centuries. Next to Ula the tourists looked like blind peasants stumbling around.

"What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Ula demanded and stopped in front of a roman painting fragment of a winged wild eyed creature with punk hair and pointed ears that looked suspiciously like an elf. Where was this going? Penny wondered.

"So, Penny, when you recover from your spell of Stendhal syndrome, why don't we continue our discussion of E.L.F. and difference waves and their modulation of the human psyche? Because, isn't all art modulated by a sublime agent, the invisible muse or angel?"

Before she could respond Penny's eye caught the dried blood on Ula's hands and sleeves as she swept her arm around to the lilt of her words. They were back at the stairs, beneath the marble wings of Nike, who rose above the roar of a thousand living languages.

Dizzy again, Penny grabbed on the low wall and sank onto the bench slab. Ula remained standing, patient as the marble that surrounded them. Penny shut her eyes to absorb the torrent of humanity flowing up and down the stairs.

Work was always the answer at times like these. "Can we stop for a minute? I gotta get this."

No one would approach the bald stork in her flapping robes. Penny put on her headphones, and set up the speakers eighteen inches apart at the foot of the Victory, with the minidisc machine on the stone ledge. She handed Ula the new ear buds, and with her fingers on the tiny wheels of the wire control, toggled to balance the sounds. Ula's pale eye sparked for a brief instant as she inserted the buds.

"Stand there, and don't move. Don't even breathe."

The rush of sound filled the space inside the disk. The movement of the sound waves that bounced off the marble and limestone surfaces; off the folds of Victory's chiton, the grooves of the feathers in her outspread wings were magnified by the Escheresque volumes of the staircase. And it was all captured in three, no, four, dimensions.

Her face upturned and beatific Ula stood motionless beneath the colossal goddess.

After ten minutes Penny turned off the machine, and replaced all the components. Ula silently handed her the ear phones and they both merged into the descending crowd.

"Anything else you wanted to discuss, Ula?"

"Yeah, let me show you something."

They entered a hall of goddesses and athletes. At the very end towered Michelangelo's giant pair of slaves.

But Ula appeared to change her mind and went straight to a window, settling herself against the sill. Out the window was an incongruously weedy courtyard, strewn with a couple of overturned plastic buckets and a tumbledown shed. A scruffy calico cat crept along the heavy rusted grates of the basement windows.

Penny thought of those famous paintings by Hubert Robert, of the Grande Gallerie fantastically renovated with enormous skylights, and idyllic gentlefolk admiring and copying the masterpieces, and its companion piece, the Grande Gallerie in ruins, overgrown with weeds, the roof caved in, peasants cooking over a bonfire next to Michelangelo's Dying Slave, the same one as at the end of the enormous room.

Ula took a wrinkled apple from her bag. The calico spotted his victim among the weeds. As sparrows chased each other around the shed. The cat pounced on his prey.

"Lunch mouse for kitty," Ula said with glee and bit into the apple. "When I was a girl," she continued, her mouth full of apple bits, "before the Mona Lisa was encased in bulletproof plastic long before I M Pei hammered his glass stake into the building's heart, I would wander here for days. Did you know they had secret staircases? There was a spiral one that ended up in those dark little Bosch and Breughel rooms. Yeah, and downstairs, the Egyptian mummies were all lined up in rows like cargo waiting shipment to the afterlife. This courtyard'll be next."

Turning from the window to Penny she shoved her nearly finished apple under Penny's nose. "Wanna bite?"

"No thanks. I see the Dying Slave, down there."

"Well, *andiamo!*" Ula left the apple core on the window sill.

He looked more like an exhausted party boy than dying menial labor, but Michelangelo must have had his reasons.

From the smooth, hard marble of the perfect toes, to the rough parallel striations at the base sketched in by Michelangelo's chisel, up to the satiny calves, Penny felt its life-like energy. Ula stood in front of the statue as if at a holy shrine, and when Penny looked up at the hand resting so gracefully on the chest, at the swelling curves of the neck, the tilt of the head, the angle of the jaw, the lids softly shutting out the world and - the lips, those lips, a shiver went through her.

Ula gazed up, wringing her blood stained hands, and recited, "Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence, for Beauty's nothing but the beginning of Terror we're just able to bear, and why we adore it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us."

"The Stendhal effect? People standing before Michelangelo's David for the first time would faint, become ill, unable to bear the beauty. And this one's beauty is so much more terrible!"

Penny ran her fingers over the bumpy chisel ridges. She could agree with Rilke, but Stendhal? This statue was a piece of limestone crystallized by metamorphism and no blood pulsed through those veins and its face would never look over at her and smile. It was a piece of art. Those nineteenth century aesthetes were deluded about so many things. Michelangelo never fainted! He, like Beethoven, like Xenakis, knew and had weathered far more abominable things. Could Beauty make you sick? And, if so, what was the artist's responsibility? These were the questions that had taken over her life; maybe this is what she had come all this way for.

They drifted together in silence towards the exit, spiraling up and out the top of the glass pyramid.

"Are you going back to the hotel now?" Ula asked without looking up as she buttoned her cape and slipped on a quirky black bonnet against the wind that had shifted, whipping blasts from the north.

"Are you still at Dick's?" Penny asked, zipping up her parka but not answering the question.

Ula looked to the river just beyond the Louvre's covered arches. They couldn't see Dick's tall windows through the trees, but once on the bridge they couldn't be missed.

"I haven't been back there yet. I don't think he got into the Biennale so he'll be in a really pissy mood." She broke off with a shrug and turned away without a word the black folds flapped and waved a vicious goodbye as they receded towards the left bank.

Penny headed in the same direction but only after walking east along the river to the Pont des Arts and walking across on the creaky wooden planks towards the golden dome of l'Institut with the bells. She took a wrong turn above the Boulevard St. Germain and ended walking all the way up the Luxembourg Gardens to a fountain of the world held aloft not by Atlas but by the continents anthropomorphized into

buxom goddesses. She turned right, down the Boulevard Montparnasse towards the ugly tower, knowing that beyond this, towards the river, was the seventh. She could follow the top of the Eiffel tower when it peeked up through the rooftops, and the house was somewhere between those two landmarks.

An uneasy silence reigned at the table as Penny sat down at her place.

"I went to the Louvre, I just had to see it, although it's so huge that I probably couldn't see all of it in a lifetime!" Penny said, as she sipped her cream of asparagus soup.

Alessandro was absent from the table. Maia pushed her croutons around her soup as if they were little boats. Max jaw muscles flexed obscenely as he ripped off chunks of bread with his teeth. Only Signora carried on as if all were normal.

"I am delighted that you saw our great museum, what did you visit first?" She said in a too peppy voice.

"I really only got to see the sculpture of the Greeks and Romans and Michelangelo. I didn't have time for the mummies or the paintings."

No way was she going to mention Ula, so she just babbled on until dinner was over and disappeared to her room to listen to the day's catch on the minidisc player.

Penny cleaned out her computer mailbox. Trash that the spam bot hadn't gotten to yet. "Bigger thicker penis, larger nuts!" (Larger nuts? Squirrels would love that one, she chuckled and hit the junk key.) Another. "Pennis drukgs!!!" What would they think of next! Hit Junk. One of those Nigerian money scams. Junk. And what was this? Hieroglyphs of code mixed with some obnoxious leet jargon: phux0red, and pr0n, but then she caught the terms 8311 (Bell) and 3Lf, (E.L.F.) pointing right at her. The spam bot caught up and zapped it away before she could finish scanning it. Then she saw that her firewall was down.

## VILLA POLLODIO

Ripping off her headphones, she ran to answer the door. Alessandro must've looked freaked because he said, "What is wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, I just got this weird encrypted Email, and my firewall is down. How are you doing?"

He sat on the edge of the bed. "How did you log on? Oh, you found the WiFi, *bravissima!* Mario has installed broadband and WiFi, he is *très branché*, jacked in, you know."

Alessandro sniffed the stale air and then looked over to the door to the zoo room and sighed, "We have peace now, Maia and Max went back to Rue du Dragon. The door is not repaired but Maia hates it here. Eh, it is mama she hates. Max went with her."

They hadn't even said goodbye.

A whiff of dry rot puffed from the shredded velvet as Alessandro reclined into the pillows, holding his side.

"Do you know, she is determined now to be a pop star. *Povero* Max. I think my accident makes her think 'time flies', no?"

He pointed to the laptop from his cushions. "We tell the security about this, and keep it on, okay? They can maybe trace the original address."

He took the phone out of his pocket and gave some polite but curt orders to the head security guy as he nervously slipped in and out of his red leather slipper. At one point the slipper fell off completely and he had to grab it with his toes and squirm back into it. His foot was pedicured and even more perfectly shaped than the Michelangelo's.

"They are coming up with machines. I think it will take some time. Maybe we change your room, so you can sleep in a fresher bed than this *minable pucier, bene?*"

She had barely unpacked, so she grabbed her tooth brush and coat and waited for instructions by the door.

One of the guys came in and started looking through the computer, attaching a series of gizmos to the USB ports. She was glad she had a backup drive with everything on it in case they screwed it up.

Penny hoisted up her knapsacks, and followed Alessandro through a fog of fatigue and confusion to his wing of the house. Her new room was larger than the previous one and smelled of stone and

fresh air. Under the high vaulted ceiling and mottled plaster wall was a high blackened stone fireplace. Heavy furniture was placed sparingly around the room: a few carved chairs, a low chest, a bed covered with a fluffy white eiderdown and a red marble table above which hung a tiny Gothic Madonna. This monastic sparseness contrasted sharply with the overblown baroque of the main house.

Penny walked up to the little painting. Inside filigree arches, a girl of maybe ten or eleven sat pensively on a bench holding a book, encased in voluminous tubular folds of carmine velvet. A white bird hovered above her head. Behind her, beyond the lace stonework of the arches, stretched a vast and minutely detailed landscape. Blue mountains. In a cave, an old hermit was beating his chest with a rock in front of a crucifix. Trees grew like lace and blue green fields cut awkward little rectangles around a cluster of hovels around a black steeple. Grass flanked roads meandered away with little people on donkeys or little people carrying farm tools to dilapidated farmhouses surrounded by tiny pigs and chickens and a cow or two. Worm holes dotted the bottom where the surface was eroded away and from which a white lily grew, crisply faceted.

He drew the window's velvet drapes and said, "Do you like this room? It has not changed since 1690, when this part of the house was built. The plaster is original, that is why it is stained, but the roof above is new. The little door there is to the bath. The rope next to the bed is for the maid, but you can use the phone, also, press two. And that door over there goes to the library and then to my room. The glass doors here go to the balcony over the garden. If the chickens do not wake you, then the birds in the pear tree will."

She smiled and muttered something.

"*Allora. Buona notte*, Penelope, sleep good."

He smiled wearily as he closed the door, and she heard his slippers pad down the hall.

Chickens? Did he mean a rooster? In the middle of Paris?

She was woken up not by the buzz of her Palm Pilot alarm or by a rooster, but by the riot outside the window. The pear tree, almost leafless now, was covered with twittering, bickering, birds. Hanging from one of the limbs was a feeder, so the tree was like the neighborhood café. The variety of birds was astounding, probably many were migrating. She identified, besides the sparrows, several types of finch, including the red breasted chaffinch, all of which were indigenous. From the top limb, a dapper jay screeched at a red headed

green woodpecker hard at work on a nearby trunk. Penny set up her minidisc machine on the balcony ledge and pressed record.

In the oddly shaped space between the spiral staircase and her room, she ran a bath in the narrow tin tub. She loved the sound of the water when it first hit the empty metal and thundered out like a gong, then slowly got muffled as the water level rose and there was only the echoing splash of the water and the clean smell of the limestone and soap.

Penny slipped on her outfit, checked the machine, and although the mayhem continued outside, she wound up the microphone wires and took in a few lung fulls of the brisk air before returning inside. Just then, the French doors to Alessandro's rooms opened and he stepped out on his balcony in a sweater and jeans, and except for his stitched and bandaged face, he looked almost like a regular guy. His hair was still wet and steam rose up from his head as he leaned on the balustrade and smiled at her.

"The little devils woke you, eh?. After breakfast, we go for a walk in the garden? It is a warm and sunny day."

"Wow, that sounds great. How's the damage?"

"Better, I can think of things besides pain. I think we have breakfast here in the library. My mother is out at the *coiffeur*. The security guys are such a nuisance, I dono why mama insisted on them. Antoine is big and has a gun for squirrels."

Penny didn't mention the Beretta in the bag with the loot, but Max had almost certainly made off with it.

The room was lined floor to ceiling with books: old brown leather, fat shiny art books, pale cream French paperbacks and glossy bright Italian ones. On the table by the window was a tray with steaming pots of coffee and tea, and honey, jam, croissants, and two covered dishes.

She poured tea and buttered her croissant. Under the silver dome was an omelet, with a slice of orange and mint leaves to the side.

Although his face was still a big bandaged bruise his mood was definitely upbeat and Penny wondered briefly if this relocation wasn't a veiled seduction tactic, not that he was in any shape for that. He must know. She had behaved like a total idiot in the salon. She felt his eyes on her now. This was not happening. Get a grip, Penny. She looked up, but he was quite innocently pouring coffee in his cup. No, under all that yellow and blue his face was red as the jam.

She took a fork full of omelet, and looked out at the birds

crisscrossing the lawn.

"How do you like the eggs? Antoine is anti-Frankenfood activist and keeps hens and a co—co—, a male chicken in the back, for the bio eggs. Makes it feel like the countryside, no?"

A feudal keep perhaps, and as they went down the back stairs out to the garden, she saw another miniature mansion that was the garage and servants quarter. Laundry hung out to dry, and there were those geraniums again just like on the little barge. Nearby was a wire fenced area, with a miniature Palladian villa, complete with crumbling orange stucco walls, columns, a dome and the ruins of terra cotta chicken sculptures dotting the entablature, all of it splattered with bird poop. Hens clucked and pecked the ground in the front yard as the rooster eyed the newcomers from atop the coop's grand entrance.

"Cock-a-doodle-dooo!" said Penny.

"Yes?" Sandro looked at her in the exact same way as the rooster.

"Lil' red rooster!"

He looked bewildered.

"So, how does the national bird sing here?" Penny asked, kicking the gravel as she walked.

"Ah! Coco-rico!" He laughed in relief.

"Hey, is that the same rooster lives in Maia's phone?"

"O, Dio! I dono, maybe that is his grandfather! No! No! It is from the Beatles, there is a song, maybe you know?"

"Yeah, 'Good morning! Who built the chicken a villa?' Penny asked as Sandro watched his happy flock.

"Mario and Antoine, long time ago, as architecture lesson for us. La Villa Pollodio! Is cute, no?"

The chubby maid from before came out with another basket of laundry.

*"Ciao Sandro, allora, come stai, oggi?"*

*"Migliore, grazie,"* Alessandro said, and chatted with her for a few minutes. Penny smelled the mint from among the rows of herbs and young lettuces in the garden. A small apple orchard grew next to the wall that was still covered in blooming roses.

The apple trees were covered in different colored lichens, and moss grew up the trunks from the ground. The tiny apples had begun to drop on the ground, with some already brown and caved in, others dotted with little black worm holes.

"Oh Shit! Sorry, I totally forgot. I saw Ula at the Louvre

yesterday."

"What? Why did you do that?" He was completely taken off guard.

"I didn't do it on purpose! I was standing in front of this really bad roman bust of Pythagoras, and next thing I know she's standing there behind me like a ghost! She says 'Thought I might find you here' or something, and we start walking around the museum.

"We get to the big staircase, the one with the Winged Victory, with all those people walking up and down, talking in very language known to man, and I'm thinking, wow, I've gotta get this down, but she's standing there. So then I think, yeah, she can stand there, be the scarecrow so no one'll bother us. So I record this amazing track of these people in this huge resonating space! Then she takes me to her favorite little courtyard that's all decrepit, with weeds and old plastic buckets and a stray cat prowling around, and she tells me these stories of how it used to be when she was a girl walking around the museum before they renovated it, how they had this secret passageway. And then we go see the Michelangelos and she kinda shuts down and we go back outside to that arch and she puts on this weird little hat, not the Napoleon one, more of a Crusades type thing, and just turns on her heel and splits!"

"Back to Dick's."

"Yeah, I guess, but she didn't seem too eager. I think she wanted to get away from Ng though."

"You think? Eh, Mama spoke with Dick the other night. He laughed and said Ng is just a hothead, that I provoke him."

"Man, the guy doesn't cut you any slack! Hey, did he take Ula under his wing after her mother slit her wrists in his bathtub?"

"Wut?" He blinked, looking around. Penny bit her lip for that one.

"Em, yes, Ula found her. She did not speak for many months. Dick legally adopted her, but when, I do not know. He never speaks of those days, and neither does she." Alessandro kicked at some leaves in their path.

"Did you know her then?"

"I was not yet born."

Penny couldn't think of an appropriate response so they walked in silence except for the crunch of gravel under their feet.

"It is incredible that you and Ula were together in the Louvre. You broke through to her. For me, she is still a mystery."

Alessandro's room was similar to hers, but for a tall bookcase stuffed with books on top of books. On a chair was a carcass of lute, no strings, slats of wood held together with strips of white cloth tape and the Francesco Canova da Milano scores. Above the marquetry desk were three antique photographs of dancers, a ballerina on toe with her arms above her head, and two of a male dancer, one of Stravinsky's Pierrot with his head and arms at angular opposites, the other Debussy's Faune holding an Isadora Duncan style scarf.

"Nijinsky, the greatest dancer of all time, who went mad, in the winter of nineteen nineteen, He was the favorite of Diaghlev, you know, of the Ballet Russes. Igor Stravinsky and Debussy wrote the music to these ballets. The Pavlova here in the Dying Swan was his favorite."

"Saint Saens, sure. This one's from Petrushka and that one Debussy's Faune."

"*Brava!* The Petrushka is the one with the black gloves, it is said the white glove Petrushka is better, because his hands were so expressive. Sad that he was never filmed. My *nonna* Tivoglio saw him leap across the entire stage in *Le Spectre de la Rose* in Monte Carlo as a girl. She had big dreams for us. Heh heh, my father never forgave her." Saying that, he pulled a dog-eared book out from the shelf: Balanchine's Stravinsky.

"Now, Balanchine did not understand Stravinsky at all. Where is the humor, the madness? It is all black and white, abstract. Nijinsky went mad, he knew life was a big terrifying, wonderful mess. He understood about ecstasy, and about living as an alien being on this earth. The real modernism of his ballets was his use of movement as heightened gesture, distilling the essence of emotion. The true expression of feeling, this was his philosophy. For Balanchine 'form follows function,' it is the body as machine, and most dancers now consider the body a machine, as athletes do.

"Ula wants go further, using holograms. Salvador Dali made a piece of a pirouetting ballerina, a tiny hologram, like Princess Leia out of R2D2. This got her interested, but then it was impossible. Still is, but Ula wants to be immortal through the holograms and by then she says it will be everywhere. Deus ex machina. So now I study the virtuality for a piece. A corps of holograms, projected for the spectacle. Or VR." He carefully replaced the book in the shelf.

"Yeah, so why violate your holistic position just for her?"

"For my benefit. I will use her to make commentary on the

dehumanization of the spectacle, on the acceptance of the simulacrum, on the perils of technological fetishism for humanism."

"You've been reading too much Baudrillard. So how are you going to reconcile postmodern existentialism with this old fashioned romanticism-humanism of yours?" she asked, glancing at the patient on the chair.

"I use the ultra modern vehicle—Ula—to express the timeless constant."

"OK, but holograms are unreliable and VR is primitive. Remember the Hentai?"

"Yes, interesting, because Kabuki is like mime, both ancient and modern, but distilled, not coarse like the Hentai. And mime is Spectacle! That is what I did in Avignon, a boy rips apart a priest. My brother was the boy. The priest just robes: a ghost, a demon."

*No, no, no! Think about mimes in sad white faces, but not this!* Quickly, she said, "So you choreographed a mime piece, you're really a mime?"

"Well, not like the guys on the street in front of Beaubourg with the fire eaters! Why, you have problem with that?"

"Um, yeah, maybe? I hate mimes, they run around in little tights and make fun of you on the street, then expect you to drop a dollar in their hat. It's like begging with makeup on. They're pathetic. And the only thing worse than mimes is carnies. Like those gypsies hanging around Astroland at Coney Island, all covered with faded jail tattoos. Carnies and mimes, they're just, I dunno, creepy." She was burning up.

"Do they have mimes at Coney Island?"

"I don't think so. They just have carnies, and they have this drag ventriloquist."

"It sounds fantastic, you will have to take me there!"

Penny strayed to Alessandro's dressing *armoire* and the tall mirror on the door. Her hair stuck out in little balls like Buckwheat of the Little Rascals. She tried patting it down, but it bounced back up, making her chuckle. That Paris water and shampoo were a nasty mix, or maybe she needed a buzz. It had been a while.

He smiled through the mirror and said, "Perhaps you need a haircut? You had no preparation for your voyage. Maybe this afternoon we can go to get it done."

"You know a good barber?"

"My mother's hairdresser is the best. She does all the models."

"I don't want fancy model hair, just a buzz, like a sheep."

"But she does mine!"

"That figures."

"You think I look like a girl?"

"You look like a god, but she sounds pricey."

"Friend of the family, dun worry about it. I call her. I think  
Mama is there now. Today is her day."

## LE COIFFEUR

The hall of mirrors that was the *réception*, or anteroom, was an overgrown jungle of pink and violet flowers sprouting from rows of spindly gold vases lined up like regiments against the faceted mirrored wall and reflected ad infinitum in every direction. Above this tropical nightmare hovered a ponderous and unbelievably hideous chandelier that dripped iridescent crystal tears from its gilt gesso curlicues. Madame d'Oc marched in towards Alessandro, her arms thrown up in a dramatic show of horror. (She'd heard all about it from Signora, an hour before.)

"*Mince alors! Mon pauvre petit, quel dégâts!*" She exclaimed as she inspected the ruins.

"So, are you going to have *zuh* surgery? Your *muhzair* is very worried, you know," she said as they moved into the coloring salon.

Demonic laughter erupted from Alessandro's mouth. Heads, glittering with foil, turned to see where it came from. Madame d'Oc pursed her lips and focused on Penny as she walked briskly through the room on her spindly heels.

At the base of a frail wrought iron staircase that spiraled up through a ceiling of painted puff clouds, Madame felt Penny's hair between her fingers as if it were a fabric swatch.

"*Une vierge!*" She winked at Alessandro, who turned away, mortified.

"My leetle lamb," she said, her fingers deep in Penny's hair. "So you want to resemble a leetle farm boy, is zat eet?"

Her eyes peered into hers. She looked like a wolf, a very polite, perfumed wolf and Penny was her little lamb, ready for slaughter.

"Don't you want to look like *zuh brillante docteur pianiste compositeur* zat you are, and not like *un p'tit moutard?*"

"Well, you know, I don't have time to fuss, so it's gotta be short," Penny said, as she followed the wolf up through the clouds.

"Well, we can do zat, you have a lovely cranium, mademoiselle." Madame led Penny into another mirrored room, a Barbarella era space station, with rows of lavender porcelain sinks opposite a matching row of lavender dentist's chairs.

A beautiful young man with Marlene Dietrich eyebrows and

bouncy fake breasts sudsed her hair. After the spray gun rinse, he wrapped a towel around her head and scooted her over to the ionic infrared hair drying dome. Penny fried there for thirty seconds in the floral tinged ammonia fumes until Marlene's red talons curled under the dome and pulled it up and escorted her to one of the lavender chairs.

Madame d'Oc came over to scrutinized her with her tiny gray eyes and launched in with a pair of scissors that moved over her head faster than the speed of light. Ammonia and brimstone rose up from the coloring inferno below. Lucky for Alessandro that he was in the lounge doing oxygen.

"Ah! Zuh ears, mademoiselle, have a fine shape, you should sink of earrings, eet eez a seemple solution for appearing more femeeneen."

The arthritic hands were large with veins bulging and overlapping like Banyan roots over the waxy hairless skin, flat wide nails were filed into long tapered shapes lacquered to match her nacreous lipstick. Penny looked down at the slim stockinged ankles peeking from under the starched lavender smock. Arthritis might have made those bones so knobby, or—Madame d'Oc was one of the very earliest of her kind, what Alessandro's brother had become.

The ears were a dead giveaway. Although partially hidden by her crown of permed ice blue curls, they were outlandishly large, each wrinkly lobe studded with a pink pearl button.

It might work for looking feminine, under the right conditions, like the rarefied conditions she found herself in now. But what about pirates? Well, pirates on long sea voyages probably did a little cross-dressing after a few bottles of rum anyway, so the earring thing might come in handy.

Marlene Dietrich stood by, laconically gathering the red clouds into a steel surgical tray.

"Wiss zeess hair you can grow natural corkscrew curls, do you know how many women would keell for ziss hair?"

Madame picked up a handful.

"And you should wear zee hair long. Wiss zat face you would look like a fairy preencesse, but non, you want to be an androgyne! Bien, I leave a little curl here, you know, like a baby fringe, to remind you that you are a wooman."

She pulled and tugged at the one clump that was left in front. "You have seen your friend Miss Nova in her new, euh, coiffure? Hmmff! What do you sink of zatt?"

"I liked it better before."

"Merci, I agree, you need perfection of zee bone structure to carry zat look. I don't know what has gotten into her head zeez days." She rolled her eyes and smeared some goop on her gnarled finger, then wrapped her finger around the clump, blow dried it and let go one perfect corkscrew curl.

"Voilà mademoiselle, and sink about zuh ears. Madame Tivoglio says young ladies should never have zuh ears unadorned, nut even as zey slumber!"

"Thank you, Madame d'Oc, it's, um, *très avant garde*." She smiled her biggest, friendliest smile so the coiffeuse wouldn't think she was an ungrateful brat.

"Mademoiselle deserves nussing less. When you go to receive your Prix Nobel I hope it will be my honor to do your coiffure."

In the lounge, Alessandro was reclining on a black leather chaise, watching the catwalk on the screen through the integrated goggles of his latex oxygen mask.

As soon as they were out from under the striped awning into the Place Vendôme, Penny shouted, "*Fresh Air!*"

"I should have offered you the oxygen, I am such an egoist."

"Hey, no way was I gonna I put that thing on! Whole experience was too freaky."

"You look so pretty this way." He fiddled with the little curl.

"It's not much different than the four dollar job I get on Mott Street, but she did it all with scissors. Thanks, I really needed a haircut, by now my head is cold and look, those black clouds are closing in."

Luckily a taxi station was right there with an idling cab, so they got in just as the sky opened up again. Looking out the window at the Eiffel tower against the gray sky, with its tiny orange elevators crawling up and down the sides like aphids on a branch, Alessandro said, "Madame d'Oc, as you have probably guessed, is transsexual, one of the first and a medical pioneer. Her operations were only partially successful, but after many years of living as a woman in a man's body, inhabiting a female body, even an inferior one was preferable than living a lie. During the war she was a famous transvestite cabaret singer and even fooled Hitler's troupes when she was a spy for the Résistance. Madame is the one who told mama that Gelino would never be a 'normal' boy."

"Yikes. Tranny granny. So, how did your mom take the news?"

"They sent us to the Jesuits to make us into normal boys."

"Right. Well, you seem normal enough."

"I do my best, thank you."

Back at the villa Signora rustled around in a stiff cocktail dress of midnight blue silk. Her hair was shinier than usual, and her nails were freshly coated with pearly translucent lacquer but otherwise she looked about the same, even after a whole morning at the beauty hospital. The glamour did nothing to hide her mood, however.

"What is the use of hiring a security force if you two slip out from under their noses? To go to the coiffeur? What has gotten into you? *E tu, figlio?*" she said turning from her to him and back to her.

"He should be in bed. He has bruised ribs, a crushed septum, has had a concussion. Does that not sound like he should be in bed? And you are pulling him around town like he is a cheap tourist guide? Have you no concern for my son? He would defend you as he defended that *putana!* You know it too. Have you no gratitude for his noble sentiments? They will be the death of him, those. You have behaved like children. We will have our supper and you will both go to bed."

She sat at the table and folded her hands.

"Grace? Sandro?"

*"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.*

*Benedic, Domine, nos et haec tua dona*

*Quae de tua largitate sumus sumpturi*

*Per Christum Dominum nostrum. Amen."*

In Latin, mumbled, but as fluent and as graceful as if he had been born speaking it.

The chubby maid with the lace tiara served everyone spaghetti in a creamy bacon flecked white sauce.

Signora appraised Penny's make over. "Your hair looks lovely, very feminine. Madame called me and told me. She agrees with me that you need earrings. Why aren't your ears pierced? In Italy all girls have them pierced as babies."

"My parents were not concerned with how I appear to others."

"Well, the haircut, at least, has improved your diction. Madame certainly is *une magicienne.*"

Penny twirled a forkful of spaghetti in her spoon like in the movies, but it was harder than it looked, and a stray *spaghetto* always managed to lash out from the group, flinging sauce around, and then she had to slurp it up American style, anyway.

His face hidden by his heavy curtain of hair Alessandro was too

wrapped up in thought to eat.

"Sit up! Eat your food! It is you who needs the haircut, *tesoro*. Madonna, you need more than that. Madame tells me you laughed in her face when she mentioned the surgery. *Sei pazzo, carino?* I will not have my beautiful boy walking on this earth looking like an accident. *Miseria!*"

Alessandro got up and went over to his mother, kissing the top of her head; whispered, "Mama," then left the room.

Signora held her pearly fingers over her lips as if in thought, but Penny could see her lips tremble underneath.

Penny did the only proper thing and said, "Thank you for the dinner, Signora Tivoglio, I'm rather tired myself, I think I'll go upstairs, if that's okay. Good night."

## AMORE

Penny collapsed into the duvet, then froze. He was at the table, madly typing into her laptop. Next to the laptop was the long rectangular shape of the EX5 keyboard, like just like the one she had at home.

"Sandro, what's going on?"

"Yes, Mario found this. I hope it is the right one."

He pulled out a white box with trodes wrapped around it. "And he found you these. In French, but same principle, yes?" He turned back to the screen. "Oh, yes, I am surfing for deep links."

Manga hair swished across the laptop screen with Japanese captions.

"How did you get my password?"

"I guessed."

"Uh-huh? And what did you come up with?"

"Copper. Eh, CU29, the symbol and atomic number."

"How—"

"Instant message, no? And back door is of course, is 58.9332, the atomic mass, Henri Quatre not so bad for chemistry, too. Mario helped a little. Was fun. I wonder what you would look like with long hair, Madame says you would be divine."

She looked over the keyboard, still skeptical.

"So, Mario got you this keyboard? They don't sell them anymore, and as for IM, I haven't been on the scene for eons now."

"Why nut?"

"It's not real."

"But you have many friends, I saw your buddy list."

"Oh, please."

He shot her a puzzled glance. Was he jealous of her far flung fans, living in their mother's basements, never seeing the light of day? Buddies indeed. Of course that was all history now.

He turned back to the computer.

"Is okay? I thought it would help with your work."

Plugged in. Branché.

"Wow, um, I don't know what to say. So, have you found anything?"

"In the deep links? No, I went from the Kabuki porno we found, but there is nothing."

"What do the security guys think?"

"They will not say. Mario says they are a joke."

"Are they?"

"I told them what I know, is there more?" He looked up.

"Gee, nothing comes to mind. There was an interruption in my firewire, which means anyone could have retrieved or dumped data during that time, and I found that weird code, and it was personalized."

"Hmm."

"What kind of police is this?"

"Em, private police, the regular police are not interested."

"The guy downstairs with his nose in eurosmut magazines is for real?"

"Sort of, yes. Mostly they are retired Special Forces, not hackers. He is now myopic ex-sniper turned free lance bodyguard."

"Sniper, huh? That explains the steely stare."

"*Sympa* guy, but not really a people person."

"Yeah! Hey, does your mom have any idea what kind of humanity she's let into her house?"

"She thinks they will keep me safe."

"Are they? Keeping you safe?"

"We shall see."

"Did you find the gun?"

"Max took it with him, I told him to throw it in the river."

"What about the loot?"

"Pfff! Worthless trash."

"Even the surveillance vid?"

"What 'surveillance vid'?"

"The night vision disks of me in my studio, duh?"

"Aah, yes. We must investigate these, but it may be something different from what you think, it is easy to become paranoid in a crazy time."

She let it slide, for now. "Okay, okay, maybe I am getting a little bent out of shape, so what's next?"

"We wait."

"Whatever for?"

"We shall see."

Miraculously the right kind of synthesizer had materialized in the room with a set of Paris hospital trodes. He had guessed her

passwords, and seemed just a little too fatalistic about everything. Paranoia seemed appropriate under the circumstances. The Madonna looked down over her book to the laptop and Alessandro. With the little bird hovering above her head she wasn't worried at all.

He turned to her with his deep soft eyes.

"The painting reminds me of you."

She stiffened. "Hey, I'm not religious, and I'm not a virgin."

"No, no. She resembles you when you are thinking, like now."

"Thanks, I guess, but she's just a kid."

"So are you! She has your forehead, and the little nose, like your photo."

*That webcam portrait where I look like a beluga whale?*

Penny couldn't stop blushing now.

"Yeah, I sorta have a big forehead. I like to think it's to hold my frontal lobes, but that's just vanity. Was this painting your brother's, too?"

"It has been in my family for many years. When I decide to become a nomad, at first I think I keep it, but I put it away because it is so fragile."

"So that's what you were looking for in that room."

His turn to blush.

"And you just put this up here the day before yesterday?"

He turned away from her to the painting.

"She was above my desk before."

"What was here?"

"My brother's crucifix, by Giambologna. This and the Pavlova where his favorite things,"

"But he was religious?"

"Yes, very, but you know, after we go to the Jesuits this became complicated because of his, em, gender diaspora. Well, the guilt is a big part of what they teach us, especially with the sexuality, you understand."

"Not really, but that's the word, I hear. You still say, your 'brother', does that mean you didn't buy into it?"

"But I did buy it! I wanted him to be happy!"

"Yeah? Okay, um, whatever. So, what about you, you don't seem so by the book yourself, you know?"

"Eh, *scusi?*" He recoiled, catching his breath.

"Strictly religious."

He chortled relief.

"Pascal, the skeptic, says that he would rather believe in God and be wrong than not believe and then find out that God did exist after all."

He leaned towards her. "Agape, you know this?"

"Agape, sure, I know Agape. It's Greek for love. The celestial kind, I think. So you must think of her as um, like, beyond Time and Space? I remember some my mom's books on stuff like the Rosicrucians, Cathars and the Manichaeans. All these so-called heretics set up alternative communities in remote mountains. You know, pure living, community and practicing Agape. Like model hippie communes. So, um, when was this painted?"

He turned back to the painting. "Late fourteen hundreds to early fifteen hundreds, perhaps. The cult of Mary, that grew from the area of Chartres, not far from here, absorbed the ancient beliefs of the pre-Christian goddess in her various forms, but I dunno if the artist knew about any of this. In the end it is unimportant, as the message transcends all temporal manifestation. The artist was thought to be Memling for centuries, but now this has been disputed, so she is deemed almost worthless, but that makes her more mysterious this way, no?"

"I didn't think this was copy," she said and walked up close. A magic window through time, past the tiny cracks, around the filigree of Gothic arches framing the virgin, over the folds of red velvet beneath the little book in her hand, through the busy landscape to the hills that disappeared in a blue mist that deepened towards the top to pure cobalt Space. Everything there was still and perfect, unaffected by the turmoil of history. She was there in a tiny two dimensional time capsule with a message that "transcends all temporal manifestation."

"Nothing changes in there," she said.

*"Nada te turbe, nada te espante, todo se pasa,  
Dios no se muda,  
La Paciencia todo lo alcanza, quien a Dios tiene  
Nada le falta. Sólo Dios basta."*

"Spanish. Nothing can trouble you, nothing can scare you, everything changes, God alone remains unchanged, patience brings everything, he who holds God wants nothing. God alone suffices. Who wrote that?"

"Saint Theresa of Avila, the Spanish mystic."

"Wow, that's very Zen, except for the god part. So, what's happening in here?"

"But it is the Annunciation! There is another panel somewhere, perhaps, with the angel Gabriel,"

"Or was."

"Yes, I have never seen it."

That explained the bird. Its halo had rubbed away.

"What would the angel have been like?"

She sat back on the bed.

"In the Annunciation, Gabriel holds a stem of lilies or a golden scepter. In Flemish Renaissance paintings he almost always holds a scepter, but in Italian paintings of this period he prefers the stem of lilies."

"Well, the lily's down here growing out of the worm holes, so he'd have to be holding the scepter."

He switched from holding the imaginary lily stem to grasping the scepter, his brows knit tight as he arranged his hands into the appropriate angelic pose.

"I meant the expression," she said when he finished.

For a second he appeared bewildered, then a smile spread across his face that flipped her over inside, and she lost it, totally lost it. Bolted from the bed and planted her lips on his. He held her face between his hands and returned her kiss, feather light, then eased her onto the eiderdown.

"Penelopé." Music from his most beautiful lips. His heartbeats slammed into to her chest as if it was made of paper. His hand under her shirt. "May I?" he asked, and softly cupped his hand around her breast, sighing, and with that expiration disappeared at least an hour or two, because the room was colder, the smell of limestone more damp than fresh now. He hadn't moved, was barely breathing, but the smell rising from him was like new peaches in the sun. Her face was covered in tears.

The birds woke them. Cloudy, but not raining. He curled up against her with his arm around her. She ran her fingers through his hair, away from his eyes and the bandage across his nose, and kissed his forehead. He wrapped his arms closer, and kissed her lips. His eyes were still shut as he smoothed his hands over her body, a silly smile spreading across his face. He tried to change position but began coughing and had to hold his side. She offered to help him up, but he shook his head.

Shuffling into the library, he said, "Breakfast in here, okay?"

When she came in, he was on the phone, looking out the library

window. "Ula," he mouthed silently.

The aroma of coffee filled the room, chasing away the smell of books and medicine from the bedroom.

After a cup of coffee, and some bio eggs from the chicken villa, he said, "She is freaking out. Dick is redecorating and the workmen have invaded. About the affair, she says Ng was teaching her some kind of Tai Chi *merde*, and they were working in the mocap studio. She told him to fuck off, and now he is really mad and she is scared, she says something about mafia customers and that Dick being a pill. What is a pill? *Una pillola*, a medicine tablet? Oh, and Ng knows the gun is gone."

"Shit! Does he know who has it?"

"No, and she did not mention the missing materials."

"Well, that's at least something."

"Have some pastries, the almond filled ones are very good."

"We're still just sitting ducks here."

"Security is good."

"I don't know about them."

"Yes, this guy is *un vero fanullone*, but the machines are good."

"What good are they if nobody's watching them?"

Staring blankly at the window, watching the rain spatter against the panes. The birds were gone.

The purple had turned a greenish yellow around his eye, and the black scabs with the stitching above the eye and around the cheek were edged in furious pink. They were the only colors on his face, framed by his black hair and turtleneck and the background of the jittery gray glass.

The phone rang again. He sighed and flipped it open. "Oui, allo?" He turned to the window and spoke. "What is it? Mannaggia. Max and Maia do not answer? Maia's new project? I dono. Em, yes? Ye-es? *Scusi!* Eh, yes, of course, but of course you can. *A toute a l'heure. Ciao.*"

He snapped it shut. "Okay, so Ula is coming here. I must go now and tell Mama. She will not be happy. Do not worry, Ula is not coming up here. I come back." He kissed her quickly across the table and rushed out the door. Now there was just the rain.

Back in her room, she turned on her machine and took the extra minute to rig herself up to the French trodes. With the E.L.F. range dampened down, she cranked up the volume and drifted through the creamy landscapes that formed on the mottled plaster wall. But she

was stuck. All this passive-aggressive fatalism was getting to her. It hadn't really sunk in that he loved her too. And now, Ula was joining the club. It was too soon. But inevitable. Was there such a thing as supersonic jet lag? She would have to ask Alessandro about that. Maybe a little shut-eye. The bed was right there.

"Where's Ula?"

He entered silently, "Nut here yet."

"Doesn't she have a phone? Aren't people always on their cells? I mean, it's like 'Where are you?' 'I'm getting on the train.' 'I just got off the train!' 'I'm at the door!' I mean, couldn't she just call?" Penny sat up, thick headed and irritable.

He threw up his hands and walked over to the window.

"Sandro, can I ask you a question?"

"Mmhhmm?"

"A personal question."

"Yes, of course" He looked away, out the window.

"You and Ula."

"What?"

"Well?"

"I have known Ula since I was much younger than you."

"And?"

He raked his hand through his hair. "Well, yes but - "

"That's all I wanted to know."

"I dun' love her!" He wailed to the window.

"You dono, you dono. You know how she is."

"Do I?"

"I never approached her, it was her, it was always her."

"...who seduced you? Like Maia?"

"O, Maia," he scoffed.

"Or me?"

"You! You did not seduce me!" He gave her a sly glance.

"Okay. Anyway, we're both still bursting at the seams."

"Bursting at the seams?" He thought about that.

"Ha, ha, yes, no, we have not yet burst our seams."

He threw himself across the bed into her arms, but his nose started gushing blood. A second later the phone rang.

"Pronto?"

Penny rushed in the bathroom, looking for tissues, she found them and ran back handing him a wad. He coughed and held the tissues to his nose. The tissues were filling fast with blood.

"Where are you?" He sat up, bunching a new wad to his nose. "I cad hear you, speak louder!"

The box was empty now. As she took it to the wastebasket, something knocked around at the bottom of the box. She emptied it into her hand. Someone must have dropped a watch battery in there at some point. The box had probably been there for ages. She put it aside on the sink, and got another box from the cabinet.

He was still on the phone when she put the new box of tissues by his side. The bleeding wouldn't stop. He threw his head back.

"I dono, she said you cad stay, she bad at Dick, you are ducky."

Penny offered him a huge stack of tissues.

"Yes she's here by be. By dose is bdeeding agaid, she gibbing be sub Kleedex. Eh? Be dice! Tiao."

He fell back on the pillows. "Badaggia, why do I do dis?"

Penny lay down next to him, all the activity had made her dizzy, or the blood.

When she opened her eyes it was dark and he was gone. She turned on the light, picked up the wad of bloody tissues from the floor and rolled it around in her palm. Ng. Ula and Ng. Ula and Alessandro. Ng and Alessandro. Primal. Sitting on the bed now with the red ball in her hand, all she felt was drunk love. Primal She never thought it would happen, not to her, and now that it had, it was the only reality. This little red ball of blood had become her world. She couldn't even remember how she had felt before.

Penny glanced up at the painting. Not the same at all today. Melancholy? No, the little girl with the book was still looking down on the world with gentle detachment. But that was before the angel came down and blew her mind.

He entered through the library, then locked her door to the hall outside with a big curly key. "Which one did she go for?"

"Oh, she does not like those rooms."

"Too much furniture?"

Leaning against the door, he just smiled

"So where did you stash her? In the attic?"

"*Esatto*, the top floor studios. She likes it there."

"So she's moved in? Did she bring the black sack?"

"The sleeping bag? Ha, ha! Yes, it is up there, covered white with plaster powder from Dick's. She was hysterical."

"Yeah, she tried that on me. Remember? That's why I'm here."

He shook his head and leaned it back against the door with his

eyes shut.

"Now mama wants to keep her here. I think she has a plan."

"Why did you lock the door?"

"To keep her out."

"So this seraglio thing is new to you, huh?"

He shoved his hands into his narrow pockets.

"Where does she stay here, usually?"

"Here."

"You really don't know anything about women, do you? In a situation like this, Don Juan, you lie!"

"To whom?"

"To me, to her. What's the difference? Oh, it's okay, it's kinda cute. We'll figure it out." Penny rubbed her temples, took a sip of water.

"This water sucks!"

"Faucet water! Only dogs drink this, I am so sorry! I will bring an Evian, *subito!*"

"Not now."

"Yes!" he spun around as if to go his room through the library, but Penny stopped him, with her arm on his.

"I'm fine, why don't you take a break? You're strung out."

Without ceremony, he collapsed into the blood splattered duvet. Penny watched him from the chair. How many times had Ula had sex with him on that bed? Even second base? That's all it had been, after all. She turned around to the painting. That, at least, had not been here. He had put it there for her. Ever serene and pure. *Nada te turbe*. Her ticket to sanity.

He slept, peaceful as a corpse. The blue veins of his hand meandered between skin and tendons. Each finger nail was clipped with identical white slivers. Felt them stroking her face, slipping so politely under her shirt and over her breast. Those same hands had cradled Ula's shiny skull and held her, moments before the attack. They had also turned the curly key to keep her out, the very person they had come here to find.

Back to work.

The warm whisper of his lips brushing past the back of her neck woke her. Then as she melt in her chair, he lifted the headphones from her head, "Dinner is served. I think it will be dramatic."

Alone in the burgundy salon, Ula was engulfed in a velvet armchair with only her black taffeta turban peeking above the rococo frame. Her spidery white hand held up to the light a large black and

gray transparency of a skull. Alessandro's cranium seen in profile, with the soft tissues like eyeballs, lips and tongue disappearing in the black depths. She handed the sheet to Penny, smiling politely, as if it were a vacation photo. He was familiar with the pictures and didn't want to see them.

Signora swept into the room, ignoring the transparencies for now, and led them to the dining room.

They sat around the table in silence.

"We say grace, yes?" Signora prodded.

"Sandro?"

He made the sign of the cross, folded his hands together and said Grace in Latin again, his face washed with peace.

*"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,  
...Amen."*

Ula watched him in a trance. The stiff fabric was wrapped around her head geometrically to look more like origami than anything from the Arabian Nights.

They began with plates of little pasta nuggets in a white sauce. *Gnocchi*, they were called and looked like big grubs. At least they didn't misbehave like the spaghetti. Penny tried to curb her hunger, she could have polished off two plates of those things in a minute whatever they were. With a look of disgust, Ula impaled the *gnocchi* one by one as if they really were grubs.

Watching Ula stab her grubs robbed Penny of any appetite, and she lay down her fork to stare at her plate.

Signora said, "Penny, if you are hungry anytime during the day, you may ring for food or water, tea, anything at all, whenever you like. That is what the rope is for. The same goes for you, Ula, now that you have joined us."

The plates were cleared and the next course, Scallopine al Marsala was served accompanied by peas topped with leaves of wilted lettuce. The meat smelled delicious but it tasted like wet cardboard to her. Methodically she chewed and swallowed watching Ula prick her peas one by one with the last tong of her fork. This gave Penny an irresistible urge to laugh, but she gulped that down and continued to move her jaw mechanically up and down on her meat and vegetables. Alessandro watched them in a daze from the head of the table.

Signora had orchestrated this little summit impeccably, so dinner rolled right along. No mention of the X rays, that was for later. Even the *gnocchi* were part of her enigmatic strategy.

Signora sustained a cheerful banter. On the Turner prize, "Maybe we should turn one of our empty rooms on and off! Ula? Sandro? Which room?" About the new director of the Alvin Ailey troupe, "Ailey's 'Revelations' are as good as Balanchine or Graham, don't you think? But then you are not so fond of Balanchine, Sandro. Graham's histrionics are an inspiration, but not the bare feet, eh, Ula?"

"Balanchine was a Nazi."

"I believe he was Russian. As you must know, Ula, the Russians and the Nazis were enemies."

"Not that kind of Nazi," Ula sneered.

"You are not so fond of discipline, are you?"

Ula rolled her eyes and stabbed a pea.

Signora forged on about the mysterious disappearance of Gerhard Finkenbeiner, genius inventor and manufacturer of the modern quartz crystal glass harmonica. There had been an article in the culture section of the paper about it.

"Have you ever composed for glass harmonica, Penny? You know, they thought the vibrations were driving people mad! Progress, first mad, then dead. What do you think about this, Penny? More peas? I must insist that you do not endanger members of my household during your stay. Peas, anyone?"

And she offered second rounds to every one, even though that was the maid's job. That would keep them busy.

After coffee and pastel mints, they moved to the salon for "conversation." Alessandro walked over to the bar, a baroque marble table crowded with bottles and glasses, and poured himself a Black Label. Ula's mask flickered momentarily when he raised his tumbler to see if any one else was game. He downed it in one gulp and immediately poured himself another. And another.

The stack of X rays was in the empty chair, reserved for the guest of honor, the silent witness, the skeleton in the closet, the ghost in the machine. Its flesh was fast getting drunk at the bar.

"*Basta!*" The signora ordered without turning around. "*Sederti!*" She pointed a pearly talon. Alessandro stumbled into his designated seat between Ula and the X rays and sat there as composed and regal as a pharaoh.

"Ula, do tell us about Ng Van Hung."

Silence.

"He is your lover?"

Silence.

"He was your employee, no?"

"It was a mistake, alright? Dick said he was a genius. I went to him for the video thing, and image capture. Then I found out he knew martial arts. You know, Jujitsu, Kung fu, Tai Chi, that sort of thing. He said he was a healer and he did teach me the eighteen therapies, the longevity exercise routine associated with Tai Chi. Anyway, one thing led to another, and, oh, I don't know." Her downtown cool voice trailed off and she looked around the room nonchalantly.

"But you flew back to Paris when you had already asked Sandro to come meet you in New York!"

"Mhm? Well, my loft was broken into, and I got a call from Mr Hung, and, oh, it's complicated, you wouldn't get it if I spelled it out to you."

"Do spell it out for us, Ula."

Nothing.

"Ula, what are you afraid of?"

Ula said nothing, focused on her knotted hands. Penny noticed now, probably because Signora was always flashing any number of precious rings, that Ula had not worn the enormous diamond since New York.

Tears trickled out the corners of her reptilian lids, but her mask did not crack.

Exasperated, Signora got up. The grand inquisitor had pity on the Kabuki nun, and said to them all,

*"Va bene così.* We go to bed. It has been a long day, no?"

Ula nodded.

*"Buona notte, tutti."* Signora kissed Alessandro on the top of the head before swooshing out of the room.

Penny followed the sounds of the silk, and when she turned around the two of them were looking at each other in silent understanding and her heart stopped in her chest. She felt like a speck in the huge red room.

Then Ula did the unthinkable. She knelt at his feet and buried her turbaned head in his lap. He shut his eyes but remained otherwise perfectly still.

Penny stood in the middle of the room not daring to breathe, expecting some action from Ula at least, but they were both frozen in this pose. A good minute passed. Only after Penny cleared her throat did Alessandro's eyelids flicker, but that was it.

"Well, 'night, folks, see ya in the morning!" She ran upstairs to

her bathroom as fast as she could, and all the *scallopine* and the peas and the *gnocchi* tumbled into the toilet.

The rooster woke her this time but the sun was still asleep behind its gray flannel blanket. Still, it was pretty late, and she just lay there like mud, like the sky. She forced herself up to run a bath in the tin tub. The battery was still at the edge of the marble sink. Maybe it was still good, better not get it wet. Probably from one of those fancy Swiss watches, like the one around his wrist with all those useless dials. No, they were perpetual, the motion of your arm kept them ticking. An electric razor? She looked at it more closely. Not like any battery she'd ever seen. No seams, no numbers, no nothing, just a dull heavy cylinder. Someone must have stuck it under all the tissues in the bottom of the box. Her skin crawled. A bug! Someone had bugged the room. But, who, when, why? Whoever was spying on her in New York, but that was Ng and he had never come anywhere near here. And the weird stuff going on with her computer. Was it all related?

She turned the water off. She took the thing to the bedroom and placed it by her keyboard and checked that the door was locked. Back in the bubbly hot water the shivering stopped. She shampooed her hair and scrubbed herself pink with the loofah.

Wrapped in one of the warm fluffy towels, she pondered the steel dot by the computer and mentally scrolled through her options as she got dressed. She picked up the phone. Over the dial tone was a funny click, intercepted every couple seconds on the other end, and she heard faint crackling voices, when there should just be a dial tone. But the phones were old with rotary dials, with wires that were stuck directly into the wall, disappearing in a hole drilled in the ancient baseboard, so maybe it was just the obsolete state of the house wiring. And maybe phones behaved differently here. They looked a lot different. The light switches were big chrome things out of the last century with the wires discretely stapled to grooves in the paneling and above to the plaster and stone. Pretty obvious if someone had messed with any of that.

Paranoia was just getting the better of her. Better wait and ask him what he thought about all this. He would just say she was being paranoid, or paranoiac as he called it.

But maybe she should just check his empty bedroom. Cautiously she opened each door and then tiptoed to the bed. On his night table was a notebook, next to his assortment of homeopathic painkiller phials.

She settled at the table in the library and leafed through the pages. It was full of strange hieroglyphs and stick figures leaping and spinning. Shorthand notes at the edges. The angle of the script became more acute and the diagrams more succinct as the pages progressed.

She heard the door slam, some frantic rummaging from his bedroom and he skidded into the library dressed in a tattered sweatshirt and black tights, bulge prominent. Farther down cobalt nylon braces were strapped around his knees, then off white wool leg-warmers pooled around his ankles, and, yes, there they were, ballet slippers, all gray and worn, molded to his feet.

"*Ecco li!*" He reached for the note book, his eyes feverish and distant. He must have been pretty doped up.

"Jumping around? Smart."

He lifted his shirt exposing a torso wrapped like a mummy into a rubbery exoskeleton.

Penny's heart jumped and thrashed. "I found a bug in the bathroom," she said thickly.

"Eh? *Scusi?* Tell the maid!" He blinked, pulling down his soggy sweatshirt.

"No!"

"Hhmm?" He rolled his eyes.

"Never mind, forget it."

"May I have the notebook?"

She handed him the notebook. He motioned to his bookcase, "Feel free!" he said and spun away back into his room, leaving her standing there stunned. A last yellow leaf spiraled to the ground from the pear tree.

*Prick!* She went back to the computer and contemplated her bug. Why a bug in the bathroom? Because, the box would be brought into the bedroom, where the action took place. As with insects, if there was one bug, there were more. Penny looked around. The new box of tissues. She ripped out the sheets, no bug. On her hands and knees. Under the bed, along the underneath of the bed frame. The night table. The computer table. Nothing. Under the chair, along the sides, underneath the frame of the back, between the leather and the wood. Ah! She picked it out from the crack, with eye brow tweezers from the bathroom. Eye brow tweezers? Whatever. The thing was magnetized. Same item. Placed it next to number one. Now, along the wainscoting. The door to the closet, nothing. She looked through the bathroom. The other boxes of tissues and soaps were sealed, as were the luxe hotel

style guest supplies of nail clippers and tweezers, aspirin, digestive aids, Band Aids, and Q tips, but no Tampax. She couldn't imagine Ula needing those anyway, and otherwise this was boys only territory.

Between the floorboards. Under the bed she used her micro light, combing through each groove, but that search was fruitless, although she did find a gold earring back. No dust bunnies, though, that was suspicious, or maybe that was having servants.

In the library. Around the table. Right where the marble top met the wooden frame and had been reinforced with a metal brace, it was stuck to the metal. Number three! Under the chairs, nothing! The oriental rug, worn out and thin.

She gathered up her micro light, mechanical pencil, tweezers and the last bug and moved on to his room. Nothing under the rug. She rolled under the bed.

Wet feet splitter splattered out of the bath. A waterlogged towel dropped to the floor. His feet stopped six inches from her face. A red dent from the slipper's cord circled his foot. Oh, to cover his perfect feet with kisses, to hold them in her hands, run her hands up along his legs. Get a grip, Penny, get a grip. Lying on her stomach, she dropped her forehead on her hands. It had come to this. She couldn't think straight anymore. She had lost her mind, gone gaga over this perfect stranger, and now she was hunting for demons under his bed with a pair of tweezers.

"Are you there?"

"I'm under the bed," she said, and rolled out onto the rug. Naked he crouched down over her, his hair dripping into her eyes.

She showed him the bug.

"What is that?"

"A bug," She mouthed, holding up the tiny metal dot.

"You found this under the bed?"

Pointing to the other room she said as she got up, "I found three. One in the bathroom two in my room and one in the library, but I just started in here."

"We tell security."

"Shhh!"

"What?"

She pointed to the room phone and whispered that she had heard noises.

Alessandro shuddered. He ran his hand through his wet hair.

"Where are the others?"

"What? Oh."

The bugs were lined up in a row next to the computer, each one on a Post-it with its provenance, so she wouldn't mix them up. She wrote one up for the library bug, and put it on its paper next to the others.

He picked up the gold earring part.

"Under the bed."

"This was my brother's room, there have been no women here, except for her, and her ears are not pierced and neither were his, yet."

"Your mother, before there was furniture."

"Si!" he chuckled and picked up one of tiny cylinders stuck to the yellow paper.

He began laughing, "This is not a bug, you have not seen these?"

"No oh?"

"Ah, well this is a magnet." And he stuck it to the edge of the curly key in his hand. "Mighty mags, I believe they are called, from the Museum of Modern Art gift shop, super strong, but I lose every one. Old Christmas present from Dick."

Penny felt like a complete fool.

He picked up the phone, shut his eyes, listened, shrugged, hung up.

He sat in the chair at her desk and asked, "May I listen?"

She turned it on and Alessandro sat in his pharaoh pose, hands on his bare thighs, eyes closed, and listened.

With the ear buds, she listened along, watching his face carefully. He was a good listener, and sat in stillness to the end.

When his eyes met hers, the lashes still sparkled with tears. He got up from the chair, naked and shining and making no effort to hide what was happening to his anatomy, but wore an odd surprised look on his face, as if he didn't quite know what to do next.

Penny sat down at the edge of the bed and kicked off her shoes without really thinking.

As if undressing a child he knelt down beside her and methodically peeled off her socks, jeans, T shirt, and white cotton underwear. Hesitating a moment before scooping her up he whisked her through the library to his bed. Remembering something, he dashed into his bathroom, came out tearing open a small package with his teeth. This, at least, he seemed familiar with.

Afterwards, they lay side by side on the bed and stared cross

eyed into empty space.

"This is the happiest day of my life," he announced to the ceiling. "I am the happiest man of the world."

"In the world."

He turned and whispered in her ear, "You make me this."

"Sandro..." Penny began. He rolled on top of her and kissed her lips, her throat.

"O, Mia vita. Can I make you happy? As happy as me?"

Penny nodded helplessly.

"We will pay for this."

"Pessimist."

"Penelope, love me always."

"Forever."

"*Per sempre*. I love you *per sempre*. I live inside you, it is paradise."

He reached for her breasts.

"Most beautiful in the world. This one, and this one, how friendly. O, Penelope, I love you so much, so much."

He lay his head peacefully between them and she streamed her fingers through his hair.

Night fell in shades of gray. They heard sounds outside the door, not much, just enough to guess who it must have been. No telling for how long, either. He got up, frowning. His arm tightened around Penny's shoulder as they stood on the other side of the door and held their breath.

The door moved imperceptibly from contact with the ear held to it, and they heard the brush of her hand as she bent down to look through the keyhole. They froze, expecting the worst. Instead, she slowly rose, her hands sliding up the surface of the door. A mute note as she leaned her forehead, then in a cloying wave of contact, her entire body into the door, her hands suctioned flat and still on the wood. They could hear her breath behind the wood. Slowly, she moved away towards the library door, trailing her nails along the plaster. Sandro hugged Penny close, his heart pounding into her chest, until he was sure the danger was past.

The blackened fireplace came to life after Sandro's ministrations and washed the room in a tide of orange that ignited the room with gold: the frames, the satin damask coverlet lying in a heap at the foot of the bed, the roaring lion heads on his Vermeer chairs. She turned to his golden fractured face and looked deep into his eyes, where the fire

really danced.

"You want to know?" he asked.

"What?"

"You know, about the past." He sprang up and yanked an old shoe box from a desk drawer, flipped the lamp switch and plunked the box between them, pulled out a photo of his parents in front of a café surrounded by parked Vespas. The *marchese* standing nonchalantly in his crisp linen suit and wide tie with one hand around his girl and the other dangling a cigarette. A long, patrician face, mostly in shadow. Beatrice looked about the same as now except with heavy black eye makeup and complete lack of eyebrows as was the style then enormous, white sunglasses perched on her black mane. In her platform shoes and white bell-bottoms, she towered over him.

A picture of Sandro and some other boys, in full soccer gear, with the black and white ball tucked under his arm.

How long did you play?" she asked, remembering what Maia had told her.

"First here and then with a group. Not so long, I hurt my knee, and they found out and did not approve. It is a sport of the lower classes."

"The lower classes? Wow. Soccer's for rich kids back home. So what do the, um, upper classes do here, ballet?" Penny asked.

"*L'èscime!*" And he ran buck naked into the hall, returning moments later wielding a long black sword from the storeroom. He threw off the leather scabbard and hopped into position menacingly. "*En garde!*" he declared.

Pointing the blade down he said, "*La fente!*" lunging straight at her as if to run her through. He stopped inches from her and explained gallantly, "*L'art de donner sans jamais recevoir!*, the art of giving without ever receiving, heh, heh."

"Lemme see that." he handed her the sword, Gilt curlicue handle first. "Whoah heavy! So, is this black with the blood of the lower classes?"

He gave her a funny look. "From the 'Thirty Years' War. It is black with the blood of Protestants!"

"Ouch."

"I think that is when we got the painting," he said thoughtfully as he slipped the sword back into its embossed scabbard and returned it to the storeroom.

Back by the fire he rummaged through the shoe box and

brought out a picture of two boys in face helmets and white quilted fencing outfits. Then one of Angelo in toe shoes and a lace altar boy/baby doll nightie thing dancing with the priest's robes, his face in white mime makeup.

A picture of Dick, with the vestiges of hair on his head, his arms around the two boys. A medieval castle behind them like a stage set prison. The Avignon piece. Sandro is perhaps fifteen, and as proud as ever. Angelo looks melancholy and lost.

A photo of Ula and Sandro practicing in an empty room. Ula is young although with her long flat body and the ballerina knot at the back of her head it's hard to tell how young. Sandro is still a little boy and is smiling gallantly up at her.

"I think I've seen enough. You were very close to him, weren't you?"

He nodded. "We had our own world, our private language. It was not for Ula, Dick, anyone."

"So you met Ula before he went to live with Dick?"

"Ula was always trying to break into our play world. More when Mama was away," he said, evening up the rows of photos.

"Why was your mother away?" she asked.

"Doing the movies in Rome. The nanny complained that 'Gelino would not share mama's clothes for dress up, like the Biba and the old platform shoes from the modeling days, even though Ula was a young woman already! That is when Mama found out and she fired the nanny and told 'Gelino why don't you go live with Dick so he can train you to be a real *finocchio*, not a little girl playing dress up!"

"*Finocchio*? Isn't that a vegetable?"

"Homosexual, except that is not what he was at all."

"No kidding."

"Is that when Dick took those pictures of, um, you and your brother?"

"What pictures?" His head whipped around.

"Um, with the, uh, Empire State Building, you're both kinda laughing, playing some kind of, uh, game? You're like, younger than me."

"Where did you see those?"

"At Dick's, in the hall."

"When? The first days? *Managgia*. He has those up?"

"Framed, next to pictures with, like, Picasso and Dalí, and a lady who I think must be Ula's mother."

He pushed away the box, turning a furious red.

"I am sorry, I did not know. But these are not so bad, eh?"

She said nothing.

"It was em, a joke. And, yes, we were both younger than you."

He shrugged it off, hiding behind his hair.

Nodding to himself, he told the box, "Ah, that is why you sat so far at the end of the sofa."

"It's okay, really," Penny said, to smooth things out.

"What did you think?" A tiny twisted smile peeked from under the wall of hair.

"About the content or the artistic merit? I didn't look at 'em that closely, okay? I saw it was you and I just can't believe somebody'd hang something like that in their house, that's all. I'm not a total hick, okay? I know art's gotta shock the bourgeoisie, but jeez!" Her face must have been vermilion, too.

"Thank you for not running away after that," he said, his voice low and deep in his throat.

All of a sudden he jumped up and went to the closet and brought out his fancy clothes. "We dress for dinner. How are your things, you should not have gone on the floor in those."

She put on the clothes and he inspected them as he put on his sculpted gold cuff links. They had the same design as the top of the sword's handle.

From the bathroom he brought back a washcloth, and dabbed and brushed her like a grandmother. He smoothed her hair and wrapped the curl around his index as deftly as Madame d'Oc. She kissed his wrist.

"Dun't move," he scolded, withdrawing his finger from the curl. He bowed and offered his hand, "Shall we?"

## BATS IN THE BELFRY

Downstairs in the salon Ula and Signora were having a *tête à tête*. Ula perhaps believed that she was learning the secrets of becoming a Grande Dame. Sandro walked up to his mother. She whispered something in his ear and they moved into the anteroom. Penny heard them walk away. Ula had been watching her, sipping a translucent drink that smelled like licorice.

"Get you a drink?" she motioned with the glass to the bar, as if this were her own house.

"No, thanks." Penny sat in one of the red damask chairs. Sounds of china and silver came from the dining room.

"You're so uptight, a little alcohol might help."

"It'll just make me sleepy." Penny sure hadn't felt uptight until now.

Ula sailed to the bar and poured something into a small crystal goblet from a bottle with an artichoke on the label.

"Here, try this," she said, "It's good for the digestion and almost non alcoholic, from the heart of the artichoke."

Penny took a sip of the artichoke blood. More sweet than bitter, like homeopathic cough medicine, but also reminiscent of Coca Cola.

"What is it?"

"Cynar, an aperitif invented by this eccentric art collector/inventor that I met at Salvador's."

"In El Salvador?"

"No, silly, Dalí, the artist! They collaborated on these weird projects, holograms and things. I met him when I was visiting Salvador and Gala in Port Lligat and he'd stopped by in this gargantuan yacht, parked it right outside in the little bay!"

"Hmm." What did Ula think when she walked down that hall with all the photos? Penny swirled the surrealist's bitter potion in a paper thin goblet like ones in still life paintings of desserts and watched the crystal facets sparkle under the chandelier. Ula continued her ramble on this celebrity's legendary quirks and extravagances. Penny tuned it out until the part about twin baby bottoms on wet paper.

"The little rosebuds were identical!" Ula exclaimed as if it were normal cocktail hour conversation. In the silence that followed, because

what was Penny supposed to say to that, it dawned on her what those weird paper sculptures at Dick's were and she felt sick and took another sip of the dark liquid. Ula inspected her face with her deep, unwavering stare.

So close to Penny, Ula exhaled licorice. "You really are just a child. You look twelve."

"I'm seventeen."

"I know how old you are." She took another sip of her milky fluid. "Your eyelashes aren't pale like most red heads. You don't dye them?"

"Huh?"

"No, of course you don't, I'm sorry. Do you like your drink?" She placed her hand on Penny's knee; slid it up her thigh.

Penny shot up, still holding her glass. Ula putting the move on her? She swished the artichoke stuff around again, but couldn't bring herself to drink any more of it.

Without warning, Ula's dry fingers were brushing her cheek. Penny shuddered and moved farther away, her breath caught somewhere in her throat.

"We could all be one happy family," Ula whispered in her ear.

Sandro sauntered in.. Incredulous, he snatched Penny's glass, his eye piercing Ula. "What is this?" He looked into the glass.

"Cheenar," said Penny.

He took a sip, tasting it carefully as if it might have poison in it. He nodded.

"Do you like it?"

"Too sweet."

"Don't drink anymore, okay?"

Ula smirked at them from her bubble of absurdity.

He put down the glass and grabbed Penny's head in his hands and smashed his lips into hers. Ula threw her head back and clapped her hands, cacking, "Fine theater, lover boy. Magn-i-fique! But there's no escape. Poor little Penny's out of the frying pan and into the fire." She drained her glass.

"*Bambini!* Enough of the monkey business, *andiamo a tavola,*" Signora said from the doorway

Signora rushed Sandro through Latin Grace. The maid was so nervous she spilled the *brodo* from the tortellini on Signora's lap. When the Signora patted her hand instead of firing her on the spot, she burst into tears. Signora had taken his advice and sent the security team

packing.

"Holy shit!" Penny blurted out, and they all looked at her, thinking it had to do with the maid.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I forgot something." Penny knew why her firewall had crashed before.

Ula ignored them and speared each tortellini in its broth with the accuracy of a heron.

Penny was furious with herself, she should have thought of this right away. Love had sliced her IQ in half, at least. And all that lovemaking had her nodding off during dinner. She had two espressos after the *tiramisu*, so she could be alert for debugging.

He kept pouring the coffee into her demitasse as she sat with him at her computer. That was how they'd gotten her. That weird email message had been to kill her firewall, so they could get in her computer, virtually. No tweezers needed. She found a program to purge her laptop of Internet launched bugs and ran it through the hard drive. He watched her methodically run through her files, not saying anything as he leaned on his elbow, pouring her more coffee.

"I've had enough coffee, Sandro. I'm not Italian."

"I think Ula put something in your drink."

"What?"

"She does that. Her and Dick. Scopalamine, usually. Tasteless, invisible and you remember nothing. Did you feel nauseous, dizzy, have trouble breathing?"

"Yeah, I felt bad but that was because of something else. Date rape drugs? How does that work on guys, anyway? Never mind."

Sandro just sighed and drummed his fingers on the desk. Much later, with the computer swept clean, they went to sleep like proper lovers, in his bed, wrapped around each other front to back and skin to skin.

In the morning she awakened next to him, breathing in his peachy warmth, and her heart started purring away. The birds weren't around the pear tree with their usual racket as it was dark and stormy outside, so she lay under the covers, drifting happily until he stirred awake.

Downstairs in the solarium over plates of omelettes and pastries, breakfast was *en famille*.

"You eat like a horse, what do you weigh, ninety pounds?" Ula asked Penny as she poured tea into her empty cup.

"I'm still growing."

"Jesus Christ! You can have my croissant with your tea, then." She pushed both the cup and the plate with the splayed croissant towards Penny.

"I did not know you were Christian, Ula," Signora said.

"I'm Taoist, actually."

"Really?" Signora scoffed.

Penny absentmindedly spread the lump of jam across the croissant, still groggy from the night's cozy dreamless sleep and pre-breakfast love-romp.

"*Oggi, lavoriamo.* Today, we work," Sandro announced as he got up, folding his napkin by his plate.

They were to spend the day in the studio on the top floor.

There were no radiators, just an electric heater that made a racket every ten minutes or so when it woke up. R2D2 with an attitude. Ula stretched at the barre. Penny set up camp in the corner by the old standup piano, away from flying figures, but with a view. On top of the piano were bottles of Evian, towels and energy bars. She sat on the floor ensconced in one of Sandro's sweaters, the sleeves rolled up, with her purged laptop on the floor between her knees. Ula was in her black cashmere unitard, Sandro in a fresh assortment of dun colored dance rags. Either he had stretched earlier or he was going to take it easy.

Ula went through *battements* and *developpés* at the barre then moved into the center for jumps. Sandro's phone rang. "Dude! Whassup ah?" He walked to the window by the barre nodding to Max at the other end of the line.

"Score? Aah!" He chuckled and looked out the window, scratching his head. He turned back to the room. "Hey, dude, we're practicing, I can't talk now, okay? Ciao."

From practicing jumps, *grand jeté en tournant*, and *jeté en devant* Ula moved on to combinations. Sandro watched, tapping out the beat with his foot all the while.

Then, he sprang up and flew back, spinning through the air and landed on both feet with a light spring, wincing and out of breath but obviously quite happy with himself, for that explosive maneuver had been flawlessly executed. He didn't look about to try any more, though.

"This is the most difficult of all the jumps, not across the stage like Nijinsky, but about the precision. *Cabriole à la quatrième derrière.*"

Ula pouted. "Show off! Okay, so turning jumps is your thing. My favorite is *Brisé volé.*"

Ula brushed her leg through and sprang forward, arms out in front, head tilted to the side. She landed, shot back up, then drifted down arms outstretched like wings and landing in a arabesque, her arm outstretched towards Penny

Penny clapped uncomfortably.

"It's all about the flying. That's what Sandro says. He does Cecchetti, the Italian method, it's choppy and showy. I do Vaganova, the Kirov's method. It's slower but more lyrical, more like flying. But he's always complaining about my technique, isn't that right?" Ula swept a stray lock from his eyes. He pushed her hand away.

"I complain because you do not keep the beat. Art is about precision first, expression later," he quipped.

Watching them dance together was a shock. They moved and breathed as one organism, communicating through the mirror. What unfolded in the world beyond the glass was the truth of their relationship.

Ula gulped down half her bottle, radiating.

They did a complicated step, where he caught Ula, swept her over his shoulder and flipped her over, her limbs rotating like the spokes of a wheel to the ground, then he launched her up, her wings spread out, like Nike.

He explained something in French touching her back in two places, and asked Penny to play the passage again.

"*Brisé volé* again, with a partner." Ula wiped her face with the towel.

"This is, like, a *pas de deux*?" Penny asked from her corner.

Ula watched for his reaction in the mirror.

"I am thinking." He paused. "A male presence too brings a certain, em, gravitas—"

"Balls," Ula cut in, patting her sweaty scalp with the towel.

"This was your idea?" Penny asked. He nodded and walked over to her, kneeling down in front of her, careful not to disturb the mess of wires linking the machines.

"Ula's right. Your music it has balls. It can support a whole company! Analog, not machines. Beating hearts! Right Ula?"

"Trial run, Sandro. Let's keep it moving."

Sandro turned up the volume and they got back to work, even though he looked ready to keel over. Across the room, like ghosts, translucent in the twilight.

"Could you turn it down?" Ula asked the corner.

But Penny had her own situation. A funny taste rose in the back of her mouth, like ether, or acetone.

"What's wrong?" Sandro's sat down on the floor next to Penny, his eyes searching hers.

His face swirled, bright bright Van Gogh yellow, his hair a violet halo. The halo stretched out from the yellow swirls and up she floated, right through him, inside a purple haze and there they were way down there, with her hovering next to the flickering filament of the ancient bulb, ceiling cobwebs shivering from the rising heat of the room.

Sandro holding her wet scalp peering into her eyes, Ula still holding the bottle she had poured over Penny's head.

"What happened?"

"When did you eat last? What did you eat?" His tone was flat, like a doctor.

"When you did, at breakfast."

"You passed out, your eyes went to the back of your head."

"I did not pass out."

"*Scusi?*" He looked at her as if she was insane.

"Leave her alone, Sandro. It's that music."

"What?"

"Bats in the belfry." She mouthed the letters 'E L F' and put her hands over her ears rolling her eyes around.

"*O Dio*, what are we going to do?" He wiped her wet face with his towel.

"I don't get it. Its not supposed to be happening!" Penny said.

"What is happening?"

"Hold on, let me think. Well, I got this funny taste in the back of my mouth, I saw swirling, bright colors, then I went up like a balloon and bobbed up around the ceiling in this, like, violet haze, and everything got really detailed but I saw myself lying down here, you, everything, from up there. And I'm really up there, because I can see things I could never see from the ground, like the filaments of that weird Edison bulb. Then I don't know, I guess I went blank."

"Your eyes, there was only the white."

Ula sawed silently at her neck with the towel.

"I'm so sorry," he said, wrapping his arms around her.

"It's not the end of the world. I saw your aura. I flew right through you. I bet acid's like this. I dunno." Had she been lying to herself all this time? It had happened before, but she always dismissed it

as a dream, as she often fell asleep at her desk. Then after the concert she had begun to wonder. She still had to figure this out. So much to figure out

"I'm going downstairs. Say, Ula, did you bring your laptop?"

"It's next door, want me to get it?"

"Yeah, I would, actually."

"Okay, be right back."

"What are you doing?" he asked, as soon as Ula was gone.

"Bet hers is infested too."

"I thought we weren't going to say anything."

"We're not, leave it to me." It was hard to think.

"Are you okay? Dinner will help." He hugged her, rubbed her back. He reeked of patchouli.

"*Ti amo*, dun' be jealous," he whispered as Ula returned with her silver sliver.

"What do you want it for?" Ula asked suspiciously.

"I found a virus in mine yesterday. Have you been on the Internet recently?"

"Yeah, of course. You mean like Lucy or Code Red?"

"Uh huh."

"Shit, what can we do?"

"I can flush it, I got a program."

"Now?"

"Yeah, well, later, if that's okay."

"Wow, thanks. Hardware, software, I don't know squat."

"No, you're wetware."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind."

They filed down the stairs to get ready for dinner. The three of them ate in silence. Signora must have been accustomed to this, because she carried on as if they weren't there, racing through a Georges Simenon *roman policier* as she ate.

Penny ran every piece of debugging software she had and after a few hours found the bug. Ula probably had Maia's entire CD cabinet ripped to MP3's on her hard drive so there was no telling where it had come from.

Her head felt as if it had been through a blender the next morning when she woke up around noon. Sandro was off somewhere in the big house. She made some tea in her room and ate one of those tasteless energy bars, then lay down and fell asleep, on her own bed,

until dark.

She decided to get dressed and make an appearance for dinner. On the spur of the moment Signora was at Mme Giroux's, the minister of culture. As a government official, her schedule was hectic, and social calls with the girls took a back seat. So Penny came down to find Alessandro and Ula alone in the red salon.

Sandro poured himself a scotch, oblivious of Penny, who sat down in one of the rococo armchairs.

"You really shouldn't mix, Sandro," Ula said sipping some viscous looking cocktail. She offered her glass to Penny.

Wary of Ula and her bizarre European potions and still reeling from her experience on the top floor the day before, she asked for an Orangina. She loved the nubby orange globes and the bitter fizz inside, plus, she could open it herself. He opened the door of the paneled mini fridge and threw her one.

They sat in their red *fauteuils* and sipped their drinks like tired bankers at a private club, deep in their own thoughts.

"I got the worm," Penny said to break the ice as she watched the bubbles collecting around the edge of her glass.

"Chiquita! No tequila here, non, no! But we got the worm wood!" Ula sang with a Mexican accent. "Hahaha! Oh, the *worm!* You mean the *virus!* Which one was it?"

"I think it's nicknamed KGB."

Alessandro rolled his eyes and drained his whiskey, walked over to the bar, tinkling the cubes in his glass. "Anyone?"

"I'll take another of these," Ula said as she walked up to the bar.

Sandro looked back at Penny as he mixed Ula's drink, a complicated affair using arcane Art Nouveau implements. "You wan' something to chase away the ghosts?"

Might as well join the gang. "What do you recommend? No artichokes, please."

"What do you like? You must have had something before? Even in America."

"Jello shots," Ula teased.

"OK, spike my Orangina. Vodka or gin, nothing fancy!"

"Jello shots," Ula laughed or rather snorted in her drink.

"Oh, forget the Orangina!"

A plume of frigid Stolichnaya vapor rose from the little goblet.

"Here, I put in the little Chardin glass. Cute, no?"

Handing her the glass, he asked, suddenly all business. "We

need a hard copy. Penny, do you have this notated? Is that possible?"

"Sibelius, but that takes time, I don't usually make those until I'm sure I've got what I want, but then I've only worked solo. I think I can whip something up for you, do you have a printer?"

"Mario has one. Okay, so, what do we do with this piece? What do we call it, how do we present it to the public, in what form: stage, video, animation? Ula are you there?" He snapped his fingers.

"Aren't you getting ahead of yourself?" Penny suggested.

"Maybe we should think of this in more fluid, holistic terms," Ula said in her pretentious downtown voice now, the voice she had used the night she had crept up on Penny.

"But its fluid now, it's like a dream." Penny sipped her firewater. It made her nauseous and vaguely dizzy, but at least it wasn't poisoned, or was it?

"I'm thinking in terms of combinations. Like, altered images, human and non human using musical and non musical soundscapes. A complete multimedia experience." Ula screwed up her eyes and looked at each of them in turn.

"Like MTV or the Whitney Biennale? How is that different from what we did in the past?" Sandro jeered, pouring himself another.

"I need something that will blow people away," Ula hissed.

"You want to blow people away with only two people and some cellophane?" Sandro, clearly fed up, downed the whiskey and poured another, sloshing half of it on the table.

Ula leaned forward. "Multi-media, *carino*."

"Well, Ula's got a point. Spectacle's the only way. You said so yourself, Sandro. So we can do a Techno Trance 3-D multimedia extravaganza, you know, Matthew Barney with VR. Enough slam balm special effects and no one will see the difference! Okay! Get rich quick, fry our brains in the process then chill out in some cushy Magic Mountain loony bin."

"Sandro already is rich," Ula dead panned.

"Yeah, but he's not crazy, so maybe he should have a say. Vote?" Penny didn't raise her hand.

"I think it is a fantastic idea! We do it!" he proclaimed, his hand aloft like a Roman emperor. "The yeas have it!" He drained his glass and slammed it on the marble. "So we may all dance in clouds of purple ecstasy! *Divino! Divino!*" He spun around the room waving his arms.

"I'm going to bed." Penny got up and went upstairs. They were both bonkers. They deserved each other.

## CHARTRES

Penny awoke before first light, and gathered up her minidisc, her portable CD player with the disc, put on her jeans, hiking boots, Sandro's sweater and the parka, and slipped out the service entrance they had used to go to the movie. At the Gare Montparnasse she bought a ticket for Chartres. Pigeons flew all around inside the grungy glass window wall of the station, swooping up and down the escalators, between the shops, and all around the drafty waiting area. By the wall was parked the "Bar du Monde," a sort of space station glowing with half a dozen monitors of a sharp jawed guy swerving around a virtual race track. Rows of stemmed glasses hung like interstellar incubation pods in the smoke filled cloud above the wraparound zinc counter where roughneck travelers drank coffees and various alcohols, watching the driving jaw.

Settling at one of the metal tables squeezed in between a garbage can with a greasy coffee Penny watched the commuters coming down the escalators and stirred her coffee. Plopped on the floor by the rails was a video game booth. Inside the red and yellow booth an adult delinquent played something called "Crazy Taxi," adding his own mouth effects as he smashed up the too-clean New York architecture with his yellow cab.

The bar was not at all clean. Pigeons pooped from the girders of the post modern interior and waddled under the tables looking for crumbs. Ashtrays and trash bags full of butts and gum and half-eaten sandwiches overflowed onto the floor.

Shivering through her layers, she went up to the bar and chose a croissant. Back at her table she looked out the filthy glass towards St. Germain she mulled over her air-filled croissant and his odd behavior the night before. Had Ula used one of her potions on him? Or on her, in her Cynar, and could that have influenced what happened in the dance studio, or was it a delayed effect of her waves? Either from the E.L.F.'s or from those modulations from whatever sublime agents, invisible muses or angels. Under the cathedral vaults seemed like a good place for angels to lurk, anyway, and she would be far from any technological interferences.

Penny wiped the grease on her jeans as there were no napkins

around and worked her way through the maze to the departures.

Shark-nosed bullet trains idled under the drafty glass station roof. She found her train and a non-smoking compartment. Once outside the station, rain began spattering on the window, then streaking it horizontally as the train picked up speed. Miles of "Clockwork Orange" housing projects, then factories, new and white, flashed by. And then Versailles blinked in bright from a gray leafless forest, followed by fields and fairytale villages each with their own castle and black spired church.

Beyond the wires that fed her train, the cathedral shot up above some trees, above yet another gray town. The train slowed and screeched to a stop at the nondescript concrete station, and she followed the tourist signs up the hill to a deserted town, dark and dead in the foggy morning drizzle. The giant cathedral loomed behind a row of dingy gray houses.

Penny found a tiny café in a basement around the corner from the empty church square to wait in until the gates opened. The solitary owner waiter was drying glasses on the zinc counter, smoking a putrid Gitane.

*"Mademoiselle?"*

*"Un café, s'il vous plaît, monsieur."*

*"Tout de suite, mademoiselle. Vous etes Américaine?"*

Penny nodded. After a sputtering clamor from an antique contraption he put the foaming thimble of espresso on a wet saucer and slammed it on her table alongside a bent spoon. He went back to work with his sloppy rag.

She drank a few of those to kill time, although it seemed pretty well dead in its tracks here, and examined the soccer calendar on the wall. The players looked like rough thugs and she could just imagine what that snotty guy in his fancy suit thought of his little boy getting mixed up with these types.

The gates were open now but there were no busloads of tourists as she would have expected, there was no one at all but for her, as she dropped her coins into the hands of the local Quasimodo stooping low in his yellow plastic poncho.

Her Gore-Tex resonated with every step in the vast empty space. The smell of old candles and wet stone exuded from the penumbra. Twenty watt bulbs glowed dimly from the walls. Any real light came in through the stained glass windows that towered like skyscrapers on either side.

Penny had to walk over a round carving in the floor to reach towards the red carpeted altar and the shabby wooden bulletin board next to it with a history of the cathedral. The carving was a mysterious labyrinth, the longest path possible within a confined space. Instead of walking straight across, "The Road to Jerusalem" was to have been followed for about one hour on one's knees all the way to the glowing copper plaque in the center, around which blossomed a six petaled flower.

Beneath the mishmash of symbolism was a layer of even older myth, Pre-roman, possibly even Druidic, or even Paleolithic, of a *Virgo Pritura*, heralding the coming of a virgin mother, and making this the origin of the medieval Mariel cult. Just as Sandro said.

The original church had been built of wood and burnt to the ground in 1194, but The Sacred Relic had miraculously survived. Peasants, lords and ladies; every able body, had dragged stones from far and wide to rebuild the church, and this was when the labyrinth was constructed. Since 1250 not much had changed except maybe the bulbs and the stretch of petrochemical red indoor-outdoor carpet that surrounded the altar.

Continuing around the south of the apse, past walls of limestone saints she came to a little chapel at the very back of the cathedral that held the so called veil of the virgin (The Sacred Relic) where a doll-like statue dressed up in glittery finery was surrounded by hundreds of candles casting a golden warmth into the stony gloom. Remembering her mom's strange obsessions from her days in the bucky-dome commune, without which she would never have been exposed to Pythagoras, or history, mythology or very much culture at all, she pulled a couple franc pieces from her pocket to drop in the donation slot and light a candle in her memory.

Pitch dark consumed the north apse, so she walked back to the silver saints in the clear light of the south window.

She pulled out the minidisc and placed the microphones on the damp window ledge, screwed the ear buds into her ear, sat down beneath the soaring spears of light and slowly let out her breath, waiting for release into the arches above.

Yes, she could do it. Whether celestial, infernal or merely earthly, she was in control of this energy and instantly she was there, up between the vaults' dark pointed recesses. In the powdery penumbra, millions of sprites flitted about the limestone ribs that converged above the apse. Maybe they were angels, launched from the spinning head of

one of those pins you could have heard drop, down below. Maybe she was imagining things and they were just dust.

Then, a flash of white, and down below she saw in the window's powdery glow a hunched green blob with wires trailing to a silver square on the ledge. The battery must have run out, because the only sounds were her breathing and the rain drumming away on the stained glass outside. Eyes shut, she hovered, suspended inside the big empty dome of her skull where black reality stretched out far beyond its eggshell thin walls. She found her lungs and took a breath and instantly was back in her seat under the window with the back of her tongue tasting of ether and her entire body pulsing.

But now she knew something she had not known before. There had to be a modulator to her alpha waves. Something was modifying the amplitude, and more bizarre, the pitches of her composition. A complete Fourier analysis would shed a ray or two of light on the problem.

## SERAGLIO

Night hung over the house and the kitchen and pantry lit and bustling with dinner preparations as she snuck back in.

The piece blared from the stereo in Sandro's room. Her own room was empty, but the doors between her room and his were wide open and voices and the heavy sweet smell of marijuana wafted through.

She unloaded her gear and walked through the library to see what was going on. He reclined into his pillows, his eyes shut, inhaling deeply. Max sat cross legged on the mattress next to him. Ula was there too, sitting at the edge of the bed but turned away from them, her fingers making shadow puppets dance on the wall in the light of a candle.

"Mind if I crash the party?"

"Where have you been?" Sandro demanded.

"Field experiment," she snapped.

Max smiled to himself, humming the Hendrix's Purple Haze as Penny plunked herself down in the lion chair facing them. He extended the peace offering, of which only a sputtering red ember remained. She ignored it. Ula, still playing with the shadows, formed a snapping wolf with her hand, and extended her free arm for the roach, gazing dreamily back at Penny.

"Purple haze yourself. Voodoo Child blows that away any day. Hey gang, I think they're about ready downstairs, bet you're famished."

*"Whatever it is, Whatever it is, that girl."*

"Oh, shut up, Max."

They got up to go downstairs.

*"Purple Haze was in my brain, lately, things don't seem the same."* The song followed her down the stairs.

*"You've got me blowing, blowing my mind, is it tomorrow?"*

"You gonna shut up?"

Downstairs, the atmosphere was tense. Signora had them staring into their spaghetti. Even Sandro slipped as he twirled it around and around on his plate.

Penny dove through the ice with "Beatrice, (she pronounced it the Italian way) how was your *soiree* with the minister?"

"I am glad you asked, Penny." She was not glad at all. "It is an election year, and the other guests, the Prime minister and his wife, who is a feminist philosopher, talked politics all night. He is running for president, and an absolutely charming man, although I do not approve of his politics. We chatted with Blaise Boulot, the composer, do you know him? He wondered that you could be taken seriously as an artist in your country since your experiments with tunings have no musical relevance today and if you yourself were not the product of a government experiment. Franken-music is the term he used."

She looked at each of them, checking for reactions. "So, how did you spend this miserable day, Penny?"

"Oh! I took a train to Chartres. I've always wanted to visit this cathedral, and what more Gothic weather than today's?"

"And how was it? I have not been there in years."

"Lovely! Empty! Angels were dancing in the vaults around the nave. The architecture was influenced by Platonic ideas of the order and rationality of the universe, in the service of the Virgin of course. I read all about it on the bulletin board, in English. Did you know that the cult of the virgin began right there at that very spot, for all of Europe! Those platonic masons also brought back with them from the Crusades the worship of Sophia, incorporating surviving forms of the primeval Great Mother from Asia Minor, then grafting her onto the even more ancient earth goddess beliefs of the druids and of the native Paleolithic peoples of the area—ensuring the survival of the protective female deity to this day. Sandro and I were talking about this just the other day."

This time it was Sandro suspending a piece of cutlery in midair, with a single strand of spaghetti trembling from its otherwise tight roll.

Beatrice looked at each in turn.

"Anyway, it's more magical than Notre Dame or the Sainte Chapelle! The crowds just ruin it." Penny concentrated on twirling the spaghetti on her spoon into a perfect cylinder.

"*Precisamente!* The tourists are a terrible nuisance, they are vermin, like pigeons, worse even than the immigrants."

Penny wondered what political party Signora voted for, probably the one that made the trains run on time.

Sandro and his entourage blinked through the rest of dinner as they shoveled in their food.

On his way out Max the neoprene bumblebee tripped on the Aubusson. Both Ula and Sandro had vaporized, so Penny escaped

upstairs and locked both doors. All was quiet in the sultan's den next door so she got to work and ran both the original CD and the minidisc version she had played in the cathedral, simultaneously, comparing the two using Fourier analysis, although she lacked a FFT machine, electromagnetic frequencies and Hertz readings, noting down correlations, and comparing those to the chronology of the experience she had scribbled down on the return trip.

She drew up colorful charts in Excel, crashing the computer in the process, but with Windows that was a given. Now she had rows of elegant charts: a timeline, waves, spikes, even parabolas. What was happening? She went over her coefficients, double checked the magnitudes of her vectors. She stared at her beautiful Fourier chart, and the patterns winked back at her. The chart caught the pitch modulations that were adding whole new frequency components. So not only was there a modulator to her alpha waves, modifying the amplitude, but, more bizarre, the pitches and the difference tones were multiplying, growing like kudzu over the original waves throughout the composition, transforming it completely! Was this modulator the signature of her possession? Again, she couldn't verify any of this without the proper equipment, in this case a not exactly portable MRI chamber, but there was no mistaking those patterns. She wrote up her experiment from hypothesis to conclusion, in outline form. Of course, without a real control it proved absolutely nothing, and her batteries had run out. But she had no doubt it would impress Sandro.

The locked library door shook with urgent pounding.

"We have to talk." A phosphorescent white triangle entered the room and sat at the edge of the bed.

"I'm not mad," Penny said, in her most level headed voice.

"Angry mad or insane mad?"

"Neither."

He let out a long cannabis tinged sigh.

"Seriously, let me show you what I discovered." She led him by the hand to the computer and turned it on. He leaned on the back of her chair and looked over her shoulder.

"It's very pretty, but don't you need a cage of normal mice too?"

"Good point, know where I can find any?"

"You smell good."

"You reek. Go back to bed."

"I'm sorry."

"Bout what?"

"That I doubted your sanity."

"Hmm."

"Nothing happened the other night! I was so drunk—she helped me to my room."

"Whatever."

"I know it's hard for you to see, but I've made a stupendous discovery here!"

"In the cathedral?"

"No, well you know I've been fooling around with these difference tones, that happen when two or more frequencies cause an intermodulation distortion upon entering the ear? Well, this extremely high harmonic stuff is being manipulated by my feedback loop, and—"

"Something strange happened to me before," he confessed.

"With Max?"

"Before he came over, I dono, I was on the bed with my hangover, listening with your headphones, soft not loud. It was incredible. So strange. First I floated in all red, like behind the eyelids, then poof! All white. *O, Dio*, so beautiful. I dono how long I was there, but after, in a small moment, I saw... I felt her bend over and kiss my forehead, and when I open my eyes again she was not there and I could not move my limbs, like my body was not my own. That's why I had to have some, I asked him to bring it. Now he thinks I am crazy too."

"What? Who did you see?"

"The Virgin!"

"Hmm, has this ever happened before?"

"No!"

"You sure Ula hasn't been slipping something in your drinks?"

"Not the same at all!"

"But you have been listening to this stuff a lot."

"Yes, but, you know."

"Right. Well, may be you should give it a rest until I sort it out."

"I dono."

"Either way, something's wreaking havoc on our brains."

"Come sleep with me now." He put his arm around her and led her to his room.

In the middle of the next week, Max cycled over with some more weed, some news and an envelope for Sandro from Maia. The two of them were on a plane that night for L.A.

"Maia is impossible these days, she freaked out from this guy

she was seeing, a professional ud player, Moroccan, real slick operator, has the keys to five girlfriends' apartments on his key chain. Oh, she stole these from him, they should help. So she says the next guy she fucks is going to pay her for it and she calls this record guy in California who's crazy about her and he says 'take the next plane, baby!'"

"I see the bandages have come off the lute if not the lutenist. With these she will be ready for serenading!" Max pulled out a mess of strings from the envelope. Maia must have yanked them off the Moroccan's instrument in a fit of fury because they didn't look brand new. Sandro took a long drag and went over to the chair.

"Yes, they are compatible, thank Maia for me, I will think of her every time I play. Everybody uses nylon lute strings now, but I do not believe they sound so good."

"Nylon has infected the lute community? All 25 of them?"

"It is bigger than you think, mostly amateurs though."

"And you're not?"

"Max, Max, I will miss this, you know?"

"Penny can take my place, right, girl?" He handed her the joint.

"What's that supposed to mean? Get him into more trouble?"

"You know, Purple, I'm getting a new guitar! Custom job in purple, I think, metallic finish, classic chassis. What do you think?"

"Don't ask me, Max."

"So I will think of you every time I play."

Sandro seared him with a look that shut Max right up.

"Do you want a ride to CDG?"

"We have limo."

"Takin' your bicycle?" Penny asked.

"It's limos from now on, babay!" Max did his cool cat jive. Sandro walked up and threw his arms around him.

Sandro turned away to and gingerly dab at his nose. Max took the opportunity to nearly squeeze the life out of her. "Well, I better be goin', don' want to miss the boat to Xanadu! See you in the big Apple, Purple."

Then it was just the two of them, the bag of weed and the kidnapped ud strings. Sandro rolled a new one and crouched over the instrument, stretching out the strings.

"The ud is similar to the renaissance lute, this one. Newer models have different proportions to the peg box. Maia is truly divine, I never thought I would find what I was searching for. Hold this down here, okay?"

They worked into the night tightening and tuning and smoking. He tried to sight read the Francesco Canova da Milano, but was too stoned to concentrate." Another time, I will serenade you."

At the bottom of the stairs the next morning, Penny collided into a strange woman only to find it was Beatrice sporting a spiffy new hair cut with short hipster bangs her still firm derriere poured into skin-tight slacks. Outside the grand entrance in the gravel driveway idled a brand new Carrera convertible, top down, even though it was past Thanksgiving and drizzling. She must have pulled some strings to get her driving permit back.

In spite of her immortality regimen of raw greens and mushrooms, colonics at the homoeopath's clinic and daily breathing exercises, Ula looked much older than Beatrice. She was beyond any shadow of a doubt anorexic now. She was almost beyond having a shadow.

But Penny was wrong to think Ula was fading into a dreamworld of her own making. Inside the dance studio things were far from dreamy.

Penny came out of the solarium after her morning run of scales. Passing by the red room saw him, in his sweaty dance rags, pouring himself something at the bar. It wasn't even ten o'clock in the morning. She walked in, he had his back to her, his hand in the ice bucket.

"Yo ho ho, what a great way to start the day, hic, hic!"

He spun around, a drippy ice cube on his cheek, the one that was supposed to be on the mend.

"Ouch, looks painful." Embarrassed, she came up to comfort him, thinking he must have slipped during his acrobatics upstairs.

"Just go, please." He wrenched away from her.

She hesitated.

"Out, via!" he growled. She backed out of the room.

At dinner he had the makings of a new shiner. Beatrice and Ula appeared not to notice, each in their own bubbles. He just stirred the vermicelli around in its broth.

Ula stuffed rabbit food in her cheeks, counting each chew with her eyes shut.

Overdressed in skinny orange and gold Versace, Beatrice jangled her bracelets and babbled away about Christmas.

"We go to Rome for the holidays. There will be lights and pannetones, the shopping, oh, and Penny, the museums are the greatest in the world! The Borghese, Villa Giulia, Barberini, Doria Pamphili,

Campidoglio, and Vaticano! The Louvre is provincial compared to all this! And the ruins! Sandro will have to give you the grand tour, he knows everything there is to know about his maternal city, as a true child of Caesar! (She patted his hand). Did you know our family was descended from the emperors of Rome?"

"*Mama, basta!*" He looked up from his vermicelli. "She lies, she cannot accept the humility of her true lineage. Gypsies, thieves and beggars from nowhere! Saracens from Calabria and Sicily. Not Romans. Her *putana* mother could not read and her father is a mystery! This is the shame of our family."

Beatrice got up and left the table without a word. Sandro hissed at Ula on his way out, but she just plowed through her black mess of boiled dandelion and stared into empty space.

Sandro's doors were locked when Penny made it upstairs, so she ran a bath to get warmed up, then crawled under the duvet. After tossing and turning, it dawned on her how he had gotten that new bruise.

Next morning, seated at the piano for a run through of Chopin's nocturne in C sharp minor, Sandro surprised her with a kiss on the back of the neck. Already packed, she was there to stay out of Beatrice's way.

Later they ate a quick dinner in the kitchen with the help. Leek soup with *crème fraiche*, then ham, olives and *cornichons* and dessert of fat little cheese logs wrapped in paper called Petit Suisses and eaten with sugar jam. Rosalinda, the chubby maid who was also Mario's girlfriend, bragged about the ten kilos she lost on a diet of these alone.

"You must try Ula's immortal vegetables *régime*." Sandro teased, because she was still a little butterball. This led into one of Antoine's legendary sermons on the evils of genetically engineered foods.

Pointing to a pile of broccoli on the table, Sandro launched into the nature, or un-nature of this popular cruciferous vegetable, introduced to France during the Renaissance by the Italian born French queen, Catherine de Medici.

"So you see, Antoine, we have had Franken-food since Roman times, when peasants 'engineered' your little broccoli flower from the lowly cabbage."

The non-plussed Antoine deftly whittled a miniature Frankenstein head and wagged it before Sandro's face, sending everyone into convulsions and to bed with sore jaws.

## ROMAN HOLIDAY

Between rows of sleek TGV's was the haughty Palatino, in shiny midnight blue and gold. The train was due to arrive in the Eternal City just in time for breakfast. The first class compartment was decorated with sepia photos of the Alps above the deep plush seats that converted into bunks at night, complete with crisp white linen sheets. The little wooden table that folded out over their legs for reading predated laptops by three quarters of a century but accommodated Penny's just fine. Mostly they stood in the aisle away from the two witches, and watched the brown French countryside roll by, him pressed up against her, their arms intertwined on the window rail. Gray steeples stuck out from white roofed villages as sturdy red faced women beat rugs out their open windows and watched the train pass by. The Alps appeared with the night, white teeth closing on an indigo sky. The moon came up, ready to be swallowed whole. Ula and Beatrice slept like corpses under her light while Sandro and Penny made quiet love in the top bunk.

A blizzard welcomed them to Italy. Breakfast in the dining car was stale *cornetti*, (Italian croissant facsimile), strong dark coffee and bland watery eggs. Menacing black bristles poked through Sandro's upper lip and chin. Beatrice yawned non stop behind her manicure. Ula's icy eyes were fixed on the blur outside the steamy window. The cold metal of the wheels screeched underneath as they slowed before crossing another bridge floating lost in a swirl of white.

Even the gentle hills of Tuscany, and the wilder ones of Umbria, were covered in snow, all the way down to the weed covered Roman aqueducts that flanked the tracks converging into the travertine monstrosity of Termini station.

Their taxi swerved around the obelisk of Piazza del Popolo to the Locarno Hotel. Penny would have expected Sandro's flinty faced dandy of a dad to show off his beautiful mistress along the Via Veneto, but here he was definitely slumming it. They passed through the threadbare Art Deco entry and squeezed into a cage elevator of the same vintage as Max and Maia's and just large enough for signora's luggage.

Their rooms were lined in padded satin, not musty relics but

tough spot cleanable polyester, and furnished with quirky nineteenth century reproductions of eighteenth century Venetian Rococo styling. Two double beds of faux marquetry occupied most of the room.

Penny entered the floor to ceiling dark green marble bathroom. In a row were bidet, toilet tub, of sturdy white porcelain. She stepped under the elephant shower and shampooed her scalp squeaky clean in no time. The water from those aqueducts tasted pretty good, but she hoped this wasn't like Mexico and squirming with vengeful bacilli. She would have to ask him if it was more than dog worthy.

She came out wrapped in a towel "The tub is big enough for two, why dontcha hop in and I'll scrub you pink like me?"

The particle board armoire was open so he could watch a soccer match of red and gold jerseys against light blue. No answer.

Glassy eyes following the running red and gold guy, a light blue jumped up and butt his head into the ball, sending it over the red guy, through the goal. Live game. Sandro grunted in disgust.

"What's Lazio?" she asked. They were winning.

No answer.

Penny eased her fresh pink body on top of him. Remote in hand, he upped the volume, one eye on Rome going under, hoping the cheers of Lazio would drown out the sounds because Beatrice occupied the room next door. But as soon as he'd killed the TV they heard her knocks and her bracelets on the door.

"*Momentino!*" he yelled, out of breath with one hand on Penny's bottom, the other with the remote.

"*Bambini, Andiamo!* Are you ready, it is getting so late!"

"Si Mama!" They both sighed in relief.

Downstairs at the bar, Beatrice waited, glass of champagne in hand, wrapped in a massive chinchilla coat that had seen better days.

Ula wickedly ran her finger down Beatrice's sleeve.

"Another hand me down from Gala, Beatrice?"

Beatrice marched out and they all trailed after her down the Corso, the main drag, to the Via Condotti. She hesitated, glancing up the street at the end of which could be seen the Spanish Steps. But instead of heading there, she rearranged her coat and led everyone in the opposite direction, into a narrow winding maze that had not changed since Roman times and was better equipped for Vespas and donkeys than cars and throngs of tourists. Green intellectual types wove their bicycles in and out over the worn-slick square black cobblestones. Beatrice in her determined fury click-clacked away on her

dainty Parisian heels like the runway pro she was. Unlike Paris, the buildings here were not buffed clean but still layered with black industrial and pre-industrial grime, except at shoulder level where human and animal had worn them to an oily, dun colored sheen.

Winding round these dark walls with their rodent fur covered navigator, the helmeted Ula, and an abysmal Sandro, Penny felt more like a character in Kafka than any in Roman Holiday.

The party found themselves in a long piazza built around another of the obelisks, hoisted way up on the shoulders of stone giants around tumbling water.

"How the hell did they get that thing all the way up there way back then? Pulleys?" Penny craned her neck to see.

"Yes! Bernini asked the help of the Jesuit eccentric Athanasius Kircher. A man of science, right up your alley. He made a chamber of mirrors as an experiment to drive cats crazy."

"Crazy cats, okay, so what's that got to do with hard science?"

"He invented the megaphone, but also the hydraulics for this fountain. Then he also had himself lowered into Mount Vesuvius just before an eruption as he correctly thought the earth's depth's to be on fire. He dreamed of how time was infinite, and the world much older than the Bible says."

"This guy was a Jesuit but didn't get burned at the stake for thinking like that?"

"That is the miracle!"

"This isn't that guy who wrote a book on musicology and bird songs, and made a vomiting lobster? That was around that same time."

"The *Musurgia Universalis*. Yes, yes, same guy! I do not think they have a postcard of him, or of his lobster, for your wall."

"That way is the place where they burned the guy who did not get away with scientific thinking, Giordano Bruno," he said, pointing to the other end of the Piazza Navona.

Beatrice called out from her perch on the steps of Santa Agnese.

"*Bambini!* We go have a *gelato*, now, OK?" Ula reappeared from her slow dance around the piazza where she attracted the attention of the curious tourists who also flocked around the King Tut mime at the other end of the Piazza Navona.

"I came here always, even when I started working. It was fun being a model here when all the other girls lived on hard boiled eggs and champagne! How could I ever be jealous of them, blonde

American and Swedish girls, so big boned they could eat nothing? I always eat all the pasta, all the *dolce*, all the *gelati*, and look!" Beatrice babbled once they were seated in the rococo dining room. She leaned to the side and slapped her behind, cackling with delight.

Sandro stared around him in embarrassment.

"You know who I saw sitting over there once?" She pointed to a table by a huge vase of flowers. "I saw Jean Paul Sartre, alone with a *coppa Olympica*, right there! How existential can you get! Eh Sandro?"

"It was not a *coppa Olympica* you said before, just vanilla."

"Oh Sandro, it is only a story!"

"No, you are falsifying history. He would not eat such an old lady *coppa*. Simple vanilla, here, is more existential."

"Yes, well I eat them and I am not an old lady!"

He rolled his eyes.

"*Per me una coppa zabaglione cioccolato, con panna, per favore,*" Sandro told the hovering waiter.

"*Limone senza panna, per me, per favore,*" Ula said. To the philosopher's empty table, she whispered, "*L'enfer, c'est les autres.*"

"*Coppa Olympica, Cioccolato, nociolla, zabaglione è crema, per me, grazie.*" Beatrice itemized the flavors on her red dipped talons and flashed her brightest Gina Lollabrigita smile.

"*Per me ... come lui ... per favore,*" Penny stumbled out.

"*Brava*, but no, have something different, we can share. You love blueberry, and they have pecan like in Dixie, and the walnut is very Yankee, no?"

"Okay, I'll have the Civil War special: walnut, pecan, chocolate and lots of *panna, per favore*, you tell him." Sandro relayed this to the waiter, they were both chuckling.

Their goblets of ice cream arrived with long waffle sticks in them accompanied with a crystal caraffe of water and glasses.

"Is this mineral water?"

"Rome has natural mineral water from all its faucets and fountains for more than two thousand years from sources throughout Italy. This Navona water is different, heavier than the hotel's Piazza del Popolo water, you will notice, as is comes from a different source since Roman times, but is still the best in the world!" Sandro winked, he already had a mustache of whipped cream, and a dot of it on the tip of his nose.

Ula rolled her eyes. "You're a regular fountain of Roman BS yourself, *professore!*"

"Is the truth!"

"Okay, okay," Penny said, "so they've had faucets here for two thousand years, and aqueducts to bring down mountain fresh water, and it all went out the Cloaca Maxima. I knew that, but, hey, I had to make sure I wasn't drinking any 'dog water.' I mean the stuff in those Paris caraffes, 'dog water', right? So, I was just asking."

A few steps further and they stood before the Pantheon. For a monument to all the gods it looked so small, sitting in that dip just behind a little fountain topped with yet another of those Egyptian obelisks. They walked under the portico past a group of gypsy beggars huddled together against the damp cold. They had the same hair as Sandro and his mother, only not styled by Madame d'Oc. Inside the bronze gates the round temple was the last living remnant of Ancient Rome. A hole in the center of the cupola was the only source of light below which was a shiny puddle. For the grand temple to all the gods of creation, the scale was downright cozy.

Sandro pointed to the blue disk of sky. "The Oculus makes a sundial there on the polished floor as it moves in a circle around the center. The pool of water there was for prayer, where the void's rising vapors are caught by the gods."

"The *gods*? So now you are a pagan, Sandro? Is this Ula or Penny's doing?" Beatrice teased.

"Neither, this is from Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoires d'Hadrian*, I was reading it at Dick's."

"Dick is interested in antiquity? That is news."

"It is not antiquity, but the Emperor Hadrian he finds interesting. I think you know why, mama." To Penny, he continued, "One of the greatest of Roman Emperors, and very gay. When his lover Antinoüs, who resembled exactly Elvis Presley, drowned in the Nile, Adriano had him deified and put statues of him in all the temples, maybe even here. He also built a beautiful villa out of town on the way to Tivoli. I will take you there some day, but in the summer, not now. Perhaps we can go to the Castel Sant'Angelo, his mausoleum where he is buried and after which my brother was named for some mysterious reason mama would never tell us."

"I bore two sons. One for the kingdom of man and one for kingdom of God. But I..." She shrugged, following Ula's swirling dance inside the circle of melted snow with a look of blank incomprehension, before abruptly clattering away towards the massive doors.

"Why don't you show Penny the Spanish Steps? She can buy

books at the English bookstore. And I must do something about this!" She told Sandro, clutching her fur collar.

As Beatrice made a bee line for Fendi, Sandro, Ula and Penny went up to the Spanish Steps, crowded with the local teenagers and tourists, and found the bookstore tucked next to Keat's house, where Ula found a copy of the same dog eared little volume she carried in her bag, *Immortal Sisters, Secrets of Taoist Women*, and bought Penny a copy.

"This is my bible. Merry Christmas, Penny," she said in her most subdued tone and hugged Penny, who had no interest in this stuff whatsoever.

Beatrice billowed into the bookstore covered in her new fur, a troglodyte thing with jagged hairy bits hanging off the hem that would look right at home inside a Natural History Museum diorama, but not a stuffy old world bookstore.

Next morning, while waiting for breakfast and looking at Ula under the twenty foot ceilings, Beatrice wondered aloud, "How long has she been doing this street theater in the public piazzas? I thought she was the big downtown sensation, no?"

He shrugged.

"When was the last time she was in the nuthouse?"

"Mama! It was a hospital."

"Poor girl, she must get it from her mother, she was very unstable."

"You knew Ula's Mother?"

"Oh, yes, we were all one big happy family. Everywhere. It was always party time then, here, in Paris, New York, at Studio 54, at Port Lligat with Salvador, when Irina threw herself off the rocks at Capo Creus she was lucky Dick was there to dive in after her, eh? Carrrrrazy!"

Penny had trouble seeing Dick Schwanz do anything as chivalrous as jumping off a cliff after a girl.

Ula drifted to their table and sat down, unfolded the napkin, spread it carefully on her lap and watched the group through the dining halls floor to ceiling mirrors, avoiding direct eye contact. Through the mirror she addressed Sandro. "Is Keat's house open today?"

"Why do you want to see that old British nostalgia?" he asked her directly.

"I thought Penny might be interested in Frankenstein's mommy."

"Eh? Why?"

"Weird science." Ula gave Penny's reflection a meaningful look.

Ula winced as Sandro kicked her under the table. She explained, "It's kind of a curio museum for that whole ex-pat gang, Keats, Shelley and Byron, and they have a portrait of Shelley's wife, who wrote the book while on vacation at Byron's place while it rained all summer. I guess she got bummed out, or maybe it was the orgies. Sandro hates it."

Sandro harrumphed in a mockery of all things British and placed his napkin on his plate.

Ula declined to comment, blowing daintily on her tea.

Beatrice looked bleakly out the window, impatiently tapping her tooth with a red nail.

"How far is Sistine Chapel?" Penny asked.

"It's in another country," Ula dead panned.

"Yes, we take Penelope to the Vatican, the Sistine Chapel, le Stanze, San Pietro. There are magnificent volumes, so bring your little machine. We must hurry, it closes at one. Then we go to the Castel Sant'Angelo, it should be sunny by then. What do you say, Mama?"

"Beh, maybe the Vaticano will cure you of your new pagan ways. Take your harem, see what the good brothers think of you then."

Except for the sumptuous marbles and all that Aztec gold, they could have been walking into a Hollywood set. The scale of this was anything but cozy, this temple to only one god. Colossal blood red columns shot into the haze that filled the cupola, or was that atmospheric perspective? The place could have been virtual if not for the crowds and their magnified sonority. Penny set her machine on the ledge at the base of the column. When she turned around, Sandro and Ula had disappeared into the crowd of Catholics. Penny looked up at the domes through the haze. Just beneath the big central dome were the four twisted black columns of a four poster bed for Godzilla. No, for Saint Peter, the fisherman, a human being of normal height. His bones, or his keys were under the bed

She scanned the groups of tiny third world nuns fingering bright plastic rosaries who scurried around the bed or *baldacchino*, the official name for it, but no Sandro and Ula towered from their midst.

Still feeling somewhat queasy Penny leaned back against her column. Was this a case of Stendhal Syndrome and should she carry on? Her eyes shut, she let her breath out slowly, and strained to release into the domes. But all she could think of was them, hand in hand. The church had the gravitational pull of Jupiter, and she remained planted furiously into the marble floor.

His hand was on her shoulder.

"*Andiamo* to the Last Judgement?"

"Hell, why not?"

The chapel was so packed it had garlic breath. They were told to keep moving, like sheep. The newly restored monsters stared down on them in terror.

"This is *infernale!*" he gasped, and pulled them out. "Past the prisons was the quickest way!"

## THE ANGEL'S TOMB

"This is where Hadrian is buried," Sandro said. After the Vatican and they had walked down the via della Conciliazone to the Castel Sant'Angelo, a forbidding round fortress by the river.

"Is Antinous in there too?"

"He was eaten by crocodiles," Ulla chimed in.

"In the Nile. Hadrian's wife, Sabina is here," Sandro clarified.

"He was married?"

"Duty to the Empire."

"Right."

Sandro got the tickets and handed them out. They followed him down a tunnel then up narrow winding stairs, around an around, higher and higher, past the barred window of a cell in which languished a giant bronze angel. Then up some more and into the daylight of a wide balcony that overlooked the Tiber and all of Rome. Above them was yet a newer version of that angel, flashing his sword at the storm clouds that rolled in from the sea.

Ula turned to Sandro, "Ashes to Ashes! Dust to Dust! Why don't you sing for it Penny, so she can hear your beautiful voice in Latin! Go ahead, sing the *Angele Dei!* Make us happy and sing your precious song!"

"I've heard him, it's unearthly," Penny whispered.

"That's just Grace, Penny. This is the fall from Grace! The *Angele Dei*, Sandro." She pursed her lips and stepped away, her eyes on the ground.

Sandro grasped the flimsy iron railing that separated them from a sheer drop to the Tiber below, and searched the sky. Then he sang.

*"Angele Dei  
qui custos es mei,  
me tibi commissum pietate.  
Superna hodie,  
illumina, custodi,  
rege et gubernata.  
Amen."*

He turned around to Ula. "There, are we happy, now?"

"That was the most beautiful thing I ever heard," Penny said.

But he was still withdrawn into himself.

"Where did you learn it?"

"School. Here, I translate. Angel of God, who is my caretaker, illuminate, guard, and govern me... You do not know Latin?"

"Greek," Ula butt in as she floated towards them.

"Of course," Sandro nodded.

"It's not a singing language, but the thought is beautiful," Penny explained.

"Ah, Penelope, I can always count on you to see both the truth and the beauty of things."

"Is that a joke? Little Miss Doctor Bell's whole family is autistic. Her father's a full blown Asperger and her brother couldn't tell his mother's face from a toaster! That's where she got the idea for her subliminal mind control 'show and tell' project. You can Google it, if you're interested. Aspies are good in math and science but esthetically and socially challenged."

Penny tried to figure how she found this one out. Google didn't bother with sorry has-beens like her dad or with her family history. That stuff was strictly confidential, lost in the back of a file cabinet somewhere at that creepy brick school in Montana.

"Autism concerns empathy not aesthetics, something Penny has infinitely more of than you and has perhaps used to survive in her inhospitable environment. And, also, *carina*, Penny, is more intelligent than you and me together."

"Well, even together you and your mirror image were no match for me and Dick, so go do the math on that!"

"Cut it out, Ula. He's no dummy, he knows the Pythagorean Theorem, he even recited it to me just a few minutes after we met."

"Oh, so that's that's what swept you off your feet."

Sandro led them to the bridge of angels that connects the Vatican side of the river to the old center where most of the sites and the hotel were. On either side of the bridge loomed giant weatherbeaten angels, each with an instrument of Christ's torture held in his arms. Abruptly, between two angels, Sandro grabbed Penny and hoisted her up over his head, and leapt down the deserted pedestrian bridge, now become a stage. The Tiber swirled below and the angels spun around her head as she soared in their midst. Sandro brought her down, embraced her deeply. She was so dizzy, so shocked, during her descent she never realized that her feet had yet to touch the ground, and only when they did, did she know that she had flown.

"I get the picture, I get it, okay? Now lets find out the truth!"  
Ula said from her vantage point, leaning on the balustrade.

"Are we on trial here?" Penny asked.

"Very good, you are catching on." Ula turned to Sandro. "It's time for my favorite tourist trap. Take us to the mouth of truth, Sandro, for judgment is at hand."

## BOCA DELLA VERITA

"If you lie, it swallows your hand," Ula announced. "Okay, Sandro stick your hand in."

They stood before the old oracle's moon face, its gaping mouth worn light from hands plunging in.

He rolled his eyes and stuck his hand in.

"Now, say that you love me. Do it!"

"*O, Ula, ti volio bene. Ch'e bello vivere nell'amore.*" He removed his hand.

"No, no, no!" She stamped her foot. "Put it back in."

He put it in again and looked up at her.

"Now, say it like you fucking mean it. Like this, *'Ti amo di tooto il meeyo cworay!'*"

"Your accent is still *schifoso, amore.*" He took out his hand. She shoved it back in. He glared at her and said it, but he wasn't looking quite at her.

"Okay, Penny, your turn,"

Penny watched her hand disappear into the hole.

"Say 'I love Sandro with all my heart.' Say it!"

"What the hell are you trying to prove?" Penny turned around.

"Do it!" She stuck it back in.

"Fuck you, Ula! Yes, I love Sandro with all my heart, and so do you. So does everybody! Look at him, it makes his life a living hell! There, are you happy now? Look, I still have my hand." She backed away from Ula and the mouth.

He put his arms around her and whispered, "*Grazie, amore.*"

"I heard that!" Ula snarled, clutching the lower lip of the mouth. "Well, I love you both and you can both go to fucking hell!" She pushed herself up and sashayed out of the enclosure and towards the river.

Sandro and Penny followed her, hand in hand, around the small cluster of temples, one round, one square, that made a little park between the monument and the river. Flustered and self conscious now, Penny looked down at her feet. In the sandy gravel she spotted a penny, all caked in dirt, so she picked it up, to have something to focus on besides this insanity. The red was not shiny copper but layers of rust

and the face was not Abe Lincoln's. The disk was heavy and thick, definitely not a penny.

"What is it, an old *gettone*? A coin?" He looked over her shoulder.

"A Roman coin?" she asked.

He looked at it, then sat on a bench and spat on it and rubbed away the dirt with his nail. He snapped a twig from a bush and used the end to clean out the indentations, then mushed it in the water of a puddle under the bench to sponge and coax out the deepest particles of encrustation. He rubbed it again with the handkerchief. It was shiny and black now. He turned it around in his hand.

"Not Roman! Greek. Hmm. Asia Minor, Pergamum, circa 270 B.C. a silver didrachma. This is Alexander the Great. He wears the lion's skin, in guise of Hercules, his ancestor, but from the deep eyes and the forehead, you can see it is a portrait. The other side must be, I think, Zeus, but it is too corroded."

"*Tieni.*" He handed it back to her.

Ula stood beside them.

"Why don't you throw it in Trevi, for good luck?"

"Here, a lucky Penny for Alexander the greatest." Penny handed it back to him. He took the coin and kissed it, put it in his pocket and they hurried to catch up with Ula.

They found a bus that would take them back to Piazza Del Popolo so they could regroup with Beatrice for dinner, but it was rush hour so they were packed like sardines and could barely see out the windows.

Sandro stood dangerously close up against her butt and whispered, "You must forgive me, but I must do this to protect you from them."

He nodded over to the back, where, sure enough, a pack of guys had each chosen a blushing school girl to cling to like horny barnacles as the bus heaved through the tide of traffic.

"Really Sandro, you're such a gentleman," Penny kidded.

Ula stood clear of trouble in clutch of ladies half her height and twice her width.

Beatrice wasn't back when they returned, so they sat around the bar sipping their cappuccinos.

About an hour later, a taxi pulled up and Beatrice stumbled out. Sandro rushed out to her, but she shoved him aside and staggered through the entrance to the elevator. Locked inside the cage she leaned

against the glass as the elevator rumbled up. Sandro bounded up the stairs.

From two floors down, they could hear her monologue, peppered with his curses. They heard a crash, then a series of thuds as he rolled down a flight of stairs. He rushed down the remaining stairs to the desk to apologize to the terrified desk clerks. They were all over him.

"Are you all right?"

"Do you need an ambulance?"

He just said, "*Tutto va bene, Grazie mille, signiorine,*" and joined Penny and Ula in the lobby.

Sandro recounted what had just happened as they waited for their pizzas in the little wood oven pizzeria down the street.

"She met an old boyfriend, from before my father, a movie guy, now richer than my father ever was. They had drinks and some coke, so now she is *arrabiata!* He laughed at her, told her she was too old, so the new hair, the clothes, the fur, all of it a waste! This was her Christmas plan, and now she is really mad! So upstairs, she tells me never loved my father, that she seduced him in those rooms for the money!"

He ran his hand through his hair, looked down at his steaming pizza. "*Putana, my mother, always the whore.*"

"Let it go, Sandro, nothing you can do," Penny said.

"She's no different than Dick, really," Ula said shaking her head.

"*Veramente!* How you say, the birds and the feathers?"

"It's 'birds of a feather' and 'the birds and the bees,' and that's about sex between flowers," Ula observed just as Beatrice trotted into the pizzeria.

"*Bambini! Sandro! Carino, perdone me,* it was the coke, and that arrogant old *bagolone,* I will never do it again, I promise. You forgive me?" She pecked him on the top of the head and sat down in the fourth chair. "*Pizza Margherita per me! E due carafe di vino qui, per favore!*" Snap of the fingers, jingle of the bangles.

And Ula pulled out her book. No one spoke, Penny could think of nothing to say, so she pulled the strings of cheese from her pizza with her fork, to see how much tension it took before they snapped.

Beatrice started on Ula, pointing to the cover's dainty Chinese lady on the leopard's back.

"Is that an immortal sister? She has a fat face. The only pretty shape is an oval shape, with the bone structure. What do they do these

sisters, eat boiled dandelions and practice Tai Chi until they are prunes? She would not look like that! Tell me, Ula, why do you want to live forever? Your hold on reality is not going to improve with age, medicated or not. Remember your mama, it only gets worse, you have to have nerves of steel to face the old age! Do you have nerves of steel? Muscles perhaps! But you are what? Not less than forty, I know that!"

No answer.

"What kind of future is there now? Penny has an entire life in front of her! But you and I? Men are attracted to the juicy fruit, like all animals. It is *finito, Ula, finito!*" She laughed and tore at the pizza with her knife and fork. Pointing her knife at Ula she said, "Don't look at me like that! You think I am a bad mother, that what I did to Sandro's father was a crime? You do, don't you? You all do! Men are all the same Animals! Gay or straight, just animals. They just want the juicy fruit, whatever they can get!"

Ula shot a meaningful glance at Sandro.

"Well, Ula dear, have I got news for you. You think your father was a mysterious stranger, a nobleman perhaps, or a premier *danseur!* You have no idea, do you? Heh? Ahah!"

Ula's pale eyes were locked on Beatrice.

"Ah! But I do! Yes my dear, I always have! Think about it. Look into the mirror at your funny head and tell me you what you see!" Beatrice jabbed her tomato smeared knife towards Ula's fuzzy scalp and cackled, her mouth full of red pizza mush.

Ula sat frozen in her chair. Sandro stared, aghast, at his mother. The entire restaurant had their eyes on their table. Before Beatrice could start up again, Ula ran out of the restaurant, leaving her book, cape and hat behind.

Sandro and Penny ran after her with the cloak, but she had disappeared down the dark street. They ran down Via di Ripetta, slipping and sliding in the rain, to Augustus' tomb, and just as he was about to turn in towards the Corso on the Piazza Augusto Imperatore, Sandro froze in his tracks, swiveled around, ran in the opposite direction, to the river and the Ponte Cavour. A barrage of icy needles whipped their faces. From the middle of the bridge he peered over the edge into the swirling black water, but saw nothing. Up and downstream it was the same, so he ran back to the street and down the stairs to the water, backwards on all fours so as not to slip and be swept away. He checked around the base of the arches. Was she somehow there, tangled among the dark silhouettes of the stray branches carried

down by the current?

"We should have looked here first, she will have been carried away by the current if she jumped in!" He looked up at the bridge.

"Or slipped. How deep is the water here?" Penny asked, looking down.

"Deep enough, at New Year, divers jump from up there to celebrate, but professional divers, not like her, and in the daytime."

"I don't think she was suicidal, just furious."

"You saw her yesterday!"

"She doesn't want to kill herself, she's just flipping out—can't blame her."

They walked back to the hotel. Ula was in her room, shivering, but other wise okay, and pulling off the second of her two toed rubber shoes. Sandro wrapped his arms around her and brushed the wet bleached stuff back off her face. "We look everywhere for you, we were so worried. But you are okay? Were did you go?"

"I'm f-fine Sandro. I'm n-n-not the c-crazy one around here." She took off her outfit and underwear, and Penny could see her ribs under her skin with its maze of blue veins. Sandro slipped the white cotton nightgown down over her head, and rubbed her feet to warm them before tucking her in under a pile of extra blankets.

Beatrice was locked into her room with the TV blaring.

Sandro and Penny sat in their room in uneasy silence under the muffled sounds of the TV next door. Sandro paced up and down as she peeled off her soggy layers. He sat next to her on the bed and began angrily tearing off his clothes. He picked up his shoe, threw it at the wall.

"I hate her!" he threw the other shoe.

"Cool it, okay, so she's a bitch. You're twenty six years old, grow up."

He sobbed into his pillow.

What could she do but kiss him and press him close? They lay there together in the stillness with just the sound of tires on the wet pavement.

Beatrice booked the midday flight to Paris. Ula writhed delirious under her blankets, the temperature on the flexi strip in the forty box at around a hundred and four. Sandro wanted to call a doctor, but Beatrice said there was no time. They had to be downstairs within the hour. So they dumped everything in their bags and Sandro carried Ula into the elevator.

Sandro carried Ula on the plane and put her down in her seat by the window. He spread the Ali talia blanket over her and fell into the seat beside her. Ula was awake now, mumbling nonsense. Penny asked Beatrice if she could have the window seat for her laptop. Beatrice barely acknowledged her behind her Jackie O shades, but let her sit there. In the aisle seat she was closer to the stewardess for her champagne.

Once aloft, Penny put on her noise cancelling headphones, wired together her setup and got down with the new samples.

Next time Penny looked back, Sandro and Ula were both asleep, Ula with her head on Sandro's shoulder.

They flew over Tuscany, where a light dusting of snow still spread over the gentle hills and farms, heavier farther north on the Alpine foothills. Locked in the ice age Europe must have been like this, the crinkled white surface stretching unbroken and untouched by humanity or any form of life to somewhere beyond the edge of the world.

Unable to concentrate she shut down the machine. Her head hurt from last night, from the blinding white outside, and sitting was painful because all along her back were bruises, even on the front of her pelvic bone, he probably was the same there.

She looked out the window to the blue and white horizon, was it really curved? This wasn't Concorde, but she could swear it was a little curved. It made it seem like Earth was a Frisbee and not a ball hurtling through space. She looked over to the black shades, the red nails clutched around the nearly empty glass.

Living with Beatrice was out of the question.

The stewardess dropped the oxygen for Ula, who, once they landed, was to go straight to the hospital. Sandro called Dick on the flight phone, who said he would arrange it all.

Ula moaned under her yellow mask. The plane began its descent, Penny's ears popped and sounds became muffled as she methodically packed away her tech.

They landed in the foggy sci-fi nightmare of Roissy, parking somewhere near the terminal. From there most passengers had to take a hi-tech cattle car bus to the terminal, but Ula, Sandro and Penny got the royal treatment after an ambulance drove right up to the plane for them. A stretcher came down the aisle and two white-coated medics strapped Ula in. Sandro and Penny followed down the aluminum ramp and climbed into the back of the Citroën ambulance next to Ula.

## HOTEL CRILLON

Richard Schwanz swept through the double door in a long camel hair coat, a red scarf, red kid gloves and a brown gangster hat. The Hôpital du Val de Grace, though not specialists in pneumopathology, was not way out in the suburbs and had the doctor for his little girl, one that Dick's well connected native patrons went to for patching up. Normally he would have been expected to use the American Hospital in Neuilly, but Schwanz wanted dearly to be thought of as a Frenchman and not an ex-pat. As he pranced over to Sandro, his face fell a notch with each step. He held Sandro's scarred face in his hands as if it was a broken vase.

"Tisk, tisk, look what the cat dragged in, you look just awful! You'd better get that work done on your face or you'll scare the children! Hello, Penny, well aren't you fresh as a daisy? Tough cookie, are we? You wearing him out, these days?"

It was true that Sandro was unshaven, his lips chapped and peeling. Dick removed his coat, gloves, scarf, and hat and stacked them carefully on one of the few empty chairs. Under the coat he wore a conservative gray suit, but with red socks. With the hat off and Ula bald, the resemblance was unmistakable. Even Sandro stared, his eye following the lumpy skull through the door into Ula's room. He tore off a fresh strip of skin until his lip bled. Penny took off her own coat, dumped it on the camel hair pile and kicked their bags closer to the chair. She watched Sandro scowl and destroy his lips.

Dick came back, more somber now.

"Pneumonia! How do you get pneumonia in Italy? What stupid romantic farce did she pull now? Who does she think she is Anita Eckberg? Your lip is bleeding, Sandro, those beautiful Tivoglio lips. Don't ruin them like the rest of your face. Oh, why, why are you all so self-destructive?"

"Actually Dick, it was all thanks to Beatrice, and uh, I don't know?" Penny couldn't help herself.

"What the hell are you talking about, kid?" Dick looked around nervously, Sandro just stared at the polished floor.

"Well, I guess I'll be going, you can stay at my place if Beatrice gets too bitchy, I'm sorry about the little crisis we had before. I was

under a lot of stress back there."

He retrieved his coat and slipped it on, molded his hat back into shape and planted a big wet kiss on Sandro's good cheek. "And keep growing that beard, dear boy! Bye, kiddos." He swooshed out briskly, still buttoning his coat.

"Wow, he was in a hurry to leave! He even forgot his scarf and gloves!" Penny saw them peaking from beneath her own green coat as she picked it all up to sit down. Sandro sat down beside her and rubbed his face.

"He is her father! All these years and I was blind! Poor Ula, no wonder she is such a mess!"

"Think she knows?"

He shook his head and tore off another strip of lip.

"Hey, you wanna put some chapstick on that before that gets any worse?"

"Grazie! We stay here tonight? These chairs will be torture."

"Yeah, I should've slept on the plane."

"I think maybe we go to the Crillon now, so we can escape this madness and relax like kings, eh? I will go home soon and pick up the painting, some notebooks, and have Mario bring over the system so you can continue the work and we can make a little home there."

"Is this why you live in hotels?"

"For the personal space." He looked at his hands. "I go to the toilettes now and wash my hands, hospitals are full of germs."

On the way back he entered Ula's room and stayed for nearly an hour. Penny plugged her ears and opened the Immortal Sisters book to get her mind off things. She skimmed some pages, "The jade girl rides a blue phoenix, the gold boy offers a scarlet peach. One strums a brocade lute amidst the flowers, one plays jewel pipes under the moon. One day immortal and mortal are separated and you coolly cross the ocean."

Where had she heard that before? It made more sense now.

"The fourteen poems of Sun Buer and their commentaries. Projecting the spirit." Projecting the spirit. What was this?

"There is a body outside the body... unified original spirit... the bright moon congeals the gold liquid. The Old man of the Blue flower says... the emergence of the light spirit from its encasing... like the sun when it first rises out of the ocean." Okay, this was poetry.

"Warnings." Warnings?

"Fear... Attraction... Not being ready... Falling into demon

states... The light spirit. When it emerges, one may see a white light. Bells, cymbals, through the ears. Not strong enough to break through the Celestial pass." A little farther down, "Facing a Wall. All things finished, you sit in your little niche. The light body rides on violet energy. Yin and yang are one." Whoa! What was the catalyst? She closed the book, shut her eyes. Opened them and saw him coming out of the room, taking Ula's bag in for her.

They took a cab to the Crillon, where he'd successfully made reservations. Head back on the greasy vinyl, he began snoring. She ached and was famished. The floodlit monuments flashed by until they swerved around the Ferris wheel and one of those Egyptian obelisks that seemed a favorite souvenir for European despots. Newly reopened after extensive renovation, the hotel could just as easily been in Las Vegas. Two doormen in fancy costumes ushered them along a shiny black and white marble floor past the gift shop and a glitzy wall of diamond bling. From the elevator they went down a long rose and cream striped corridor to the door of their suite, the best one, fit for kings.

"Maybe a bath?"

"Yes, the germs."

"Bubbles?"

"Many bubbles, yes."

Next day it was back at the hospital, back on those nasty seats with Ula drifting in and out of consciousness, asking for Sandro. Around lunchtime, Dick visited, hurrying past Penny to Ula's room where Sandro was certainly holding her hand. When both men emerged from the room, Dick quickly disappeared to a bathroom, and Sandro turned to Penny. "Why don't you go in now. I return soon."

Ula was all wrapped up in blankets and sheets like a mummy, the oxygen hose discreetly in her nostrils.

"Are you reading the book?"

"Yeah. I see why you got it for me."

Ula coughed and shut her eyes. Penny let her rest and sat in the chair, which was more comfortable than the ones out in the waiting room, and read her book.

Sandro returned alone around three, and it was already getting dark. Dick had taken him out to lunch and he was pretty drunk. He washed his face in Ula's sink and drank a couple glasses of water from her carafe, gulping down water that Penny suspected was from the faucet.

Ula didn't wake when the water ran. Sandro bent over her to see if she was all right, then walked to the window overlooking the courtyard. Something must have happened with Dick.

By the next day they were settled into the conjugal life of exiled royalty. In the mornings after a sumptuous breakfast brought to their suite on a silver cart, Sandro would go upstairs to the hotel gym and work out on their machines. Penny gave her fingertips a workout at the keyboard downstairs until the maid came and cleaned the room and she met up with Sandro for a quick bite at the bar. Afternoons was sitting around in those chairs, as immaculate doctors and nurses scurried past. After closing time they would walk back down towards the river, weather permitting, through the Luxembourg Gardens.

Dinner tonight was Quiche Lorraine, a beer and an Orangina at Le Chai De L'Abbaye. Taking up the two seats next to them was a one armed man in a beat up leather jacket. He had a long scarf wound around his neck and was writing on a Masonite clipboard, the kind you get at Walmart. Penny decided he must be one of those down and out in Paris types you hear about, writing a screenplay or his memoirs.

"Anything new and exciting regarding monsieur Schwanz?" Penny asked Sandro while they waited for their order

"Beh, nothing about being her father, if that is what you mean. He must think we are all such fools! But we must be careful."

"Well, looks like I'm in the clear, in this palace Security fit for kings, right?"

"Yes, but, I protect you, always." He kissed her forehead and drained his beer.

"After coffee we go to the English bookstore, Shakespeare and Company, yes? You need something better to read than this *sciocchezza* of Ula's."

The guy got up and asked them in decent French if they would watch his stuff while he went next door.

"*Mais, bien sure, monsieur,*" Sandro said in his crisp formal French.

"The store belongs to this character, George Whitman, who until recently manned the register and stamped the books, let it become more a hangout for hippies than the intelligentsia now it has become a tourist attraction, but is still the bet place for English language books. Ula goes there all the time."

The ex-pat returned with a heavy bag of laundry to his camping spot.

"What are you writing?" Penny asked him as he hoisted the bag onto the empty chair.

"It's a long story, an' I have to go back to my place and meet a girl. But come by again, I'm always here, name's Pete." He stuck out his one hand.

"I'm Penny and this is Sandro." Penny, then Sandro shook his hand.

The coffees came with the little chocolate covered walnuts. Penny thought of the walnut ice cream in Rome as she nibbled.

Pete gathered all his papers and clipboard and stuffed them into his laundry bag, said *buona notte*, and left, lugging the bag.

"How did he know you were Italian?"

"*Sciocchezza!*"

"Skoozy?"

"That immortal *merda* Ula's reading."

"Let's go to Shakespeare's."

The Latin Quarter streets were full of students and tourists hitting the couscous joints. They turned a corner and in a dip by the river was the book store.

Penny didn't know exactly what she had in mind, but this seemed like the right kind of place. The shop was crowded with a maze of teetering bookcases winding into ever smaller back rooms. She edged herself past the loud tourists in the front to the back where dazed and confused types sleepwalked along the ragged green carpet, and serious poseurs leaned against shelves or on the steps leafing through heavy books. Ula would've fit right in. All in all, the place gave Penny the creeps.

A shelf with Huxley, Castenada, Leary and McKenna looked promising. What she wanted was something of an anthropological overview to illuminate the stuff she had read in the *Immortal Sisters* book with its allusions to special mushrooms and starvation diets of raw grasses and altered states.

Bingo. *The Long Trip, a Prehistory of Psychedelia*. She looked up Eleusis, Ergot, *Stropharia cubensis*. It was all there in this dog eared paperback, probably left here by some weary burnt out hippie. Exactly what she was looking for, except for the tech stuff, but the book predated that.

Sandro found her propped against a shelf and dropped something into her hand. A foil wrapped walnut.

He started laughing and hugged her.

"Shut up! What's so funny?"

"Your face. You look like I give you a diamond! But you say do not like diamonds so I give you this. It is not the strongest element though."

"Neither is diamond, osmium is."

"Okay, okay, so I will get a forty karat osmium for your engagement ring!"

He looked over her shoulder at her book. "What is that? Another book on immortality? Drugs! Yes! Drugs are so good for relaxing, for finding yourself, for love."

His hand slipped under her jacket, under her shirt, his cold hand on her breast, his fingers tweaking her nipple.

"Cut it out! This is important. There might be corollaries, drugs or no drugs, okay?"

He leaned into her against the bookcase.

"Okay, but you know, someday we should get stoned together and make love. It would be paradise!"

"It already is paradise."

"O! I could 'fuck you' right here in the books." He looked like he just might.

Those words in English! A tweedy bearded gent gawked in their direction.

"Will you shut up? They understand English in here."

"Oh, 'lighten up!' They are not going to arrest us!" He sighed and separated himself and leaned back against the bookcase. "Did you know that in Italy the police can arrest you for kissing in public?"

"You're kidding, right?" Penny flipped though her book, and remarked without looking up, "We kissed a lot, and we never got arrested."

"Not around the *carabinieri*. Paris is different, you can get away with anything here." He watched a girl with violet hair and studs poking from different parts of her face climb the narrow stairs to the inner sanctum, where the tearoom was.

"Okay, let's go, I think this'll keep me busy for a while." Penny shut the book and wound her way to the paying pit, manned by the studded girl's greasy Anglophile boyfriend.

The Quais were quiet now except for a swirling wind and the evening traffic. At the Pont Neuf they went down the stairs to continue their journey the edge of the water, crossing to the Right Bank on the Passage Solferino then past darkened houseboats that were all trussed

up like storybook cottages with white picket fences and on to the Place de la Concorde.

Back at the hotel, they collapsed together on the yellow bedspread, and shut the light. Without the blinding chandelier, the room assumed its hotel-ness, smelled like any old Marriott or Best Western. Traffic noises filtered in from the busy Place de la Concorde, but it could have been Boston or Helena, too. What she missed the most were the birds around the pear tree in the mornings.

"I don't know, maybe we should just go back to New York. I have an appointment with the grant board after New Year's, and I gotta be there. What do you think? And Ula's got the perfect practice place there. It's nice here and everything, but all we can expect from the grownups is more trouble."

"*Bene!* I ask Ula tomorrow what she thinks."

"And since money is no problem, like you say, then you can quit staying in these lobotomized hotel suites and get yourself a cool bachelor pad around the corner from us, how's that sound?"

"Bachelor pad? I think we need to talk about this."

"I am so zonked, can it wait 'till tomorrow? I need a bath."

"I make it. Bubbles?"

"Yeah, lotsa bubbles."

It was already afternoon when she woke from endless nightmares the next day, and he was already gone, having put up a do not disturb sign on the door for her. But she got nowhere that day, having fallen asleep at her desk and waking with a terrible taste in the back of her throat, so she just stretched out on the bed for a minute or two, but was asleep in less than that and only woke with the slam of the door when Sandro blew in fuming.

"Do you know what he wants to do now? Have you been asleep all day? Are you unwell?"

"Uh, no?"

"Do you know? So I talk with Ula about our New York plan, and she is so happy! Then after lunch Dick comes to visit, and she tells him! She tells him! So now, he says he is moving to New York. For his new 'business.' Imagine."

"Why did you tell Ula? At least to keep it under wraps."

"Because I am an idiot, that's why! She was so excited she did not think herself, and it had cascade effect! Of course he says he was going to do this all along and suggested we all live together in a big loft in Chelsea."

He smashed his head into the door.

"Okay, so Dick's gonna be around, big deal."

"You don't understand. He's going into business with Beatrice! She will do a bath and beauty line with him. And she will be there also! New York was my last haven from her! From them! I am cursed! Cursed! Cursed!" He threw himself on the bed and buried his head in the pillow.

"That really sucks, for sure, but New York's a big town, I'm sure we can avoid them, I avoid people all the time."

"Can I have a life without their madness? I have done everything they have wanted me to do, and has either of them ever thanked me, ever? Ula sucks my life. She has attached herself to me since Angelo died, like a, how do call it *une sangsue*, that sucks blood with a round mouth full of teeth.

"A leech."

"Yes one of those."

"Poor Sandro, I am sorry, so sorry, but you're an adult, believe it or not, and you don't owe her or Dick, or for that matter, Ula, squat. You do, however, owe it to yourself to—"

"Okay! I behave like a child, I am sorry." They lay together in the darkness to the sounds of rush hour around Place de la Concorde.

"I am starved, what do you think, we call room service?"

"I haven't been out today, maybe we should get some air in the Tuileries, cross the bridge, grab a quick quiche at Le Chai? Maybe Pete'll be there and he can tell us his story, don't you want to hear about his arm?"

"Okay. *Mademoiselle Réalité*, you win."

"We can't let anyone get in our way."

"*Andiamo, carina!*"

The hot guys posed under the purple awning of Café Jaded around the oyster hippie who ignored them and arranged his baroque still life on the ice.

Outside Le Chai, the art dealer/smuggler paced up the little street his cell to his ear. Pete wasn't there. They sat in their booth across from the window and ordered quiche and lemon slice beer. Sandro was still a little shaky and Penny, who had a horrendous headache, thought beer might chill her out. A little guy in a tan trench coat and wooden clogs plunked himself down in the booth behind Sandro, meticulously stuffed his pipe with tobacco, lit it, fished a Palm Pilot from his pocket and bent over it, sucking noisily on the pipe.

Geek of the old school, probably helped design the H bomb. Looked a lot like Stravinsky.

"Could be Chelsea or Tribeca, and he will keep the Paris place. I dono about Mama, she will hate New York, she always said it was vulgar." Sandro went on obsessing as he cut into his quiche.

"Her mid life crisis has her on a roll, remember? Everybody wants to be in New York these days. Where it's at."

"Thank you, Penny. That is precisely what I wanted to hear." He slammed down his knife.

"Sorry, I have a terrible headache, I had a super weird afternoon, I don't know where it went."

"You were not flying in your purple haze again, I hope?"

"Please, be nice. I did have the funny taste, but it went away."

"Were you reading that drugs book?"

"No, I was working, okay? These days I just get into this fog, the trodes are useless. Maybe I'm just wound too tight and can't slip into alpha wave mode. I've eliminated the E.L.F.'s so this shouldn't be happening!"

"Excuse me, miss, may I interrupt?" asked Stravinsky.

"Excuse me?"

"Zis taste, eez it like ether?" He stuck out a gnarly hand. "I am Dr. Otto Züt, please call me Otto. I am a neurosurgeon, I sink I can help."

"Penny, hi, yeah, it is actually like ether, then sometimes like acetone."

"It sounds like *petit mal* seizures. You speak off Extra Low Frequency Waves?" He squinted over his rimless octagonal spectacles.

"Yeah, I thought it might be from the E.L.F. waves that I used occasionally in my music, but I don't use them anymore."

She glanced over at Sandro who scowled into his *bière*.

"I haff encountered numerous cases of seizures developing from exposure to television and video, sometimes even from colored lights or switching frequencies. This last is common and well documented. I am presently doing a paper on the effects off electronic gadgetry upon our lives, and I would be very interested in studying your case. How long did you say you haf had zeess problem? You must be examined. Your programs as vell. You need a break from Vork, my dear, and no alcohol, until we know more. I just return from a conference in Bruxelles but I haff offices here, in New York, Washington and Zurich. Here is my card."

"Thanks, my name is Penelope Bell, and this is Alessandro Tivoglio, choreographer. We're working on a piece together. Thanks, Otto, it's been a pleasure. I'll think about what you said. We should be in New York after the new year, I'll look you up then." She fumbled around her knapsack for her card, but couldn't find it, so she pulled out her Palm Pilot.

"Can I beam you my card?"

"Certainly, my dear! Undt I vill beam you mine!"

They aligned their handhelds and cross zapped the info.

Dr Züt got up, nodded curtly to Sandro, and clip clopped out.

"Wow! That was weird!"

"Why did you do that?" he hissed in her ear.

"Don't you see? This guy's was at a conference in Bruxelles, that's where NATO is, right? I mean, he's a big shot. He could help us with the purple problem and he could help us with the Ng problem, even with that surveillance stuff back home. I'm kinda worried about returning there without some one to turn to, you know?"

"*Porca Miseria!* I thought you did not trust your government, this guy has a Washington office!" he cried, clutching his brow.

"What makes you think he's a government man?"

"I dun know, I dun know, but no government will help you."

"Probably not, but this Dr. Züt is a free agent, he's a foreign intellectual, he's interested. Maybe he can help!"

"Oh, Dio, Penny."

"What's your problem, all of a sudden?"

"*Niente! Camarero, ancora due! Pardon, Lucien, je suis completement foutu, ce soir. Encore deux bières, non, une bière et un whiskey, un Black Label.*"

"*Pronto, mon vieux.*" Lucien winked at Penny on his way.

"What am I going to do? The music's frying my brain. I've been real careful with my ears, but if I blow one I still have another. Only got one brain."

"Maybe the cumulative effect, Ula says."

"Yeah, maybe," She twirled her lemon on the froth.

"So, how's our dear Ula doing?"

"You dunt want to know." He leaned on his elbow, his eyelids clamped shut.

"Worse?" Penny waited for a response.

"Unfortunately, no. Now that she is feeling better and has nothing to do and no one to torment, she is obsessing on you!" he

blurted.

"Oh, so, what else is new?"

"She wants a *partie a trois*."

"A what?"

"A threesome."

"I know what it is. Is this more of her muse crap? Modulating the signal through her pussy, or whatever she was doing in that rubber suit?"

"Whut?"

"Forget it, some stuff she was ranting about in the Louvre, about angels and Stendhal syndrome and us being muses for celestial transmissions or something. Not sex though."

"Stendhal effect?"

"She has this thing about perpetrating Stendhal effect as the artist or muse's prime objective, as channeled from some higher power. Angels or something. She quoted Rilke."

"I dunt think this is about work. It is about closeness, she says."

"She puts drugs in our drinks, Sandro!"

"She says you are square."

"Square? I lost my virginity at sixteen to an illiterate half- Indian hick in the back of his barn, how square is that? Hey, girls just don't turn me on."

"I am sorry. Ula says casual sex is part of becoming mature. She considers herself adult, imagine. It is just her little game."

"Her little game? The pedophile's daughter? Come on, I saw the pictures, some game."

"Penelope!"

"You've known her all your life and you've got a history and I'm okay with that, I really am. But please, just don't bring me into it." She took a sip of the new beer. "Hey, have you ever done that, a party a twah?" she asked.

"Yes." He rubbed his face nervously.

"With boys or girls?"

He smashed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets.

"Forget it, okay?."

"I am cursed," Sandro whispered from behind his hands.

"Oh, get real. Hanging around this crowd, its no surprise you have no moral discipline."

"*No moral discipline?*" He shouted.

Pete was in at his spot now, listening to every word. He slapped

his hand on the table. The sound of one hand clapping.

"*Ciao, Pete, come vai?*" Sandro said, cringing.

Pete came over to their booth. He stank of scotch, drawled, "*Benissimo*. Sandro, is it? Hi, Penny, how you guys doin', not too good, huh?"

"So, what are you writing about?" Penny asked, glad to change tracks.

"As you were saying, 'the moral bankruptcy of the privileged classes'—what I'm writing about." Pete belched. "I need another drink."

Sandro motioned to the *garçon*. Lucien nodded, he knew what to get him.

"*Et encore un pour moi.*"

"Have you been living in Paris long?"

"I'm in exile." He coughed a glob of phlegm into a napkin. "Scuse me. As I was sayin', my life's work. *The Consequences of Entitlement: A Comprehensive Analysis of Depravity among the Modern Privileged Classes*, that's the book I'm writing, (cough.) Been workin' on it for years. "

"But this has been done, no?" Sandro snarled politely.

Pete blew his nose for thirty seconds. "Write screenplays, too..." Still wiping his nose, he attempted to finish his sentence, "One about the New York art world. Remember The Factory? Same theme. Used t'be a painter...Lemme tell ya...bunch o' crooks, all'em." Pete's hacking cough turned his face fuchsia.

"Yes, I know," Sandro sighed.

"Listen kids, I gotta go home to my inhaler, maybe I'll see you 'round? When you goin' back to New York?"

"Soon, why?"

"I prefer Italy. Ever bin to Lucca? Like our waiter, lucky Luca. Wonderful dry weather. Where you from?" He peered at Sandro, swaying.

"Rome."

"Of course, *Romaniccio!*"

"*Mia madre e d'origine trasteverana, Vicolo del Cinque, perche?*"

Pete shut his eyes and nodded gravely. "You know the Bocca Della Verita?"

"Yeah, we were just there, is that?" Penny glanced at the sleeve, folded and safety pinned around his elbow stump.

"No, girl, it's not!" His chuckle reverted back to a cough.

Doubled in two, he gasped for air.

"You okay? I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"S'okay, see you two tomorrow? Thanks for the drink." On his wobbly trip back up to vertical, his delayed focus adjusted to the ground. He crawled under the table on all threes and sat down there to gather some manuscript pages that were scattered on the floor, waving goodbye to them from down there.

"*Andiamo, subito,*" hissed Sandro. He yanked Penny, who was about to give Pete a helping hand with the papers and pulled her all the way to the street. Silent all the way back through the hypodermic drizzle that battered the Tuileries, he stomped directly into the bathroom and locked himself in.

She went to the couch in the lounge to give him some of that personal space, but now she was going to be sick, and the bathroom door was shut. She ran to the window and puked into the wind, making a mess on herself and the equipment but mostly on the Crillon awnings below. Quiche bits were all over the keyboard, and there was no water to clean it up with.

The taste was there again. *Petit Mal?* What's so petit about it? Oh, right, you swallow your tongue with the Grand. *I'm a real freak, now,* she thought. *My own Frankenstein monster. Stendhal's Frankenstein. My head. Mounted on the wall at Ula's cabinet of Brit-lit curios on the Spanish Steps, complete with headphones and white lace cravat. How Gothic.* Penny quaked with fear. *The fear behind the attraction? That's what the Old Man of the Blue flower said. Too many emotions for which I am just not ready. Is that what happened to those people when they heard the piece?*

When she came, to he was on the bed next to her with a look of resignation and a limp washcloth in his hand. "Züt—Dr Züt is on his way."

"Oh shit." Penny looked down at her bare feet. Stretched out in her underwear, he'd washed her off, and the rest of the mess too.

He kissed her forehead. "S'okay, I love you, I am not angry. I love you, whatever happens. I am sorry I was such a *salaud* earlier, it is my fault. I must put pants on. Can you dress?"

"I can manage fine, thanks."

He put on his pants and a shirt. "I hope the equipment is okay."

Penny went to look and burst into tears. He could have gotten a job as a maid tomorrow.

Dr Züt called and came up, black doctor's satchel firmly in

hand. He flashed one of those tiny flashlights in her eyes, smelled her breath, then turned to the equipment. "You haf to stay off this for a vile, now, until vee determine the cause of your problem."

"I have a minidisc of it."

Sandro rolled his eyes and paced around the room, his jaw grinding away. She had never seen him so ill at ease.

"It's in the player now. The head phones are right there."

Dr Züt put her headphones on and sat down to listen. He made a face, removed the headphones, looked at his watch and took out a small metal vial of pills.

"I can tell nothing from this, but this is Dilantin, take von viss meals twice daily, or if you haff the taste. No alcohol at all! And I vont you to get a complete physical, tests: CAT scan, MRI, the vorks. Vee must investigate. Get plenty of rest, ziss is from stress, too, so take it easy."

He glanced at Sandro's scars and pocketed the disc Penny offered him. Sandro chatted briefly in French before letting him out, then went to the bathroom and ran a bath for her. After the bath he tucked her in, kissed her distractedly and slipped out into the hall.

## REVEILLON

Next to her on the bed was a small rectangular package. She unwrapped the paper and opened the box. Inside was a silver clamshell, ready to go. His number was already in, speed dial on two. All this time and she didn't even know his cell number. Talk about independent, she'd been living like his illiterate wench for months.

She spent the next twenty minutes upgrading her life, collecting information from Palm Pilot and computer to the new phone's different functions. Once in bit world it was hard to leave, so she Googled Scopolamine on her laptop. Besides the obvious amnesia on the list of symptoms she stopped at "Feeling out of body, looking down on yourself." And GHB produced seizures! Ula had mentioned something about cumulative effects, and she would be well informed as to her arsenal's powers, and the two catalysts combined would make a whopper of a cumulative effect. Great! So, E.L.F. waves were the least of her worries now. Between this and Stendhal syndrome, angelic intrusions, and her yin-yang unpreparedness for immortality, she was so screwed. And how did that little doctor happen to have epileptic medicine on him? Let's not get paranoid. She fell back on the bed, freaked out, exhausted.

When she got up she opened her computer and saw the hour and date at the bottom of the screen. Hell, she had slept for over twenty-four hours! No Sandro.

Back to her mission. Why was she being spied on? Were they looking for the same thing she was, the real source of what had happened to those people? Because now it seemed more complicated than ever. Ng's bag was in the back of the armoire with the videos. She could go through them on mute, no risk there, and the disks; she had just skimmed through them at Maia's. She could really keep herself busy, just with the code. She backed up her work, lest some Ng bug fry her system, and dove in. The code was real crap, except for some relatively complex, or at least up to the minute, code: C++, Perl, for a UNIX platform but no Java. But maybe this predated Java. The disk looked that old.

The big question was what did it do? There was no label on the putty colored two meg sliver. That was suspicious in itself. At least it

was an American made disk, USA dot printed on the back, nine digit serial number. The front of the disk was blank, it had been wiped, or sanded clean.

This wasn't a slick graphics interface thing, and not music programming. Debugging software? E.L.F. wave hunting bots? She didn't know enough about C++ to decipher it.

Another disk, newer, matte black, worn paper orange color code label, no writing, no country of origin, no number code. What was inside? Assembly Language? So much for that. Back to square one. Or zero. At least there was no funny taste in her throat. It was two P.M.

How was she ever going to get to the bottom of this? She got a glass of dog water from the faucet. It really was okay. Jeez, these people were spoiled. She stuck in a DVD. Above the credits shimmered virtual Ula, purged of Dick's genetics, perfect like her mother, the Leningrad ice princess Irina Ivanova. The DVD opened with cuts from Ula's early performance pieces at the Kitchen and the Knitting Factory. A younger Ula flailed around the stage in the throws of one of her famous tantrums, haphazardly twitching, as if she were in the throws of Grand Mal. How very downtown. The lighting was ghastly, and her profile cut through the dark background like a crystal hatchet, even then. Was this her first piece? The audience clapped politely from their tables that were littered with drinks and pamphlets: The Kitchen some time in the late eighties.

Next piece. Rainbow strobe lighting the theater, a tutu of iridescent shards stabbed out from her angular form. Invisible from the waist down, only the cellophane caught the light as she hovered and darted: a dragonfly on invisible black stilts. This was Sandro's creation now. Penny's heart leapt in her throat. He'd transformed the neurotic brat into a tortured insect fairy queen. After the bows she was radiant, ecstatic, in love with her metamorphosis. Sandro leapt on the stage in Doc Martens, a skinny, post-punk leather outfit and spiky Rimbaud hair. He was on fire. If she was Nova, he was Super Nova.

He bowed and accompanied Ula offstage. When they returned for second bows, the crowds hoots and cheers swelled to a roar. Would the toe shoes have been tolerated back then if he hadn't been punked out gorgeous?

Penny ran it through again, in slow-mo. She froze it on him. Zoomed in. He must be just seventeen if that, his cheeks still soft, those of a boy. She magnified his eyes. They were the same, deep pools, but guarded, with a veneer of disdain. Macro on the lips. Parted slightly

with a bit of a sneer. Not real nice, but it was all part of the act.

Penny flopped on the couch. The drapes disappeared in the penumbra of the high ceiling on either side of the slash of day outside the window. Such revelations.

again. She had fallen asleep on the curvy sofa but with normal sleep. Activity murmured out on the street. More sleep. The street was quiet, it was nine. He hadn't called. Should she? She woke the laptop. His lips filled the screen.

The door opened and he stumbled in, reeking of whiskey. Turned on the light. Threw a bunch of shopping bags on the armchair, saw the screen.

"What is that?"

"Oops."

He walked over to it, crashing into another armchair on the way. She got up, pressing normal view, to the stage shot.

"Where did you find that?"

"In this CD of Ng's."

He looked at her gently, "How are you?"

"Fine, no problems, slept pretty much all night and all day, and you?"

He collapsed on her, wrapped his arms around her and muttered in her ear, "Drunk. With Pete at the café. He is on the lam."

"What for?"

"Dunno, the arm, I think."

"Perjury?"

"Penelope."

She kissed his whiskey sticky lips.

"I did not call you, I wanted you to sleep. You need rest, that is all. I got you some things. It is your birthday soon, yes? Saw on your passport, eighteen is important. Tonight is New Year. Would have come back sooner. Pete has done research. He knows things about me and Dick. I had to stay."

He saw the new cell phone on the bed, picked it up, said, "Yes, the phone so we can always be in contact, except underground, of course."

He ran his hand through his hair, felt his jaw. "I wash my face, Cold water, then I must shave, so we take Reveillon. Le Saint Sylvestre. Homard et truffes."

"Reveillon?"

"Yes, we go dance, eat oysters and caviar, bring in New Year, but first, dinner, lobster with truffles."

"Where?"

"Downstairs. The Ambassadeur. Come take a shower with me."

After he toweled off her hair he sat her down on the commode and inspected her feet, her toes, her raggedy fingernails. He brought out a clipper and file and knelt down before her and went to work.

A sea of green chiffon pooled around her ankles. Out of a tissue filled box he pulled two tiny satin stiletto sandals, to wear with the dress.

"If you think I'm walking three steps in those things!"

"In 3/4! Please, it is almost like ballet, and you did the trapeze!"

"In gymnastics not the circus! These are like, midget hooker shoes!"

He chuckled, "*Per favore?* I always want to do this!"

He slipped them on her. She wobbled forward a few steps on the carpet. Her hem no longer trailed on the floor. In the bathroom on the tile floor, she did a little better.

"Ok, I think I got the hang of it, you win."

He turned her around in front of the *armoire* mirror. "Galliano mixes 'the incredibly refined with the savage,' so I say, but that is you!"

He tugged at her strap so it fell off her shoulder. "I always wanted to do this, too."

She'd heard about Angelo's *stiletti*, the evening gowns, but spaghetti straps? His hand slipped under the silk.

He slid the suit out of its bag: a tux, tails and all, the shirt with small folds down the front, a white bow tie, a cummerbund, no baton. He even had patent leather shoes that he broke in with some fancy little steps. "My turn now!"

She was really nervous now. "You look like a conductor."

"Yes, and you are my instrument!"

"I'm not an orchestra!"

He laughed pulled her in the bathroom where she followed his steps, in 3/4. Back in the room she reached for her camo jacket but he stopped her. "No look in the bag!"

From the white shopping bag she pulled out a long silky black jacket that was light as air, and although it had certainly cost twenty times as much, she doubted it was waterproof, or would last a minute of bramble thick trail.

"This'll do. Thanks, what can I say?"

"Time for some oysters and champagne?"

"You know I can't drink on these *petit mal* pills!"

"You can have the non-alcoholic champagne, it is not so bad."

They walked along the black and white checkered floor she had passed by on her way in and out of the hotel every day and into the mirror lined dining hall with its marble walls and clusters of heavy chandeliers, that were lit even during the day.

The tables were covered with blue cloths that went to the floor and over which were starched linen restaurant cloths, but today there were extra candelabra, as if those obscene chandeliers reflected ad infinitum in the mirrors didn't furnish sufficient illumination. Plus, the people there tonight were on the other side of middle age and could definitely have used more subdued lighting, although Penny thought maybe when people got older they ignored mirrors and only looked at the shiny things around them like the bubbles in their champagne or the diamonds on their gnarled fingers and around their sagging necks. But they didn't even look at each other any more, these couples, they just sat there with tight scared smiles waiting for their boiled lobster and yet another twenty years.

The first thing Sandro did was have the candelabrum taken away. Then he spoke to the waiter about the bubbly.

"We have champagne, kid's stuff. I drink adult stuff at the ball," he confided to her, gallantly.

"That's fine, I'm still officially a kid, anyway."

He unfolded his napkin, face flushed, looking around to see if anyone had caught that, the fact that he was partying the night away with half naked jail-bait.

The waiter popped the champagne. They started with a selection of oysters from Brittany, then had to wait for the grisly deed to be accomplished on the lobster, and another dozen oysters slid down their throats.

"Oysters are supposed to be aphrodisiac aren't they? Heard that somewhere. Some o' these couples look like they sure could use some of that, huh? I think it's all bull, of course, because of how they look, all squishy and slurpy, but, I mean there's no scientific basis to that, is there? They don't, like, do experiments on Bonobos, feeding them oysters and monitoring how horny they get, huh?"

Penny slurped them down one after another as she babbled.

At first he scowled at her to shut up and keep it down, but then as more people looked their way, mesmerized by the little mermaid in

her swirl of sea foam Dior drinking oysters like some creature trawled in from the ocean depths, he settled into the show and his part in it.

The lobster came on its silver platter, bursting politely from its shell and surrounded by a tumble of mostly ornamental greens to make it seem as if it had washed up from the deep like this and then been casually tossed, boiled red and perfectly spayed, onto this silver platter.

They prepared to eat it by attaching starched white bibs around their necks. The instruments of dissection were placed one by one in a precise arrangement next to their plates, pliers and curved pointed extractors and dainty forks for dipping the flesh in the melted butter.

For him it was as formalized as the Japanese tea ceremony. Not for her. Penny cracked her claw, she had the bigger one, wrenched out the meat and cut it into bite size bits that she lined up at the side of her plate, dipping each one before popping it in her mouth. That was how it was done at the Red Lobster Surf n' Turf specials and it seemed civilized enough to her. There were no baked potatoes in foil with chive and imitation bacon bits here, but on a side plate there was a small pyramid of white baby potatoes that looked like they had each been individually carved. The pyramid was dotted with fresh pats of melting butter, sprinkled with minced parsley, and the aroma of the parsley had her wondering how it was done with snails, because Antoine kept a little house, more of a cage, nothing Palladian, filled with relatively spunky snails. He fed them flour to fatten them up, so eventually they would end up on a plate with garlic and parsley. She would have to order them someday just to find out, and hope they weren't too much like boogers. She stifled a laugh thinking of these stuck up couples in diamonds, extracting parsleyed snot from snail shells with funny little forks.

He chuckled to himself across the table at her private amusement. It was so easy to make him happy.

The princess lived on the Isle Saint Louis, next door to the Rothschilds, in a limestone mansion complete with carriage house and stables.

The ballroom was painted a dull robin's egg blue, and everything else was white and gold. Even the floor was of white marble and light caramel onyx, converging into a central sun. Chandeliers blazed overhead, and long white linen covered tables laid with silver platters, full of finger food, or glasses of bubbly and other liquors, and there was a table with party favors in colorful polka dots and stripes. Even the caterers were dressed in blue satin knee pants and white

damask jackets with gold brocade, and each wore a white Mozart wig.

One of these characters came up to them with a tray of champagne and Sandro took one and whispered something into the guy's wig. Next time she turned around the same guy had a glass of kiddie champagne for her.

The old princess was corseted to the floor in gray satin armor and wore immaculately pompadoured lavender hair that bore the stamp of Madame d'Oc with a few curls lacquered flat over the do in an asymmetric embroidery. She busied herself with Blaise Boulot, who kept a hungry eye on Sandro from across the room as he listened to the princess. Sandro decided to pay his respects to their hostess later.

The floor was cleared and the music started up from the corner chamber orchestra - all in blue knee pants and wigs, even the female musicians. How embarrassing, Penny thought, as the musicians started a waltz, to take such a job after years of training and end up in these Halloween costumes.

Older couples were already skimming across the floor to Strauss senior when Sandro took her into the arena and right into the sun medallion in the center. The trick was stepping light with fluid knees but a straight back, as if suspended from the top of your head by a string, then focusing on a stable spot. But she knew that already, from the balance beam.

They swooped and slid across the floor, her left arm on his shoulder, his right around her waist, the other arms out, leading into the dance. He smiled into the air as they floated around the floor. As the other swirling couples watched them, they too were drawn into the fairytale. Twirl, twirl dip. The room became a kaleidoscope of blue and gold and black and pale shimmering gowns, diamonds and chandeliers.

The music stopped, and couples changed partners, but he took her aside. "I knew you could do it," he said, barely out of breath.

He led her out of the room, to a small room with satin armchairs and landscape paintings of cows and sheep on the curly sculpted walls.

"I have something for you, it is not what you think, so do not panic."

He took out a small velvet bag from his pocket, and from the bag, a gold ring of two carved interlaced hands, finely wrought once but now worn thin. "I could not find a forty karat osmium, *mi dispiace*, but this is an ancient Roman friendship ring. I think we should, em, 'go steady', first, you know, now that you are eighteen, em, what do you

think?" He started to say more, but instead, he just slipped it on her finger and kissed her hand.

"I know you're my friend, I don't need some gold thing," she said.

"Penelope, think no more about Ula, this is for us now, now and forever. I love you for always, remember." She buried her face in his shirt, helpless.

Back out in public, Boulot edged in. "Monsieur Tivoglio, Docteur Bell, Blaise Boulot, *Enchanté!*" Penny stuck out her hand. Boulot kissed it, and Sandro pretended to be charmed.

"Tell me, mademoiselle, in what manner have the magnificent mountains of your wild west inspired you? Have you, like Bruckner, spent the evening hours counting the stars? Perhaps surfing their more terrifying waves? '*Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich,*' and you are angelic! 'Beauty is a terror we can barely endure...'"

Sandro led her away from him to the center of the dance floor and on the face of the sun kissed her as a roar rose and swelled up, into a chorus of shrill squeaks. It was midnight, and his timing, as always, was exact. All the glittery people were in a frenzy, making complete fools of them selves now, wearing the paper hats and blowing into cardboard bugles.

"The Baccarole!" Sandro tugged at her to join the line of revelers that wound around the room in the old peasant dance.

"No, no, please, can we go? I can't take any more."

"But this is the end!"

Early next afternoon after a late breakfast, he asked, "When is your tribunal?"

"The twenty first, why?"

"Because we will have to be in New York. You will see Dr Züt in New York, yes? He is in Zurich for the next three weeks."

"I guess, the medicine is doing the trick, and I don't feel any side effects, yet."

"We have some time to see more things around Paris."

"Well, I hate making plans, but I would like to go to a concert."

"A concert?" He gulped, smacked his forehead.

"Yeah, maybe in the sci-fi hall by Bastille?"

"Yes, they have concerts there, but also in many other places, do you want classical or avant-garde?"

"I saw they were having a good modern one at the Bastille, Xenakis and Scelsi, two of my favorites!"

After a quick, packed metro ride they he bought the tickets at the window in the base of the mirrored building, for the next evening.

Later as they dipped into their dessert of *banana au gratin* with hazelnut and praline *zabaglione* cream, Dick called.

Cause for celebration! Ula was coming home in the morning, she was okay but depressed. Dick was nagging Sandro about his face, she could tell. He must have said something new because Sandro yelled a string of French obscenities into the phone and hung up, then left the table to brood in the window as traffic circled the obelisk and the smell of bananas filled the suite.

"Why don't you just forget about it and finish your fancy banana split?"

He snorted in disgust, at everything, not just the bananas.

The steward knocked and slunk in. She had no money for a tip and Sandro hadn't budged, his clenched jaw muscles all she could see. The waiter shook his head and left discreetly with the cart and the dishes of mush.

Penny shut the light and sat at the edge of the bed, waiting for him to make the next move, but he just stood there grinding his teeth and brooding in the splash of the carnival lights outside, so she came up to him silently and unzipped him and dropped to her knees. He was surprised but took her head in his hands and fell back into the drapes with a sigh, then swept her up in his arms onto the bed where they rolled together "like crazy bonobos after too many oysters," he joked.

Dick's words must have been cycling around in his sleepless mind, for when she woke around dawn and looked over and saw him feel his crushed nose and sweep his fingers over the mangled eyebrow down to the zigzag scar over his zygomatic. He felt her stirring beside him, and as if he'd been waiting for hours to ask her, he turned to her.

"How can you love a man with half a face?"

"You don't have half a face, you have two eyes. You're just more rugged now," she said, yawning.

"Okay, you are so sweet."

He didn't believe a word of it. Even with half a face, he was still the vainest guy she'd ever met. "My biggest idol had only half a face. Iannis Xenakis, you know, Polytopes. We're going to a concert of his music tomorrow."

"The concert tomorrow? Oh, yes! Dick has the book. I will get it. And what happened to your idol?"

"During World War Two, fighting in the Greek resistance, he

was imprisoned and sentenced to death, and wounded. He had it sheared off in a grenade explosion."

"Whut?"

"His face."

"No! How much?"

"It was pretty much gone and he used a glass eye."

Silence.

"What is his music like?"

"You'll see. Like he had his face blown off, and the universe is blasting through his skull. He's been compared to Beethoven."

"Did he have an 'Immortal Beloved'?"

"He's got a daughter, but I think he was pretty much a loner."

"Eh! Beethoven was a loner, like you, no?"

After a while, he chuckled, "Those Greeks! *Mannaggia!* Will Italians live forever in the shadow of those Greeks?"

Moving back to the left side of his face, he wondered, "Tell me, did you fall in love with me before or after this?"

She rolled on top of him and held his face in her hands and kissed his right eyelid, then his left, and then down the cheekbone to his lips, but didn't say a word.

"My lovely loner, my immortal beloved," he sighed and kissed her. They lay together in silence. The traffic had died down, the wheel creaked to a halt, the world slept.

"Tell me, this Xenakis, how did he photograph? In the book, I remember the profile but I did not know. On album covers? In concert, did his face not 'scare the children' like Dick says?"

"He was mostly photographed in profile, it's true, or with the gone side in shadow."

"Did he scare you?"

"Well, his talent was intimidating, of course. Oh, come on, it's not that bad. You're not scary, you're almost normal now. You were scarier before."

"You were scared of me?"

"Yeah, you didn't look real!"

"Ah! So you fell in love after."

"I followed you here against my better judgment."

"Love is not about thinking," he whispered.

But she had become stupid the moment she had set eyes on him, or was it from the velvety voice that had woken her up?

"You say I look normal now? Like a 'regular guy'? Like a

cowboy?"

"Did you see any one running away at the ball? Boulot could've devoured you! And he knew the X man, too."

"The X man??"

"That's what his fans call him."

"How well did you know him?"

"I didn't. I had a master class with him one summer at a Juilliard seminar. You know, he did a ballet, Antikthon, commissioned by Balanchine. It means anti-earth, from a Pythagorean view of the cosmos, basically about otherness, interpreted in abstract, but polyphonic terms. He says the Pythagoreans were the first to state that the earth was not the center of the universe. He was obsessed by the 'infinity of innumerable worlds all inextricably interlinked'. But he wanted to abolish personality in music, a fatal flaw, I always thought. I'm surprised you haven't heard of it. Antikthon was premiered in September of seventy four, wasn't that the year you were born?"

"It all makes sense now."

"What?"

"Il Destino." He sighed, "So Dick is full of shit, yes?"

"Well you won't make the cover of GQ, although, who knows? Do you care?"

"The burden is lifted. I thought it would happen later, when the hair goes, you know, but now I can relax more. Dick says 'at least grow a beard.' Hmm. Pubic hair for the face? It is unsanitary and the people will look again! Now, the people look, but then look away, instead of looking and looking and looking. Eating you with their eyes, you know?"

"Yeah, it's like watching Maia in public, I wouldn't trade places."

"Oh, Maia lives for it. This is different." He changed the subject. "You really think he is like Beethoven?"

"I think I have some MP3 files of his in here somewhere, hold on."

She came back with the laptop, put the headphones on him, and played a section.

"Brutal! More than Metal! I love it! Play some more!"

"I don't have any more, I packed in a hurry. Back home, I have all his CD's."

"Could we do a piece to this? No, it would not be good for dance, not the way Ula works. Too much like what they do in Stuttgart,

deconstructed, mechanistic stuff, acrobatics without poetry. But for us, it is the wrong direction, and we must think of her."

Penny laughed, "Yeah, she might go off the deep end."

"Yes, it is very high strung." Sandro yawned and got up to pull the drapes shut so they could sleep when it got light.

Dick was knotted into a tight ball on the back seat of the car, his arms crossed over his knees with one finger drumming nervously on his opposite knee as they sped down Rue de Rennes, the ugliest street on the left bank, past the FNAC. Opposite, the blue plastic tarps fencing the construction scaffolds of rising condo blocks flapped in the wind, surrounded by rivers of mud and dust. Montparnasse tower receded in the rear view mirror behind Yusef's darting eyes. Why wasn't he going straight down Rue Bonaparte. What was the rush?

Clutching her phone in one hand and her inhaler in the other, Ula pondered the fresh scrubbed face of modern Paris, the veneer of commerce on every surface. Rome was worse. Stiletto tipped Fendi legs towered above the Campo Dei Fiori, flowers tossed in favor of sexy shoes and coats of ragged pelts.

Dick the human pretzel wasn't talking. Whatever it was made him nervous. Was it money? The Paris renovation was costing a fortune and life in New York wasn't going to be cheap, not the way he lived. Or was it Sandro and Penny living like royalty at the Crillon? The cad had taken her to the ball, they were as good as engaged! Dick was busy cooking up some scheme, that was it. The pink and lavender plastic inhaler reminded her of a sex toy, except for the canister of medicine hiding inside. She pressed down, breathed in, held it. Oh, what fun!

Down Bonaparte, Les Deux Magots was full of fat posing tourists. Now Vuitton and Dior and lorded over the antiseptic square, with their luxe for the masses. Penny in Dior, with the hiking boots or tottering on heels, all five feet of her?

Down the street, even the Beaux Arts had been sandblasted clean. She saw young Sandro trudge through the gate with his portfolio, in defiance of destiny.

Dick's hand was on her knee. He cleared his throat. "Before lunch, we have to talk. Inez will be so thrilled to have you home."

The soft light of the sun sliced through the drapes, morning well under way, Sandro with his face smashed into the pillow, his body

curled in fetal position from nightmares. Penny got up and opened the drapes half way. Under the weak sun a hazy steam rose from the Tuileries gardens, and chased away the night's chill. A great day for a hike.

"*Penelope, amore mio, vieni qui.*" Music, the way he transformed a name she'd never liked. And how she loved sex in the morning, it was like melting into the sea, the biggest, warmest sea of all.

Breakfast came and the steward pocketed his crisp golden euros. Penny went straight for the coffee, to hammer herself back into reality. He also seemed distracted, but then, he often was in the morning.

"What X piece do we hear tonight?"

"*Jonchaies*, my favorite!"

"*Palude*—Marsh weeds? Maybe the wind."

"Yeah? I guess that's it."

"Does it sound like wind?"

"You heard some last night."

"No! That is not right!"

"It's not program music, it's more hallucinatory. Clusters of polyrhythms, um, sonic clumps. Each plant has four or five reeds, you know, and they interact with each other, together in the wind, so it becomes a changing pattern field in the wind, moving moiré like, um —"

His phone rang. "Allo?" He shut his eyes and listened, nodded every so often. Had to be Dick.

"*Aspetta un momento.*" He muted the phone. "Ula and Dick want us there for lunch. He says she is much better."

"It's your call, but after last night, are you sure?"

"It will be better. We do it for her." He turned it back on. "Okay, when? We are having breakfast now. Yes, I know how late it is. No, no, *bene. Ciao.*" Turning to the window, he looked straight in their direction. "At one we go."

"Right."

"Aah, no work today."

"Yeah, I was hoping to take a walk anyway, it's gorgeous out."

"So we do an early *passeggiata.*"

"Then dinner and the concert."

"To celebrate this most beautiful day!" He stretched up his arms and roared like a lion.

They strolled along arm in arm down the gravel alleys under the

bare trees, along rows of empty green chairs, around the shuttered refreshment kiosks, the sputtering, glittering fountain, and up a few steps to the Carrousel. They turned right, under the arches of the Louvre to cross over to the Left Bank. The river danced in the sharp sunlight. They stopped to watch a barge chug by underneath, it had lace curtains but no geraniums.

## TRAP

Wrapped in the crane wedding kimono Ula watched them cross the Pont du Carrousel. What an odd couple. His step adjusted perfectly to hers as she forged ahead in hiking stride, ready to face the music.

Ula slid in her nabi socks across the newly ebonized floor her to the buzzer. Renovations were still in progress, the furniture still under plastic, the new sofa in its crate.

She buzzed them in before he could even hit the bell, as was their way. She waited until they were on the landing before opening the door.

He smiled. Smiled at her! She threw her arms around him and pulled him in, kissed him on the lips. Penny stood in the door, staring at her feet, her cheeks fiery red from the cold and from shock.

"Well, come in, don't just stand there."

"It is not finished?" Sandro asked.

"God no, what a nightmare, you would not believe!"

"You lost weight since Rome, but you look better. This is my favorite kimono, but you never wear it!" he said, fingering the sleeve's shimmering cranes.

"It's for special occasions. Can I get you a drink to warm up?"

"I'll have the usual, Penny is on the wagon, she, em, sleeps better that way."

He eyed the open booze cabinet warily.

"Where's Inez?"

"She's been a little under the weather, she's sleeping now, but she got stuff at Buci this morning."

Ula brought him his drink. His hands were shaking.

"Penny, what would you like, hot tea?"

"Hell, gimme whatever he's having."

"Black Label?"

"Yeah. Oh, I forgot, it's my birthday."

"*Merde*," Sandro said.

"I thought it was twenty one, not eighteen, Penny," Ula said.

"Not here."

Ula poured her a smidgen.

"No! I said gimme what he's having, the same amount, too!"

Shit, Ula, I'm not twelve, and you're not my mother, or even my sicko dikey aunt, got that?"

Ula ignored this and poured her a full tumbler, no ice. Penny gulped down half of it and gagged.

"Where are the paintings?" she wheezed, adjusting to the rush of toxic numbness. Sandro moved away from them towards the window, clinking his cubes.

"At the studio, a lot of stuff is there. You know, Dick's going into design for a bit, so the studio is a store house now. I'm thinking dance studio, it would be ideal, if the floors were overhauled." She made one of those pinched gallic faces. "But New York is such a fabulous idea! I am so o sick of it here!" she wailed.

"Oh fa-abulous!" Penny mocked Ula.

Sandro watched them sideways from the window. Ula skidded around the space in her funny socks, unphased.

"Paris is a museum. Musée Euro Disney. That's why I moved to New York in the first place. 'Where it's at, man! New York, New York!' She did a Broadway flourish then doubled up in a monster coughing fit.

Dick minced in, his nose in the air. "Sandro! You're right on time as always. Hello Penny, well, look at those blazing cherry cheeks. Hope you're hungry, we have rotisserie chicken and a salad, nothing fancy, Inez is not feeling quite herself these days, *pas dans son assiette*, so the *assiettes* are mine. My *assiettes* are there for you! Hangh, hangh, hangh. Shall we?" He led them into the dining room.

In the center was a translucent yellow resin salad bowl filed with clumps of greenish yellow lettuce. Matching resin plates were placed on the bare wood with skinny forks that looked cool but couldn't pick up anything because the prongs were stunted and the blobby knives had cylindrical handles that rolled around when you tried to cut something, and lavender linen napkins were twisted into stringy yellow resin Mobius strips that were almost impossible to remove. White narcissi were placed in vases between each setting. Behind the salad, the scrawny French chicken slept in its oval yellow crib on a bed of inedible curly purple cabbage. Dick made a show of carving the bird and offering the pieces. He took half a breast himself and gave Sandro the other half, plus the two wings,

"Because, you're a growing boy."

Penny, who actually was still growing, got the stringy drumsticks.

She shoveled in the salad as best as she could but picked up the

chicken with her fingers. Even Sandro had difficulty with the utensils. Ula got around all of this with miso soup in a porcelain bowl and flat bottomed porcelain spoon accompanied by a dry rice cake. Dick sliced away at his breast piece like a surgeon, having mastered his own inventions.

"Don't you love my Golden Showerware? Patent pending."

"What's so special it can get a patent?" Penny asked between mouthfuls, then stopped. It couldn't be.

Sandro, stared at his plate and swallowed hard. "Penny and I are going to a concert tonight, to hear Jonchaies by Iannis Xenakis, whose book you have, you remember?"

"Yes, yes, I'll return it, just remind me after lunch."

Sandro brushed the hair out of his face. "Xenakis and I share certain physical similarities, although his were the result of truly heroic actions, and mine are the result of blind stupidity."

"And what do you mean by that obscure remark, dear boy?"

"Dick, Sandro's trying to tell a joke? Xenakis had half his face blown off in the war," Ula said.

"Hangh, Hangh, Hangh! How lucky for our little Penny! This must be a dream come true, then! Hangh, hangh, hangh. Half a face for the smartass little halfpint, she couldn't deal with a whole one. Didn't think I'd noticed? And how about two of them? Just do the math, girl! One plus one...come on, you can do it! Hangh, hangh." Dick honked at Penny from his place at the head of the table. Ula slurped her soup, ignoring the whole thing.

Sandro solemnly pulled strips of white breast meat off the bone with the narrow fork and piled them on top of his untouched salad, without eating them or looking up.

Brandishing her drumstick, Penny avoided Dick's bright pinched face and countered."Yeah man, this guy got sick of designing buildings, with Corbusier, that is, and that's buildings, not friggin' forks and piss plates, so he went to the Paris conservatory to learn music and studied with Olivier Messiaen, also Boulot's teacher, by the way.

"Blaise Boulot, you must know him, right, don't you, um, move around in the same circles? Anyway, X pretty much invented modern music as we know it, as well as electronic-acoustical music. The music blows the buildings away totally! His greatest discoveries involved his combining, one, the theory of probability, with, two, classical and modern metaphysics. You do the math. One plus one does not equal two. Hey, got any more chicken?" She looked around. "In the hall?"

She pointed with the drumstick. "How 'bout the bedroom? How about right here?"

She slapped Sandro's shoulder. He gulped and set his knife and fork down at the edge of his plate. He was pale as the flowers in the vase in front of him. Dick shot a conspiratorial glance at Ula. Ula, who at first seemed unphased, launched into another coughing fit. She stopped mid-fit, gasping for air in short hisses. Dick didn't budge.

After a couple more gasps, it was Sandro who got up and went over to her and smacked her on the back. Nothing. She was still a fish out of water, drool threading from her open mouth. She searched frantically inside her kimono sleeves, pulled out her pink inhaler, sprayed it into her mouth and wheezed in air. He stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders, veins bulging like two blue horns from his forehead, and stared intently at the pile of gray bones in their purple cabbage bed on the platter before them. No one said a word. No one moved.

Without warning he bolted from the room and they heard the front door slam shut. Penny got up to go after him, but Dick was already blocking the doorway.

"You're in this way over your head, little girl—you have *no* idea."

She tried to slip under his arm, but he grabbed her and slammed her face down into the wall. His hands clamped like iron around her wrists. He was oddly strong for such a wraith.

"No, you are. Those pictures in the hall? You belong in the slammer, buddy."

Ula blew her nose, spit mucous into her handkerchief, breathing effortlessly now. A wet thud landed in the corner waste basket.

"Art is never a crime. You should know that," Ulla scolded.

Penny yelled into the wall, "Sodomy is not Art. On all minors it's rape—a felony. On non-consenting adults. Rape. Drugged rape is still rape. Felony, felony, feloneee!" Dick pulled both her wrists up the middle of her back. He gave a sharp tug. Fire tore through the ligaments of her arm as they strained to remain attached to her scapulae. She twisted her neck around to see him surveying her grimly from above.

"You're so full of shit, with your hall of fame and your diarrhea wallpaper, your piss plates, and your fuckin' anal embouchure." She managed to wrench her body around enough to face him squarely,

made an exaggerated embouchure moue, rammed her knee into his balls, then smashed her foot down on his arches for good measure, doubling him over in pain, while Ula bugged out at her seat.

Sandro was nowhere in sight. She ran to the bridge and looked downstream, but no, he wouldn't. He wasn't above on the Pont Royale either, or the Pont des Arts, she would recognize him even from that far. Penny ran up the rue Bonaparte to the little café in the Rue des Beaux Arts: La Charette. A couple students were eating a pile of *pommes frites* at a table. The blue jump-suited truck drivers downed glasses of *gros rouge* before heading back out on the road. No Sandro. She ran up the Rue de Seine towards Buci, then tripped on the curb at the corner and flew smack into a speeding Smart Car. The driver sputtered profanities at her from his little window but she was up and running before he could even get out.

Sandro wasn't at L'Abbaye, but Pete was getting ready to leave with a glamorous date.

"What's wrong, Boca Della Verita?" Pete asked.

"Sandro! Have you seen Sandro?"

"Jane darling, remember the little princes and their pasta-shoota mama, back in the days? This is his lucky Penny, a.k.a. the Mouth of Truth. Well, no, dear, I haven't seen him." Pete scratched his stubbled jaw.

"I gotta find him!"

"Give him a ring." Jane fluffed her mane, impatient to leave.

"I forgot my phone, everything."

Penny had just grabbed her wallet and passport and shoved them into the pocket of her slick new coat. The knapsack was "dirty and the wrong color," so it was back at the hotel. Now she didn't even have a pack of Kleenex, and her hands were bleeding from the pavement, or the car.

"Here, use mine." The screen icon handed her the tiny clamshell.

Penny's grabbed the phone with her bloody fingers. "What happened to you?" They gasped in unison.

"Smart Car." Her fingers were like rubber bananas, numb either from Dick or from the scrape with the car, so it took a few tries before she got it right and then it was unavailable.

Pete offered her a wad of crumpled café napkins to wipe the blood off. That done, she said, "Gotta go, bye," and dashed out around the corner and down the little street behind the St. Germain cathedral,

where it hit her. He might be there.

The side entrance was ajar so she slipped into the dark church. The whole place was empty, still reeking of incense from mass. No Sandro, not even in his favorite confessional. She sat down in the wooden cubicle and tried to think around her now severely aching body. Maybe, just maybe. She ran out the church and zigzagged through the crazy traffic across the Boulevard St. Germain, around the corner to the Rue du Dragon. She didn't know Max and Maia's code, and no one was answering the buzzer, so she hollered up. People in the middle of their *déjeuners* opened their windows to look and hush her, but there was no Max, no Maia, and no Sandro. Their shutters were locked down and she remembered that they were in California.

She walked back towards the St. Germain Metro stop. She knew this line went to Bastille. Maybe, just maybe, he would show up at the concert. Out of Metro tickets, Penny shelled out the crisp euros for a carnet and swiped for Bastille.

She didn't have the concert tickets, he had them. Maybe she could get one at the door, contemporary concerts rarely sold out. Seats were plentiful on the upper balconies. The hall wasn't open yet, so Penny mulled around the gift area, clutching toilet paper wads in her pockets. For such an extravagant hunk of architecture it had a pretty sorry gift shop. She flipped through the selection of postcards: long dead opera singers sporting horns and handlebar mustaches, facsimile photos of Angelino's Nijinskys, then swan princesses through the ages, from Marie Taglioni to Anna Pavlova to—

She stopped at a black and white one of a ballerina in a white tutu dancing next to a fake gravestone. At first she thought it was another of Pavlova's dying swans because of those slab-like cheekbones. Turning it around, the caption said *Irina Ulanova dans le role de Giselle*, Théâtre de L'Opéra, 1953.

With the now pink fingerprint covered postcard in her pocket she got into the elevator for the trip up to her balcony. From her new perch she could see down below, down an almost vertical drop, the seats they should both be occupying. Maybe later she could sneak down and sit properly in one of them, but he sure wasn't there now, and she couldn't see him blowing in now, somehow.

Something was terribly wrong with her body, more than her recent tumble. She analyzed her symptoms: wrenching abdominal pain, cold sweat, dizziness, heaviness in the extremities. Had Ula pulled a Borgia with her drink? Impossible, she had watched her every move.

The raw mushrooms in the salad? But Dick had eaten some of those, too. Some weird Euro flu? PMS? Her period! That would explain her outburst, and she really was late, hadn't been keeping track.

*Jonchaies* was the first piece on the program, the space age acoustics bent the sound in a thousand directions. She'd never heard it live before, and it was like sitting through a hurricane, nothing like the vectors and parabolas of the composer's beautifully drawn scores, and nothing like the recorded versions she was familiar with. This guy really understood how to bend sound around a space and hammer it through your core.

At intermission she took the elevator down and scanned the crowd: Polite clusters sipping champagne or cappuccinos, but no Sandro. She sat in their official seats for the next piece. Scelsi's *Hurqualia* was a pure piece of abstract sound sculpture that cleaned her head and lulled her into a state of soporific euphoria. But when she opened her eyes he still wasn't there.

## OBELISK

And he wasn't there when she returned. The bedroom was just as he had left it, neat as a pin, Baudrillard's *Les Stratégies Fatales* on the night table with his notebook and the gold fountain pen. The maid had fixed the bed, emptied the trash, taken down the laundry—had not scarfed the pen.

Next morning was it bright and sunny, but she was alone in the bed, and in pain. She hadn't slept much, tossing to find a comfortable position for her bruised body, jerking with alarm at every sound, thinking it had to be him sticking the key in the door.

Noon. Staring at the plaster curlicues on the ceiling, shoulders aching, abdomen still grinding. She must have dozed off. Where could he be? With Dick and Ula, or alone in a bar with a *fine* watching the soccer scores? Unlikely. He was with them, and something weird was under way. Ula smacking him on the lips like she owned him, same as Dick had. Unbelievable. If she called them he might come to the phone. But she'd blown it. Couldn't handle the conversation. Some Aspie fragment had wormed its way to the surface at the most inappropriate time, as they always did. A big foot-in-mouth emoticon flashed idiotically in her mind. Her tragic flaw. Everyone had one, according to Shakespeare.

Penny lay back on her satin bed in which kings and queens had slept, perhaps even romped, and she wondered why he wasn't *blasé* and twisted like all the other rich people she'd rubbed shoulders with. How had he avoided all that? Was it grace that insulated him from the glittery muck? His grace, that was the source of both his strength and his weakness. Grace as Tragic Flaw? It was his grace that attracted the thirsty ghouls. Had nothing to do with his face at all.

So quickly though, his face, like an apparition, dispersed in the fog of memory. She killed the chandelier, and curled up hugging the pillow.

Where the Ferris wheel revolved, the "Black Widow" had stood, chopping off those aristocratic heads one by one. Before kings and queens had romped in this room, they had died, just outside the window. She staggered to the window and opened the drapes. Before a black sky the glittering blades came down, one after the other,

chopping the present into the past. The red obelisk stabbed at the shrouded sky. Squeak, squeak, squeak, the sound of the wheel launched her through space into a blood colored void. The sky, the obelisk, the Wheel all dissolved into this sea of red. Rush of wind shot through the top of her head. Pop! She shrank to a point of fuchsia haloed white light.

When she opened her eyes she was on the floor. She pulled herself up, grabbing onto the window sill. She could see from the floodlights of the monument that blood was running down her pant's leg and between her toes, staining the light wool carpet. Her period had come with a vengeance. The last one had been... in September? Her knees crumpled beneath her as she tried to walk to the bed. Out of tissues, she crawled to the armoire, found his stack of crested linen handkerchiefs and stuffed one of the squares into her pants until she could get to the bathroom.

In the bathroom the bowl filled with blood. She ran a warm bath to ease her pain. The water soon darkened and she saw Ula's mother, dancing next to a gravestone in the months before her daughter's birth, then going to sleep in this. She lifted the plug and watched the vortex of pink water slide down the drain. Like the tea in her cup that day. The passage of Time.

She wrapped herself in one of the fluffy white towels from the heated rack and stepped out of that room and its smell of iron. A brutal smell: of slaughter and sacrifice.

Back at her desk she pulled up the chair and turned on the machines.

Days passed. Somebody, somewhere, perhaps across the river, was on the ball, because every morning an American breakfast with eggs and bacon presented itself at her door. Small comfort, because he didn't call and he didn't show his face.

Half a dozen or so breakfasts later, the new piece reached its inevitable conclusion. Not that she had much to do with it at this point. She couldn't logically see how it had developed, yet it made sense, and certainly it expressed her state of mind, something she was incapable of processing otherwise.

Penny opened the drapes and saw the sun shining thinly through the morning fog and set out down the carpeted marble stairs, past the windows of diamond tiaras, down the reflective marble checkerboard of the entry hall and congested stacks of logo luggage and into the real world to stretch her legs along the sandy gravel alleys

of the Tuileries. After a brisk walk to the Arch of Triumph, she stopped at Le Drugstore to buy a buzzer to shear her mat of hair. On her way back, refreshed and pleasantly winded, she sat on the bench across from the not so giant Sequoia planted in front of the American Embassy. With her head resting on the back of the bench she could see the entire tree stretch towards the pale white Parisian sun. Her mind wandered through the needles and landed on a favorite memory, a small grove of Ponderosa a short hike from her house that was summer home to a colony of very aggressive humming birds that whirred and dive bombed like tiny helicopters around her head. The forest there was dark and thick, truly virgin. Even bears avoided it because it was so dense. From up in the branches, a Great Northern owl stared down at her from the branches and in bold curiosity followed her to the edge of the clear cut and the logging road.

The moment Penny walked in she knew. The place had been thoroughly cleaned. The blood on the carpet was gone. His stuff was gone. The painting was gone. No note, nothing. She sat down on the edge of the bed and died.

Next day, right after breakfast, the phone rang. Penny always kept it by her side now.

Her boss, his voice flinty and flat. "We need you at Dick's. Ira is coming, he has to meet you. How is the music? Don't answer now, I will see you in two hours, bring a disk."

"Sure, okay."

"Wear the Sander, see that the nails are clipped and clean, ciao."

The date for her grant review! She'd forgotten all about that, too.

She clipped and cleaned her nails as ordered, of course, they were ragged and dirty. She zapped off her mop of orange wool, leaving the coil over her eyebrow, and slipped on the Nazi nun suit, with the slacks because skirts made her look like a schoolgirl.

## ABSINTHE HOUSE

A Filipino boy opened the door, singing into a feather duster as if it was a microphone, "*To be real. Real, real, real.*" He did a few disco grinds and went back to tickling the furniture. No Inez.

Ula was stretched out on Dick's new elliptical sofa, barely dressed in diaphanous white and balancing a tall glass of murky greenish fluid on her knee. She appeared to have fully recovered from her illness.

"What happened to Inez?" Penny asked.

"Heart attack." Ula took a sip of the liquid.

"What's in the glass?"

"Absinthe, want some?"

"The stuff that killed Rimbaud? I thought it had been illegal for like a hundred years."

"The green fairy's making a comeback. This one's artisanal, the extreme version at seventy percent. Really packs a punch. Legend has it lifts the spirits, and boy, does it! Here, have a taste." Ula offered the glass of poison, her eyes spinning saucers. Instead of the forty karat, or nothing, there was a thin platinum band inset with diamonds on the third finger of her left hand.

"No thanks, too early in morning for hallucinogens, maybe some espresso, and make that *a doppio, per favore.*"

Ula smirked, went back to her extreme Absinthe.

In the back the boy bellowed, "*Oh, ho, ho, what you feel... now! What you know... now! Whoa, whoa, whoa.*"

"Sometimes you have to take a hallucinogen just to keep from hallucinating, deary." She swirled the drink, dead serious. "Do sit down, try one of the new Go chairs, they are so MIT"

"*To be real. Isth's got to be real isth's got to be reeeal,*" the boy screeched.

The furniture was all new, all curvy with no corners. The fiberglass chaise and the bent plywood ones were still there, (except now those two were painted red, or were they new chairs, who knew?) Spindly titanium chairs were stacked discreetly in the corners. Penny sat in the chaise and immediately slid into the deep well of the seat, her feet left dangling several inches from the floor.

Ula stifled a giggle.

Penny frowned.

"Thlllaaah!" Ula stuck her tongue out. "Edith Ann, from Saturday Night Live, with the lollipop, from American TV, remember?"

Penny shook her head.

"Oh, of course, but you must know, at least from the reruns?"

Penny twisted her Roman band of gold around and around, the one he had slipped on her finger New Year's Eve. Couldn't be!

Sandro walked in from the back rooms with Dick, his hands politely clasped behind his back as he listened to Dick's design epiphanies.

"What you feel now, oh, ho, ho," the houseboy sang, down a few decibels lower but up an octave, now that the men were in the room.

"Did I tell you I got it for just two hundred grand, with the ottoman, what a bargain, it's one of the four prototypes from 1946! Never put into production, but quite prescient, don't you think?"

"You already told him a million times, Dick," Ula reminded him.

Dick ignored her. "I've already got the coffee table and it goes so well with my Eames' trio, and those adorable new Go chairs. You like the new red chairs too, don't you? I got them for you. Yes, yes, I know, it's a molten Dali on stilts sort of theme park now. I really should charge admission, don't you think? Hangh, hangh, hangh."

Ula's pale legs stretched across to the floating ottoman, her feet in cream satin slippers the same tone as the upholstery.

The rugs were gone and the polished ebony stained floor shone like the still waters of a mountain lake.

"C'mon Penny, relax. Bright eyes and bushy tail. Ira'll think you're a basket case if he sees you like that. You really must have drink, a real wham dinger." Ula was doing her *grande dame*, with slang.

She motioned to the Filipino dusting the piano with gusto to his loop of Cheryl Lynn's disco classic.

He ran over. "Yeth, Ula?"

"Can you make her an espresso, and make that a *doppio*, so she perks up? Tell Penny your name."

"Isth Lolo, but Dick calls me Loulou, and you can too, tee hee hee," he tittered into the feather duster that morphed into a lady's fan.

"Real, Isth's got to be real." Loulou sashayed his Lycra injected jeans into the kitchen to make the coffee.

"Couldn't hack it as a hairdresser, haha, *hack* it, *hair*, get it? Hahaha," Ula whooped, and slapped her bony thigh.

"Think I'll have the wormwood after all."

Ula got up and went to a glass topped gurney lined with bottles and brought back, arranged on a silver tray, the Absinthe, an engraved crystal glass, a funny perforated knife-spoon-spatula thing, a matching silver bowl of sugar cubes with scary four pronged attenuated pincers to pick them up with, and a crystal art nouveau bong-thing with spouts, filled with ice water. She began the curious ritual on the amoebic coffee table that was supposed to match the new floating rocks sofa and the anti ergonomic chairs, performing the ritual with the humorless pomp of a Japanese tea ceremony. A pogo-like spring activated the pincers to clamp around the unlucky cube. Ula set the cube in the middle of the knife-spoon-spatula and dribbled the green liquid over it until it disintegrated, dripping through the perforations of the spoon into a moiré of greenish swirls at the bottom of the glass. All familiar from the red salon, minus the fancy bong, that night of cellophane and jello shot jokes.

The green stuff was bittersweet, herbal with a moldy licorice after taste, reminiscent of the rancid cough medicine dispensed by the elementary school nurse, and Penny gulped it down as she had then.

Lamp wires trailing on the floor behind him, Dick waltzed in from the back of the loft, droning over the a capella disco streaming from the kitchen, "Biomorphic, you know, it's Groooovy time, all over again! My, my, *plus ça change*. Take these Blob lamps! Incandescent D cups! And the subtle phallic suggestion of this one, imagine them glowing together in a dark room. Such a turn-on, hangh hangh! Wouldn't you like this erotic pair for the place in New York, don't you think? One for each side of the nuptial bed!"

Sandro hunched his shoulders.

"Dick! Stop boring him, if it's not three hundred years old, it's junk," Ula called out from her siren's couch.

The oily blackness of the floor beneath her fiberglass boat rippled and curled. Lulu brought Penny her coffee. She looked into the cup. The sheen quivered under her shaky breath, same as the floor. She took a sip: bitter, strong.

"How old are you, Lulu?" Ula asked him.

"Eighteen."

"My ass. Oh, your ass, your tight little ass. Hey, Loulou, bet her ass is tighter than yours," Ula taunted.

"Oh, ith it rillee?" Loulou said in mock amazement.

"How old do you think she is?" she asked him.

"Eightheen?"

Penny snapped back to and forced a chuckle. At least someone with some sense. A most unlikely candidate, but she could've kissed him for it. "Good guess, Louie!"

The urchin sneered and pranced back to the kitchen.

Penny asked Ula for another Absinthe.

The door buzzed, a voice crackled out the intercom. "It's Ira, lemme up, it's freezing out here."

A minute later a porky man huffed into Dick's loft, clutching an expensive brown briefcase.

After pecking Ula on the cheek, he started pacing around the room, his bulging eyes fixed on to Ula's fuzzy head.

"Congrats, baby. Okay, Ula darling, so you gotta a new gig? What's the plan?"

Sandro and Dick gathered around, and Penny stood up. Sandro's jumpy psychedelic tie of tiny silver and red Penrose tiles flapped around his open jacket with every move

After briefly shaking hands with everyone Ira Kress looked around for a suitably important chair, then gave up and settled his bulk into one of the titanium sentinels and lit a cigar. Sandro eased down next to Ula on the trophy couch and Dick arranged himself on its ovoid ottoman. Penny went for one of the red Eames chairs, it wasn't much better than the chaise, but at least her feet touched the floor, and she needed that right now.

"Have a drink, Ira," Dick offered, with a nod up to Loulou.

"Sure, Dick. Scotch, on the rocks. Love the new mod look. So this is the famous Noguchi? You made the papers, you know. I see you got new help, where's the old Portuguese woman?"

"Inez passed away, such a shame, but Lolo is fabulous, isn't he?"

Ira's myopic eyes crinkled to assess the houseboy, the plucked brows, spandex jeans, and the two nymphet breasts that incubated under his tight white T shirt.

"And who's this?" he asked, singling out Penny with his cigar.

"Dr Penelope Bell, from MIT, the composer," Sandro said in his clipped, professional voice.

Ula leaned into his shoulder and cooed, "Our composer."

Imperceptibly, Sandro cringed.

"Yeah?" Ira sized her up with obvious skepticism.

"Ever been in front of the camera?"

"I work behind the scenes."

"Right. Well, not the way we work you don't. Exclusive engagement, gotta work it, baby. Mediatization, you're nowhere without it. You got any outstanding contracts? An agent? Who did your hair?"

"I'm living off a grant now, it's almost over, though. I'm an independent agent."

"Are you! Whaddya gonna do when the money runs out?"

"I've been offered several teaching positions."

"You don't say. Well, we gotta have you twenty four seven, understand? We'll talk money later."

He turned to Ula and Sandro. "Bin meaning t'askya, what's with your buzzcut, girl? It looks great on the kid, excuse me, Dr. Bell, but you gotta have hair. Bald isn't sexy, not on you it's not. Your nose is too big, and your skull's dented. Ula baby, you're getting too old for this sorta thing, you look like cancer! Grow it out, fast."

To Sandro, who was staring deep into his glass. "Whadda we gonna do about the face? I already told ja, we can't show your face like that, no way! You say you wanna *dance* in this gig? Ula's done fine solo, you know that. An' I thought the knees were busted, wha' happened?"

"My knees are good now, no problem." He rattled the cubes, and looked up, pale and tired until he remembered to flash the smile at the lawyer.

"Fabulous, your English is better, kid, but the face, the beautiful face. You gonna think about that?"

He tapped the cigar on the crystal ash tray, glanced at his Rolex, swigged down the Scotch and opened his briefcase, tossing the CD into a corner.

"Okay. I'm leaving you these papers, the usual. I gotta go, my plane leaves for L.A. in three hours and they have ta X-ray my Ferragamos. I'll see you guys in New York."

Snapping shut the case, he got up, and they all rose to shake his hand. When Sandro switched his glass to his left hand, she saw the ring, the same ring as Ula's minus the diamonds. How could she have missed it? The psychedelic tie?

She sank back into the red chair, Absinthe fumes twirling out her nostrils.

"My boy," Dick said, turning to his son in law and running his hand up and down his back.

"So, the face?"

Sandro didn't cringe. He actually smiled, although Penny couldn't tell from that angle if the smile was real or canned.

"After the Nile, I will go to Mexico," he mumbled

"Sandro and I are taking a Nile cruise for our honeymoon!" Ula turned to confide in Penny.

"Give Antinoüs my regards," Penny deadpanned.

"Hangh, hangh, hangh, have some more Absinthe, I see your sense of humor's back," Dick winked at Penny.

The biomorphic shapes of the loft stretched and swayed. A new painting dripped red blood down the wall.

"Stay for lunch? It's vegetarian," Dick asked Penny.

"No, I'd better get back."

"Wait, Penny." She dared not look up at Sandro.

"The Tribunal."

"Oh, yeah, Monday the twenty first."

"I book you a flight, then."

"Thanks."

He escorted her to the door. "I call you." He bowed down to peck her cheeks, but she ducked away and ran down the stairs.

## A QUICK FLIGHT HOME

Business class. Plenty of leg room. Quiet with the complimentary earplugs. She looked out the window at the blanket of clouds below and drank free champagne, lots of free champagne. Then she sank into the cushy seat and fell into a heavy dreamless sleep and had to be shaken awake by the flight attendant when they were already parked at JFK.

Penny had a week before her grilling, so she figured she'd go visit the folks, check up on her dad and find out how K.C. fared out on the ice pack. Better than feeling sorry for herself in her basement.

The Missoula airport was nearly empty, just mountains of plowed snow. Everything was still and white except the sky, orange from the wood smoke that collected in the valley from all the stoves and fireplaces. No one to meet her. Her dad said he was busy with some project until school started up again and couldn't drive down to pick her up. As an aging Asperger's syndrome parent and rote misogynist, George Bell considered his daughter more a nuisance than a blessing and was all too glad to ship her off to that special school.

So she took a taxi, a taxi to her own house in the Darby back country and that cost her half her cash. Luckily, Sandro had stuck a platinum Visa in with her return ticket. No note.

Dad was at the kitchen table, and piled on either side of him were books, empty coffee cups, his shortwave radio, rulers, a compass, chewed yellow pencils of different lengths, red pens, a messy stack of three ring binders and a stack of loose papers weighted down by a ceramic capacitor disc. He wasn't grading papers, though.

"Hi Dad, whatcha workin' on?" Penny came in and dumped her knapsack on an empty chair.

"Stu Grolsch and I, one smart kid, I'll introduce you, we've been working on this problem for the saucer. Podkletnov was right! As long as the speed of light corresponds to the geometric average of the sum of the tachyon speeds, we've got it! Pi in the sky! Neat-o! What do you think your buddy Euclid would think of that?"

"It's Pythagoras, Dad."

"Of course, of course. There's coffee in the percolator, but you can make a fresh pot, be a good girl. Got your postcards, sounds like

you had a super time. When's the grant review, are you prepared?"

He peered at her through thick grimy glasses - his eyes never quite met yours, just scanned the area. His receding hair was buzzed as always in a white crew cut. More hair stuck out his ears and eyebrows than grew on his head, and his argyle cardigan was on inside out with the buttons in the wrong holes. He had shrunk and looked more like a three hundred year old leprechaun than the Man from the Future that her starry-eyed mom had fallen for.

"I wrote a lot these last few months, I hope they like it," Penny said as she washed out the coffeemaker and filled the basket with Chock Full O' Nuts.

"Well you can't be going off and getting all artsy-fartsy, you have to earn your bread and butter. You know, you should reconsider teaching, it's very rewarding, when you get students who aren't complete morons, that is."

He bent over his calculations. He wasn't using a calculator, didn't need one, he said.

That was going to be it until dinner, so she went to her room. Stripped bare of her things, the room looked like a motel room now. She went up to the attic, maybe he had stashed everything up there, her antlers, her rock collection, pressed leaf collection, her collection of wild bird eggs, drained and packed in cotton, everything labeled and organized in see-thru plastic boxes, her box of spare electronic bits from when she'd built a synthesizer from Radio Shack parts. Nope! Gone, her whole life! The boxes of her mother's were gone too, even the photos.

She ran down the ladder and into the kitchen.

"Where's my stuff, Dad? I looked everywhere."

"I had Stu help me clear it out, too much clutter. You're an adult now, time to leave the nest. Never wanted kids. Pain in the neck."

Same old story.

"But mom's stuff!"

"Sentimental claptrap, all of it."

"What happened to my room?"

"Stu's been staying there, helps me out."

Her dad always had some student recruit to fill that son spot in his life. Now he had them moving in. And this new weirdo had him building a flying saucer! Probably needed a ride back home to Betelgeuse.

"Okay, well, I'm going to check out the Carvers, be back—"

"Old man Carver's dead, hunting accident, those kids are good for nothing, never could figure out what you saw in K.C."

"Right, well, I'll be back before dinner."

She fired up the old Chevy Impala just as a dented old Skylark with a lantern jawed pituitary case behind the wheel eased in next to her on the driveway. The Bell's '59 dinosaur was so dull and rusty it looked like it had grown there under the pines, but it worked fine, and started and stopped on a dime, even in deep winter. Penny put it in reverse and shot out from under the trees in a graceful backward arc, then slammed down the accelerator, leaving Lurch or Gross or whatever his name was, in a cloud of fumes.

She bumped along the trail of packed snow to the Carvers and the clearing in front of the squat cinderblock house. First thing she noticed it was hard to miss the barn was gone, there was just a heap of farm equipment carcasses buried under the snow.

Razor, K.C.'s Heinz 57 mutt, galloped at her from the back of the house and humped her leg.

"Glad to see you too, Razor."

She heard cussing inside and Mitch, the eldest, came to the smeared glass door, a cold one in his hand.

He opened the door for her, and drank from his can as he looked her over. New gut ballooned over his camo pants.

Big Black blared from the speakers.

*"There's nothing to do,*

*There's kerosene around,*

*Now what can we do...*

*Never anything to do but dump kerosene:*

*Set me on fire.*

*Kerosene!*

*Set me on fire!*

*Kerosene!"*

Right.

"Sorry to hear about your dad, Mitch, um, hey, what happened to the barn?"

*"Set me on fire!*

*Kerosene!"*

He tugged silently at his beard, lumbered back to the tattered plaid Colonial sofa and sank in under K.C.'s totally awesome but also illegal display of elk antlers.

Penny balanced on the sofa arm. The maple coffee table was

littered with greasy paper plates of once hot snacks, a universal remote, and a long nose .357 magnum.

"Have a brewski and a Pizza Pocket, Penny. You could use a little meat on your bones, girl." Without moving from his spot on the sofa Mike dunked his hand in the slush of a cooler by the side of the couch and handed her a dripping can, went back to staring at the TV where a grizzly ripped the head off a flailing salmon through waves of static.

Behind the TV a huge brand new American flag was stapled over the window as curtain sunshade.

"K.C. catchin' any caribou up there?" Penny pointed back to the antlers.

"Hell, no, he's out on the ice pack, had his trigger finger lopped off by a chain. Bitch of a job, rigs. He ain't sendin' no money back either, just gamblin' and spendin' it on whores. Din' even come home for the funeral. Assed aboutcha when I called. I see ya got a ring, you engaged?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"What's he like?"

"He's Italian, well kinda French too. It's complicated."

"Hey, juss like Steve Albini! Shit! Wops and frogs, cocksuckin' faggots, all of 'em. What you need is some good all American cock, no substitute, man. That's why you're lookin' so ragged at the edges."

He spat on the floor. Bosco, his Labrador bitch, slinked in and licked it up. The other dogs were curled up around the kerosene furnace that occupied a full third of the room.

The front door slammed and Jess, the middle boy, slipped in. Mitch immediately had the Magnum locked on his brother's head. Jess ignored the gun but saw Penny and grinned a mouthful of black stumps. He hopped around the room until he found and extricated a metal box from a pile of video cassettes. Squatting down, he unlocked it with a key that hung from a rawhide around his neck along with other talismans: a dried badger foot, a crystal charm, a tattered feather. Forehead beaded with sweat, his eyes darted about as he took a wad of money from the box, pocketed it, locked the box, stood up and skittered out the door.

*Kerosene, set me on fire.*

With a sigh, Mitch put the gun back down on the table next to the remote, rubbed the blubber tire around his back and picked up another Pizza Pocket.

"Meth?" Penny asked.

"Yep, crystal. Had the lab in the barn, it's him burned it down, so now he's just a two bit middleman, hangin' around convicts and niggers. Him and Dad were out huntin' round 'Thanksgivin'. I stayed here, back's been out. Fuckin' murdered him, I swear! Hell, I'd kill'im myself, but it's too much fun watchin' him go down the tubes, know whuddah mean?" Mitch snorted.

"Sorry, Mitch. Been a helluva a year for everybody, huh? Well, say hi to K.C., next time you two hook up, I gotta get back to Dad." She got up and started towards the door.

"You know he kinda adopted this freaky geek, right? Grolsch. Real basket case. Better off with your wop, Penny. I tell ya, whole world's going to the dogs. Were you there?" He pointed to the flag.

"Yup. I live a couple blocks away, in this basement. The super has a generator for summer brownouts, so I just kept on workin', nothing much else I could do. Well, I gotta go, okay? Take care of that back and watch it too!"

"Ha! Yeah! Thanks for stoppin' by. See ya 'round."

Penny let herself out, careful not to let the dogs escape.

Back at the house, Dad was still in the middle of his equations at the kitchen table. Lurch was nowhere in sight.

"What do you want for dinner, Dad?"

"I'm busy, make yourself something."

She nuked herself a couple of hot dogs, squirted some Guldens on them and poured some sludge into a pencil smeared mug. Her room was out of the question, so she sat in the living room, unchanged except for the lack of plants and the piano, that was long gone to make way for tall gray metal bookcase bookcases crammed with dull books on hydroelectric systems, Brave New World cities and Kennedy era politics, though not of the grassy knoll conspiracy kind. In the faded shabbiness of the living room a heavy black and white TV cabinet still loomed in front of the rotting foam filled sofa. Out the picture window the old car was parked under the Douglas firs. Beyond them spindly aspens quivered in the arctic wind, shining brightly, even against the snow.

Penny looked down at her ring. Engaged? She slipped it off. The ring had always looked beat up, but in this house it looked like another shabby trinket from the Salvation Army. She switched it to her right hand finger and curled up on the couch.

Penny woke to monosyllabic male voices. She didn't even use

the bathroom or brush her teeth, but dialed for the car service on the old rotary phone, grabbed her coat and knapsack and slipped quietly out the door. The little ranch house disappeared behind the jagged black wall of Douglas firs as she crunched down the driveway to the road.

## TRIBUNAL

Penny dressed in the Sander for her meeting, and brought the score and CD of the new piece in a plain white envelope. Now purged of E.L.F.'s it was neither her loudest nor deepest piece, and it wasn't finished, but what piece ever was? It avoided the abstraction of language associated with modernist highbrow music, because her pain was not metaphysical or symbolic but mundane. Regular, everyday heartbreak that happened all the time and always had. The stuff of Blues, of Rock 'n Roll, of Opera.

She had put to task her new formant filter synth, a sleek silver Kawai K5000, to apply a uniform series of multiple filter constraints over the sonic spectrum, giving the machine an analog heart. Then, of course, it was all about the initial attack, that one sound that heralded the song, something digital instruments hadn't quite figured out yet. Now the only thing missing was the one thing they were banking on.

"You don't seem to be using the range of frequencies we were expecting from you, Dr Bell," the board scolded, expecting all her bells and whistles. The work was rejected, her grant was revoked.

I'm always getting fucked - by angels, by Italians, by grant boards. I need relief. In a foul mood, Penny changed into her oldest jeans and marched up to Washington Square Park. Bobby said you would recognize the guy by the golden "up" arrow inlaid in his front tooth. He had everything and he was cool. In the Park, she spotted him leaning against the wall by the fountain next to the dog run, nervously scanning for the cruising cop cars. She circled around twice before approaching him and he walked with her and they made the exchange in one swift movement. Three nickel bags, then she got some papers and a lighter at a bodega on Thompson.

Penny dumped honey in her now cold tea and turned her attention to her in-box, but no there was still no email. She could have gone down in smoke with the towers. And nothing from her new friends, of course. No, wait a sec. New message!

A terse little telegram from Max.

"Your IM is DEAD, girl."

She logged on to her atrophied instant messaging. Typed control, six, send, and a kiss emoticon shot across three thousand miles

of spacious skies and smack into his IM window before she had time to reconsider.

“MeMAX: yo, purple! jus me and my peace pipe on the deck watchin a picture postcard pacific sunset.”

“CU29: memax, thx(thanks) for xcavatin my aim, dude. Sup?”

“MeMaX: sohf (Ula, aka sense of humor failure) messaged swmbo, (she who must be obeyed.) Sez you be back. Gotta see my new guitar, yeah, you guessed it, named her Purple. (blue url link) thats me playin my new gf in yonder yuppy club! like me as a blonde? We decided to show the world our swiss roots, tadaah!”

“CU29: aint you perty as a bottle blonde. howjs yer yodeling, Heidi?”

“MeMaX: Maia does the yodeling, down to eartha.”

“CU29: takin a look.”

Penny opened the video clip. Max strumming a metallic purple guitar under purple and gold strobe lights. A black silhouette topped with a platinum buzz. Maia stomping around next to him, looking very Tina Turner in her “What's Love Got To Do With It” days, only a gazillion times better.

“CU29: hittin the big time already! gfy! (good for you!)”

“MeMaX: yeah, but im living in a blue smoke haze, not a purple one, yah know, baby?”

“CU29: not xakly, maxi, typing thru blu smoke myslf. slf medicatin.”

“MeMaX: hear you, girl. Love's a bitch.”

“CU29: w/e (whatever)”

“MeMaX: take care, purple. Msya (miss you,) (leer emoticom.)”

“CU29: thx, lylab, sit. (thanks, love you like a brother, stay in touch.)”

Well, that was a new one. An IM buddy who didn't live in his mom's basement! But, Max? (Ok. He lived in his sister's house, a Malibu mansion, but not that different, really and he liked the dark, so it probably was the basement.)

February. Ula stood in the door wearing an oatmeal *jellaba* with bits of hay woven into the cloth and cradling in her arms a small metal suitcase on top of which rested a stack of digital prints.

"Hi, c'mon in, have some tea? How was the Nile? Isn't that thing scratchy?"

"Lovely, not at all, I have a silk caftan underneath. I brought you some photos of our trip."

Nefertiti settled down in the middle of the futon with the briefcase and photos on her lap, and handed the photos one by one to Penny, politely, just as she had the X-rays, so long ago, it seemed.

There he was in desert khakis before the pyramids, blinking into the sun. With Ula in that *jellaba*, next to the Sphinx. Drinking mint tea in gold filigree glasses against a tessellated tile background that reminded Penny of his crazy tie. A camel sneered down at Ula's camera in the same way that Ula looked at everybody. His face, dark, inside a café, the left side lost in the background, only the white of his eye burned through the obscurity, and the ghastliest grin just for the camera.

"Can I have this one?"

"Sure, Penny, take whole set, I have 'em all on the hard drive."

"Can you Email me this image, hi-res?"

"I took it like your X-man's, in the chiaroscuro. You'd hardly know. Any way, he's in Mexico now, getting it fixed. Thank god he still has the eye, and he looks so happy, don't you think?" Ula handed her the briefcase. "Oh, and he wanted you to have this."

Penny opened it. Safely encased in gun foam was the Madonna. Penny bit her lip.

"Thanks Ula, I'm glad you had a good time. I have to get back to work now, okay?"

"Sure, Penny, it's good to be back." She kissed her quickly on one cheek, American style.

Penny decided to hang the painting over the futon, where the two postcards were taped. Just as she hammered in her nail, a message chimed in.

The painting looked like stolen goods on that bumpy white

wall, but the Madonna didn't seem to mind and looked on Penny with her usual gentle resignation. When she came to her senses, Penny checked the message, just a JPEG attachment from Ula. She ran the super high-res image through Photoshop, macro on the eye until it almost filled the screen. Saved that, ran the image through a preset for a grainy old timey look. Now she had a haunting disk in the middle of darkness. She uploaded that to all her desktops.

She turned off the lights and sat in the glow of his multiple eyes, and lit up again. The highlight in the center of his pupil formed a ring of black within the white almond of the sclerotic.

*Enso.* The circle of infinity in Zen calligraphy. This one, thick and heavy, in the style of Hakuin. Breath was life. Didn't Zazen go to the same place as the Immortal Sisters and St. Teresa? The no nonsense, bare bones logic of it had always appealed to her. She looked over her shoulder from her new tatami meditation platform (scavenged from a Japanese restaurant renovation.) To the downcast serenity of the Madonna's gaze. Okay, so she smoked dope, and that was a no-no, but it did something to her short term memory, kept it from looping endlessly around its deeply grooved track. Grounding she got from the lotus position, counting her breaths and staring blankly at the pits in the wall. She adjusted the breathing according to the Immortal Sisters, because the men and women were as different as sky from sea.

After a sitting, all clear eyed and refreshed, she would glance at the painting, for a visual litmus check, and didn't the Madonna nod gently in approval? One breath at a time, one day at a time. Maybe she could get through this, after all.

Life was a matter of simple routine: meditate, eat, walk up to Washington Square Park to score, work on the music. Edited of non-essentials Penny's basement became a serene monk's cavern, complete with the religious icon on the rough wall. She slept on the meditation tatami. The futon she kept for company, but company wasn't knocking at her door.

Then it did, in April, the cruelest month, or so the poets called it. He stood in the doorway with Ula, Dick and Beatrice behind him.

They all filed into Penny's space after pecking her cheek, except for Sandro, who made a point of just bumping his new cheekbone against her now officially adult one. The three of them stood awkwardly in the center of the room, taking it all in, Dick and Beatrice's eyes drawn to the flashing wall of tech, the silvery new formant machine and the pile of blinking black ones. Hiding a pasty new

fullness behind her new Chrissie Hynde shag, Beatrice avoided touching anything lest it soil her chamois jeans.

Dick sized up the eclectic street finds that passed for furniture with a bemused smile, "Sonrisa's selling those very chairs but you didn't get yours there, did you, my dear?"

Also with a smirk on her lips, Ula gloated over the tatami and its black cotton zafu, as if this had something to do with her, which of course it did, it all did.

Sandro was the only one to remain frozen by the door in his Cyber Ciné cardboard cutout pose. Fearful symmetry was back under a golden Mexican tan, his face restored, but his eyes were as vacant as glass ones and disclosed nothing.

Had they even seen the picture over the futon?

The gang was on its way to check out some loft space in the trendy wasteland that was Tribeca. Down West Broadway they sauntered in the pale April sunlight, an unlikely caravan with Sandro leading, Ula padding along in her *jellaba* and new pale two toed platypus shoes, as abstracted and disdainful as the camel by the truck in the honeymoon photo. The Arabs say there are one hundred names for god, of which man knows ninety nine, but only the camel knows the hundredth. Ula ambled down the street now as if she knew that one too. Maybe the camel had whispered it into her ear after she'd snatched its soul with her camera.

A few feet behind Penny, Dick and Beatrice skipped along, arm in arm more like newlyweds themselves than new business partners.

Sandro's hair flapped in long heavy slabs, longer than his mother's now. He squinted into the glare of downtown like an Apache warrior but he didn't walk like an Indian, stiff shouldered, with one foot in front of the other. He marched towards Canal Street as his namesake on the coin had into China.

At the stoplight, new LED pictographs replaced the English signs, but they still had to scramble across Canal before the stampede of trucks resumed.

The building on Franklin Street's facade was limestone, like Paris buildings, but supported by a row of curly steel Corinthian columns instead of stone, with an uber-yuppie bar next door. Rave reviews from Zagat's and the magazines were posted in the window.

The real estate guy was late, so they mulled around on the steel platform in front of the door and watched students unload their professor's bubble wrapped paintings from a Mercedes SUV. Under the

bubbles were clumps of toga clad goddesses sulking on denuded hilltops. Dick and Beatrice squealed with delight having an art academy right there, just like the Beaux Arts on rue Bonaparte.

"Look! Hangh, hangh, hangh. A picture in the classical style! Is Retardataire the new avant-garde? What do you think the Turner and Biennale committees will think of that?"

Beatrice clutched Dick's arm. "Oh, look! You can see the student's Ateliers up there. I wonder if aromas of the turpentine will make it across the street. *Non, mais, Dick, c'est tout a fait adorable!*"

The real estate guy sprinted up out of nowhere, apologizing.

"Sorry I'm late, folks, got hung up, ready for a look see?" He said, as if he was showing them a suburban split-level and not a twenty million dollar gutted nineteenth century industrial building. He unlocked the glass fronted doors and they all squeezed into an elevator, half iron cage, half plywood box plastered with seventy years of inspection labels. The box rattled up and dumped them onto a vast sloped floor surrounded by three spackle-splotched walls and a row of murky windows. Every floor was like this, with the top one, apparently slated to be the dance studio, worst of all, from a hundred years of leaking roof. Sandro just shook his head, raking his shoe against the rotten floorboards and jiggling his change. In contrast, Dick and his mother were effervescent.

Ula headed for the door. "I'm going out," she announced without looking back.

Sandro followed her down the battleship gray stairs, and Penny followed a few steps behind them. The dust was asphyxiating and they coughed all the way down.

Ula spotted a windowless brick building flanking the art school and pointed up at to the glass transformer discs protruding from the roof. "We can't buy that dump, look! That place has enough electromagnetic emissions to fry our brains crispy crispy!"

"We go back and tell them! We veto!" Sandro marched up to the door, but the door had locked behind them and now all they could do was wait.

"Well, I need a drink! *Andiamo?*"

They followed him to the empty restaurant's forty foot mahogany bar.

"We wait until they come out, what do you want?" He turned to Ula, slapping out a Marlboro Red from a hard pack. So, married life agreed with him so much that he'd taken up smoking."The suicide of

cowards," he called it.

"Black Label, double," he told the bar tender, and lit his cigarette.

"Vodka tonic, wedge of lime, and you Penny?"

"Whatever, kid's stuff."

"Orangina?" Ula teased.

"Sure."

The drinks were placed in front of them and they moved to the tables by the window so they could keep an eye on things.

The real estate guy spotted them through the window and sauntered in with his hands in his pockets. He could just as well have been whistling. The suckers loved it, the deal was sealed.

"They like it raw, so I guess you'll be moving in soon."

Dick and Beatrice tumbled in, giggling.

Sandro took his mother aside and hissed something in her ear, but she just laughed in his face.

The real estate agent chortled at one of Dick's flat jokes and ordered a bottle of Champagne. Ula squeezed lime into her second drink. Penny drew steadily on the Orangina through her straw, watching the show. Sandro threw a hundred dollar bill on the counter and nudged Penny and Ula to go.

Back on Penny's futon Ula rearranged the folds of her *jellaba*, deep in thought. Sandro paced back and forth, livid.

"She has gone completely mad. What about the Loire place she fell in love with? The Agnes Sorel *chateau*, with the flowers painted on the red beams and the formal herb garden? It would have been the perfect *maison de campagne*! What has happened to her? She could have bought three of them for the price of this factory. And we can never dance there, the floors are rotten. *Che disastro*."

Penny made coffee, found her set of espresso thimbles and brought them, full of steaming coffee topped with a frozen curl of lemon peel on a little plastic sushi tray from Pearl River Market on Canal.

"Well, if it's any consolation, real estate is down in Manhattan since fall, but it's sure to skyrocket back, so, if you just let 'em get this out of their system, they can sell the place for twice what they paid, and buy that chateau after all."

"Good point, but where shall we go now?" Sandro said, still avoiding her eyes. Ula patted the futon for him to sit, then reached for her thimble. "Well, I won't live there, can you imagine?" Ula blew on

her hot cup.

"Why did you want me to see this place? I'm not going to live there," Penny asked.

"Oh, Dick thought it would make a good office for our ensemble, with a rehearsal floor, what an idiot," Ula said.

"The fourth floor of this building is vacant, Bobby was telling me about it yesterday. Why don't you talk to Ramón, he could fill you in," Penny blurted out.

"Yes? I call him now, his number?" He glanced at Ula, who rolled her eyes.

"Remember, not down here," Penny said.

He nodded quickly and put his phone away and looked for her cordless. Over by the machines, like before. With his digital eye staring at him from every screen, but he didn't see any of it, punching in her speed dial for the super.

The floor was still available, and as artists they both even officially qualified. Ula and Sandro got up and left, thanking Penny for whatever.

She stood in the middle of the room still holding the tray. Carried the tray to the counter and left it there. Biting her lip she took a couple breaths, then found her paraphernalia and took refuge in the smoke.

For how long had they been knocking? Penny made it to the door and opened it. Ula gave her a funny look letting Sandro come in first through the swirls of smoke. There he was, right in front of her, just like the first time, but now she knew she wanted him, wanted to throw herself at his feet and kiss his body all the way up to his impossibly symmetrical face, lips, eyelids, gaze deep into those bottomless dark pools, but it was too late. Ula emerged from the smoke, standing at his side.

Penny could barely mumble, she was so stoned.

Ula flicked on the light switch to jangle the keys in her face. Yellow shards of light stabbed at her eyes to a cacophony of brass. Penny shuffled to the switch and shut it. Now there was just the eerie stares of the screen savers. Irritated, perhaps a little freaked out, Ula swept out the door, and through the smoke and the darkness, Sandro eventually found her eyes. Slowly, he turned away with a husky "ciao," and once again it was just her and her monitors in the darkness.

## CONEY ISLAND

A couple days later Penny opened her email. Message from Ula. "Bring a hat, sunglasses, and a bathing suit if you have one. I know you're just getting stoned on your little futon, so meet us out front in 20 minutes. Ula."

Penny slid her cutoffs and a T shirt over her old gymnastics leotard. She didn't own a real suit, so she cut the sleeves off this memento and it would have to do. She put on the five dollar mirror aviators that hid her bleary eyes, decided to forgo the hat, not owning one.

They were already out on the side walk. Ula's new palm sized digital video cam followed her from the elevator.

"Whassup? You makin' a movie?" Penny asked the lens.

"We're taking you to Coney Island," Ula's mouth chirped.

"No, no, *she* is taking *us*, she knows it better than you," Sandro snapped.

"And how would you know that?" Penny asked.

He just shrugged, not bothering to look her way.

Ula swayed impatiently in her long white Indian caftan while Sandro hailed a cab.

"Wait a sec, Sandro, if you wanna do this right, we take the F train!"

"No. Ula hates the subway, it smells."

"Oh, well she's gonna love the Boardwalk then."

"Yes, well, you know, Penelope, how she is ambivalent about my past in the carnival."

"Carnival? She can't be talking about your home life. And you were a mime, not a carnie. You could pass for a gypsy though, not that you're too good at predicting the future. Whose bright idea was this anyway?"

Really pissed, he strode back to the curb. But then she saw Ula's camera fixed on them, and that it was her show, that he was playing along. But the idea had to originate with him. Had to. How was he going to pull it off, she wondered.

The turbaned Sikh whisked them from Manhattan across the bridge and onto the BQE, speeding through Flatbush, which looked

like suburban USA except for the flocks of Hassidim, who from the back looked like they'd just stepped off the Mayflower with their black hats, knee breeches and frock coats.

Ula sat in the middle of the back seat with a huge wheel of a straw hat on her lap. Sandro nagged her all the way on the folly of bringing a five hundred dollar hat to the beach just to have it blown into the waves.

The cab let them out on Surf Avenue, by the Aquarium. Except for the Brighton Beach Russians(who even swam in winter) the beach would be deserted now, without the life guards.

They walked under the elevated subway's overpass and along a high blue fence to the Cyclone. Ula focused her digital eye on the shaking cars and their loads of screaming teenagers as they clattered down the rails of the wooden roller coaster, getting all arty with the camera angles. Sandro had already given up, and waited sullenly for her to finish, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his khaki shorts from Cairo.

Penny had already done her wake'n bake and was open to any sparkly new world of revelations.

Ula's gizmo led them through the crowd of young families and middle aged weirdos that packed into Astroland. At the shooting gallery Ula ordered Sandro to shoot a gun. He cringed. There was that compulsory military service. And something about Beatrice, queen of the spaghetti western. Not to mention Ng.

"C'mon, take it in your hand and pull the trigger, it's a no brainer! What a wuss!" Ula nudged.

"Yeah, these things are toys, they won't blow anything away, Sandro," Penny scoffed.

But he would have none of it, and sneered and stuck out his tongue at the camera as she zoomed in.

"You wanna see some shooting, Ula?" Penny taunted to get him a little relief.

Ula spun around to her as Penny got a bunch of quarters from the carnie and dropped them in the slot. She picked up the toy rifle and knocked off the little red target tags on the vulture, the cage of chicken, the rattlesnake and the beer can, one by one, bam, bam, bam, plus the bonus jackpot shot. In the back the stuffed bear swatted robotically left and right, his gears grinding. The carnie looked at her like she was a juvenile delinquent and handed her a huge fuzzy bunny.

"You want this?" She held it out for Ula, but Ula shook her

head behind the camera. Penny shook the bunny into the lens then offered it to Sandro, who eyed her with a measure of fear and wonder. A little Pakistani girl dressed like a doll saved them as her wide gazelle eyes followed the bunny into Sandro's arms. He offered her the toy, to the horror of her father and delight of her mother, all wrapped up in layers of gold brocade.

Ula's camera turned directly to the yellow Satan that spread his bat wings over the entrance of Dante's Inferno, spewing smoke.

"Hey, how 'bout it, guys?" Ula asked.

Sandro eyed the devil and the two paper mache *Cerberii* that jutted out over the blacktop and shuddered. He put his arm around Ula and suggested gallantly, "We take a break from this today, eh, *carina*?"

Ula wriggled away and turned to Penny. "Where did you learn how to shoot like that?"

"My old boyfriend was a hunter."

"Casey with the barn," Sandro remarked.

"Yup. And that's K. C., for your information, just two letters."

"Was he a good fuck?" Ula asked.

Penny stomped up the stairs to the boardwalk, followed by Sandro, fumbling through his cargo pockets for a pack of cigarettes. Under the spaceship gyro stand, she bought a corn cob.

Ula circled the creepy drag puppeteer with her camcorder, the same guy Penny had told Sandro about. He recognized him instantly and sighed as he slapped out a cigarette.

Penny leaned on the boardwalk railing and tore off her kernels, glaring at the sea. The weather was perfect, the sky blue with high cirrocumulus jet stream clouds, the sea beneath them a deep blue green dotted with whitecaps. Sandro joined her, leaning in close, too close, and smoked his cigarette. So here they were, a picture postcard of lovers at Coney Island.

On the boardwalk Puerto Ricans danced under the single star flag that flapped in the wind to the beat of the Samba. Ula walked in their direction with her camera. Sandro turned to her, balancing on the top rung, to keep watch. At least a head taller than any of them, with her thousand dollar camera and five hundred dollar cartwheel straw hat from Barney's, she would have made an easy target for the Puerto Rican boys that cruised past in slashed tie-died tank shirts, but they had other ideas, like blowing kisses Penny's way until they spotted Sandro sneering imperiously from his perch.

"Come in the water with me." He crushed the butt under his

sandal and jumped into the sand and they ran all the way to the beach.

He stripped down to a skimpy black slash of Lycra. Penny held her breath and concentrated on folding her shorts, T-shirt, with the jellies on top as weights against the wind.

He dove into the waves, disappeared and resurfaced farther out flinging back his hair. "Brrrr, vieni!" She followed, and they swam along together, underwater, sliding along, even touching now and then. When they came up, he laughed, spouting out water.

*"Poissons dans l'eau!"* he said and rolled in the water.

"What?" She swam up to him and they locked eyes for a moment.

"Nothing." He rolled on his back and floated his arms out wide.

She floated alongside him, and they bobbed up and down on the sparkly sea under the sun and the feathered clouds that were layered deep into the stratosphere. Together again, side by side on the bed of waves. She couldn't stop laughing, laughing at the sky, at the brightness, at being so close to him. Tears streamed down into the salt water of the sea.

"You smoke too much dope," he said, after a while.

"I know, but I need it."

"Yes."

All of a sudden, he gasped and grabbed her hand.

"Look! Concorde!"

They watched the sleek bird slice obliquely through the blue until it became a dark speck and vanished with a puff of black smoke and a low rumble. Still holding hands they glanced at each other, just for an instant. Ula was at the water's edge, her camera's gaze lifted from the scurrying sandpipers to them, together in the waves. With his savage butterfly stroke, Sandro was back on land in seconds, and by the time Penny was on dry land, the newlyweds were sitting together in the sand, sharing one of Penny's joints. Penny sat down next to them, and he pulled off his warm damp towel and arranged it around her shoulders and passed her the joint

"You really should cover your head and skin, you know," Ula said, still exhaling.

"No, I think I'll burn today." Penny handed Sandro back the joint, put aside the towel and stretched out in the hot sand, watching him through her eyelashes.

"You are crazier than her," he said, looking out to sea.

"The pain will remind me I'm alive."

"Ah, yes, I wish I could burn," he said, snuffing the roach in the sand, and flopping down next to her. Ula circled with the camera, kicking sand on them as some kind of joke. Sandro kicked Ula away, shaking the sand off his legs.

"Stop it, we want to burn, dun you see?"

She zoomed into him, but he put his hand over the camera.

"Oh, burn then. Burn in hell, both of you!" Ula said, and threw the camera into the sand next to him. She threw off her hat, and ran to the breakers, leaping from boulder to boulder until she stood on the very last one facing the waves, her thin folds of sea sprayed cotton flapping behind her like a modern Samothrace.

"That is crazy, I get her." He vaulted across the rocks to her. and held her. Arm in arm, they stood on the rock their faces to the sea.

Penny flopped on her stomach so she could burn in three dimensions.

Sandro shook her awake. "I think you are done."

She could feel her back, both tingly and numb. The sun sparkled gold across the waves.

Ula said, "Hey, Penny, let's see you do some of those gymnastics, I need to get some good footage of you, how about some cartwheels?"

"I'm stoned, I'll fall on my face!"

"Groooooovy!" Ula jeered.

What the hell, you couldn't do cartwheels in Manhattan. She ran as far as the breakers to the hard sand left by the tide, sprang up and started wheeling, keeping her spot on the triangular shape of the head breaker. The slant of the beach had to be taken into the equation, and the sand absorbed, so she had to spring harder, but soon she was flying, she was the Wonder Wheel.

Penny collapsed in a dizzy heap, Ula must've been satisfied, because she showed Sandro the replay.

"Let's go out there!" Ula pointed to the pier, where all the new immigrants were gathered to fish. Sandro slid into his shorts but folded his silky T-shirt into the cargo pocket and wiggled his sandy feet into his Egyptian sandals, a third world amalgam of old tire tread soles and embroidered leather straps. Penny put on her cutoffs but left the old T-shirt and the caftan in the sand.

They walked along the edge of the water towards the pier then turned up towards the Boardwalk at the Wonder Wheel.

"What is that rusty thing?" He pointed at a mushroom shaped

metal tower.

"The Parachute Jump, kinda like Coney Island's Eiffel Tower."

"It is surreal, the dark blocks of the projects against this architecture of fun."

"The Ferris wheel and that obelisk from the rococo room, now that was surreal."

He kicked the sand just as Ula caught up to them grasping her hat, and asked, "What are you guys talking about?"

"Architecture and Surrealism."

"Sandro's an idiot, he doesn't know anything about architecture or Surrealism, ask Dick."

"Stop calling him an idiot, a fool, maybe. How do you put up with it?" Penny asked Sandro.

"Oh, he loves it. Don't you darling?" Ula hooked her arm in his.

"*Funcullo*," He muttered, shrugging her off and slapping out another cigarette. He lit it behind his cupped hand and strode off to the Boardwalk.

At the Grillhouse, next to The Boardwalk Psychic, he got a beer. They turned into the pier at the Rust-Oleum hulk of the Parachute jump. He drank and smoked another cigarette as Ula panned the colorful pier crowd. She wanted to get it all in for posterity, because renovation, and the death of the weird and wonderful, was imminent, she said, pointing out the piles of cinder blocks, and surveyors' marks. Sandro tossed his empty beer bottle into the trash can and stalked off the boardwalk. Back on Surf Avenue he flagged down the first cab he found, a black gypsy cab from the bowels of Brooklyn with the words Black Pearl detailed across the doors in white paint.

"Bet you don't know what the 'Black Pearl' is," Ula taunted once they were in.

"Some immortal sister secret I missed?"

The cab sped past Nathan's, over potholed road and blocks of derelict buildings hulks scattered with vagrants, stray dogs and windswept piles of food wrappers.

"Hey Penny, you do know about the G-spot, at least."

"I'm not an expert on gravitational physics, sorry. This about levitation?"

Ula slowly shook her head. "G-spot. G-spot."

"Ok, that must be like the G-factor, Charles Spearman's mental aptitude test based on factor analysis for measuring core intelligence, I went through it myself a long time ago. It's all in Arthur Jensen's 1998

book. The new theory is that thicker myelin in the brain enables faster synapses and then of course there's the genetic question—"

"Will you shut up?"

Past Neptune the cab picked up speed and the driver cranked up the rap music.

"Do you know what the clitoris is?" Ulla hollered over the rant.

"Huh? You think I'm a retard? Fine."

Sandro turned from the window and yelled across Ula. "G-spot is an area inside your body, you know the one. 'What men have women have too', and it is NOT a Chinese discovery! It is in Galen, about the parts, but also in Aristotle."

He stuck his head back out into Brooklyn. Aluminum sided row houses with cluttered back yards shaded by plastic bag ornamented acacia trees and sagging laundry lines droned past. The Black Pearl's was not the scenic route.

Ula scowled at the back of Sandro's head. "It's not Greek philosophy, stupid. We're just girls discussing our bodies. So Penny, know where it is?" she jabbed at Penny's ribs.

Penny was saved by the R&B song that came on. Maia's new hit single, Heart Strings. Without a doubt about her Moroccan from Café Jaded with the ud.

Sandro rolled up the window to listen.

"Maia," he sighed, when it was over.

The driver grinned into the rear view and said " You like Maia? She's all dat. Mhm"

"She was my first girlfriend," Sandro said into the mirror.

"Yo. No way, man!"

"Yes way," Ula sneered.

"Fuh white people," the driver mumbled under his breath.

Sandro leaned his head against the glass and tore at his lip. Ula peered at the days shoot in the tiny screen. Married bliss.

Next day Penny woke up on fire, her arms and legs bright pink. After an excruciating cold shower she lit up the roach left by the console the morning before. As tendrils of THC snaked through and dulled her pain, she wondered how long her solar souvenir would last, and what it looked like. Wrapped in her towel she opened her door and fanned it for some ventilation. She saw that Ula's was open, too, and wandered in, over towards the mirrors that lined the back wall.

Ula was busy at the barre.

Penny opened her towel enough to check on the overall

demarcations, but careful to hide anything reflected or real from Ula's angle of sight. Mismatched doll parts. Funny looking. She giggled and wrapped herself back up tucking the end under her armpit.

"Ouch!" Ula said, "But that's what you were looking for wasn't it?"

Penny spun around. Ula kept up her kicks: front, side, back, side, front, side, with a silly smile on her face.

The towel, loose from the sudden turn, slipped to the floor. Penny froze. Ula eyed her in the mirror. "Wow, well, aren't you the little lobster! Tangerine Dream, Barbie Pink, Orange Peel" she sang with each kick. "Pantone! Lovely triangle, by the way. The eyes—Beach Glass, Tender Shoots."

Ula stopped her *battements*.

"You are *stoned*. They're huge, like the whole ocean rushed in or something. Hey, did the son of a bitch fuck you under the water?"

"Ula, get real."

"It's OK, really." Ula leaned back against the barre, drinking in Penny's nakedness.

"I never saw you in the nude before. You have a dancer's body."

"Don't get weird, please." Penny picked up the towel and wrapped herself back up, careful to work the tuck under her arm away from the rawness. Jangled out of her pleasant fog, the burn was overwriting her reflexes.

Ula went back to her exercises. Between *relevés* she said, "I'm sorry about yesterday."

"Don't be, I had a great time."

"You did seem happy."

"Yeah, I guess."

Out of the blue, she broke down and the ocean did spill out.

Ula slid over to her and oblivious to the searing pain, hugged her. "I'm sorry, baby girl, we love you, we want you to be happy."

"Fuck you!" Penny tried to wriggle out.

Ula tightened her arms around her.

"Oh, Penelope, lovely, lovely Penelope."

"Don't call me that. Just shut up. Let go of me."

"That's what he calls you, in his sleep. I know how it is."

"Don't do this to me, it's too late!"

"No, no, not really too late," Ula cooed and brought her to the tatami and sat beside her.

Penny couldn't stop, she sobbed and shook into Ula's bony breast as Ula massaged her shoulders, stretched her out, then slid alongside her.

"Poor baby," she said kissing her stinging eyelids, lips, sliding her hand over Penny's still white and unburned breasts. When Ula rolled on top of her, Penny erupted into a fit of hiccups. "Penelope, I taught him everything he knows about women. *E-ver-y-thing.*" Burning and jolted by spasms as she was, Penny did nothing to resist when Ula's leg pried apart her thighs. Square, don't be square, Penny told herself. There could still be hope, if she lay very still and let Ula get on with her little game. A cold slippery thing slipped up her thighs, pushing to get inside, and Penny had a pretty good idea what the thing was by the time Ula turned it on and whispered in a prim, almost clinical voice, "Penelope, it's his, it even has the veins, painted on by hand!"

"Fuckin' pervert!" Penny flung both Ula and her contraption off her and leapt for the door, the disembodied phallus flopping around behind her on the empty dance floor.

Seconds later, Ula's wrath exploded against the double bolted steel fire door. Unintelligible sounds gurgled through the steady pummeling. "Oh, it's very too late now, bitch. You'll never have him now. *Never! Never! Ghrwaughrr.*"

BAM BAM BAM.

Penny went to the bathroom and turned on the cold water. She let the cold water pound her to the bone, hoping it would numb what burned inside her skull even more than over her skin. Dripping all over the place she hobbled out and began searching for the silver cigarette box where she kept her stash of joints. She found the box, and with cold clumsy fingers wrenched it open, but it was empty, they must have smoked up all her dope yesterday. She ransacked the wastebasket, crawled over the concrete floor, under the futon, the tables, everywhere looking for a stray roach, but they were all smoked up

Her hair still wet, she pulled on yesterday's outfit because the demarcation lines were inside the burn, then her jelly sandals, still sandy, and marched up to Washington Square Park to find Arrow.

Police lights flashed around the park. She saw a cop push Arrow's shock of dreads down into the car.

## WANDERLUST

Penny made for the East Village, sometimes dealers lurked around Tompkins Square Park, but the cops must have already busted them because there were only some passed out winos and washed out roller-bladers. She continued down Avenue A, then Essex to Delancey a street crawling with somnambolic junkies but not pot dealers. Even Roosevelt Park was deserted. There were sources around Confucius Plaza. Nothing, On her way home she passed by Go Go's, but she wasn't hungry. And she couldn't find anyone to sell her a nickel bag. Defeated, she staggered back down Grand street to find Ula and Sandro stepping out of the elevator, dressed to the nines.

"Want to come to a party?" Ula sang out with gleeful sarcasm.

"Party in my pants, everyone's invited."

"What did you do?" He growled at his elegant companion.

"Nothing."

"Oh, everything," Penny yelled out the elevator door as it shut.

Ula was back to a patchouli whiff in the hall. Sandro she could feel run down the hall late for practice. Otherwise, even he only existed through his Johnny Walker that lingered in the elevator.

Penny spent the rest of the summer meditating and wandering the streets, the only places she could find peace of mind. By mid-summer Penny's hair tumbled around her shoulders in a jumble of romantic ringlets transmuted by the sun's alchemy from copper to gold. She needed to look like a girl now, even if she wouldn't let herself feel like one. She even bought conditioner, and a wide toothed comb for the tangles. D'Oc had been right about the hair, with her high white forehead, she looked just like a medieval fairy princess, but one in T-shirt, cutoffs and ninety nine cent flip-flops.

When Sandro first caught a glimpse of her on the other side of Canal Street from the Pearl Paint sidewalk, he stopped in his tracks, didn't cross or even wave, just leapt up the steps into the art store.

Penny realized he was tailing her a few days later on one of her hikes. So, she started following him. First she followed him west through Tribeca to Hudson River Park. The temperature sizzled near one hundred and his shirt was stuffed into one of his rear pockets, his torso glowing bronze. Slung around his chest on a red silk chord was a

Catalan *bota*, a souvenir from Ula's days at Salvador's, and from his neck swung a rawhide laniard with a tiny high tech monocular.

On the promenade along the River, he stopped and pulled a cigarette from one of his tattered cargo pockets. Shooing away the usual swarm of gay cruisers like so many flies, he lit up and leaned into the wind against the rail to face the statue of Liberty and the harbor's armada of bobbing sail boats. He flicked his speed-smoked butt into the river and raised his eyepiece to the Lady, then let it drop only to raise his arm again, this time holding the wine skin high above his head to squirt a stream of gold into his open mouth. So with tasseled *bota*, Don Quixote wandered on, his Dulcinea as out of reach as a mirage.

By summer's end the park was packed, even on weekdays, and the only place left to catch the sea breeze without going all the way to Coney Island was Pier 40 at the west end of Houston. Around the corner from the old fishermen, he drifted to an old bench and watched the freighters pass.

Penny sat down a few benches down, facing the Lackawanna docks with the Palisades vanishing into the thick summer haze. He didn't acknowledge her being there, just a few benches away, as he scribbled in a notebook. The Circle Line went by twice. Today there was even a barge, not a cute one with lace curtains, but a heavy drone, humming downstream, a no nonsense industrial rust belt behemoth. They watched this one pass by. Her heart tightened, and she knew his did too, because he got up then and walked away.

Just before Labor Day Ula beckoned to Penny from inside the Yohji store. Penny hesitated as this was their first encounter alone since the sunburn. The bald sales girl stood with her armload of white shirts like a Nubian priestess at Ula's side.

Penny rang the bell and walked in the shop, filled with racks of cleverly contrived albeit conservative clothes. The stack of shirts were for him. Ula was replenishing his closet.

"Tell me what you think of this one, Penny."

Ula handed her one of the shirts. Penny took a while to find that the buttons didn't match up in the usual fashion.

"Okay, but how will he figure out these buttons drunk, huh?"

"Ha, ha, ha. Precious, Penny! Don't you get it? That's the challenge!" Ula screwed up her face at the shirt. Penny walked out of the store.

Crazy bitch. Penny wrenched one foot over the other and locked in her lotus position. Did a few rounds of yogie kapalabhati to

clear her seething brain. It didn't help. She was in no mood for sitting today. These people's lives are none of your concern. Except—

She got up and began pacing around the room.

Okay. The meditation helped her to realize that it was the responsibility of the artist to avoid causing harm, of that she was now certain. Her original assumption, that the physical properties of the E.L.F. waves were the cause, made sense for a while, but now, she had her doubts. She was certain that the very physical and modulating presence of the deep bass notes opened the audience up psychically. Everybody knew that. But what happened after that she was not so sure. She remembered how she felt inside that abomination of a basilica. Artists risk their sanity by choice. She had physically forced this upon her listeners by using the E.L.F.'s. Forced them to be modulated by the invisible forces that she was channeling and for which they were unprepared. And she had destroyed them in the process.

She thought of a story she'd heard about a techno group that had locked people into a room with monitors and attempted to alter their mental states with beats. This wasn't her. She had no interest in the physical lives of the audience. Yet she'd been dragged there by the results of her experiments. What if it wasn't the E.L.F. and difference tones themselves but their instrumentation upon the human psyche that did the damage? With the help of Science, Beauty could not only make you sick, it could kill you. This was Stendhal syndrome, turbo-charged. She had forced not only herself but her entire audience to becoming dangerously open to the angelic voices just as the old man of the blue flower warned in the book.

One of Ula's first suggestions at the Louvre, in the form of a taunt, when she had found her staggering before the head of Pythagoras, and later as they admired the Michelangelo, was that she was herself a victim of Stendhal syndrome. That had been her suspicion at the Crillon that evening just before Dr Züt's visit and diagnoses. Then she had turned her attention to the tech. The angelic had simply flown out the window with the quiche. She had turned from her audience to herself. Had lost perspective. Her responsibility with the angelic voices was the same as for all things—Do no harm. This was in direct conflict with Ula's assumption that the artist must inflict the truth onto the viewer, as in her understanding of Michelangelo, or her theater pieces and especially in her virtual porn with the teledildonics, where she abused Penny's modulation of the signal, channeling it virtually through the rubber pussy to the jerk-off on the other end. In this, Ula

attempted to be the angel or invisible muse, not the conduit, which is what the true artist is. This would make Ula the false angel; using her ego to control her audience's physical pleasure for her own aggrandizement. No wonder she had wanted to get her hands on the secret of Penny's deadly manifestations. Ironically, Ula's confused quest had also led Penny to the solution for her deadly problem.

## DESPERATE MOVES

Sounds of laughter wafted in from the hall. Must be visitors for Ula. But then there was a knock at Penny's door. Max and Maia stood next to Ula and Sandro. The duo had gone Platinum. Still playing second fiddle, Max slouched a step behind his dazzling sister, but his glow was chemical. Penny let them in. Sandro avoided her eyes as usual, but Max couldn't take his off her.

Ula, miffed at Penny's lackluster welcome, instantly herded them back to her place, but Max hung back, signaling he would join them in a minute.

He closed the door behind him and took a step closer, "Purple, oh baby," he slid his long arms around her.

She pulled away. She ignored his IM pleads as they become more and more ardent and confused. "What is it Max, what can I do for you?"

"Oh, baby, oh, baby." He drew her back to him and held her face in his long calloused fingers. He ran his hands through her gilded copper ringlets. "Don't be sad."

"I'm not sad, Max!" She pushed him away.

"You can't fool me."

"You're strung out, why don't you just leave, okay?"

"I named my guitar after you, Penelopay. I bin dreaming of you since that first day in the café."

"Oh, please, I don't have time for this!"

"I love you. I told the whole world on the Grammys! You don't watch much TV, huh, Purple?"

This time, when he wrapped his arms around her, he kissed her tenderly on the lips.

"Oh, baby, baby, I love you, I do, I can make it better, my purple belle."

She froze.

"When are you gonna crawl out of your funk, man? You channel music from the stars, you move mountains, baby. Girl, I know he's the love o' your life, but you gotta let him go, move on, cuz it's never, ever gonna change."

She turned her head over towards the painting.

"Oh Max, how'd everything get so fucked up?"

"It's not you, he's a sick dude, man."

"It's not him, it's them!"

"Come on, we both know that ain't the whole story, baby."

"Oh, yeah? So, what is the story then?"

"Hey, baby, maybe you can tell us, Ula has us thinking you're like, you know, a *ménage*."

"What? Oh, she wishes."

"She doesn't turn you on, heh? Maia had problems with her, too. You gotta let her know how you feel about that, man."

"I did, look what it got me. She's berserk."

He put his arms around her. Angry sobs lurched out of her as she clutched his shirt. He tensed with panic.

"Please, please, don't be sad," he repeated and stroked her hair.

"Tell me why I shouldn't be sad, Max, tell me that."

"Okay, I dunno. Life stinks. Purple. Here Purple, have some weed, you never had any this good."

They sat on the futon and passed the joint, him squinting at her through the heady cloud to see if it was having any effect.

When he put the move on her she offered no resistance. His skin was really purplish black, like aubergine velvet against all the gold of his hair and jewels especially at the back of his neck, beneath the gold chains. She had never made the connection before, with the colors of the Sacrifice room.

Sadder than ever now, she sat on the edge of the futon, watching Max put on his pants.

"Wanna really turn on, Purple?" He took out a gold plated kit from the inside pocket of his white tuxedo jacket. Whipped off his belt and tightened it around his pockmarked arm. Shot up along the track on his arm, then, with the same needle, he stuck her between the toes like the models did, so it wouldn't show, and they fell back into the futon and touched the sky.

Penny fumbled with her shoelaces and slipped out into the hall after determined knocks woke her up.

In the hall they were waiting for them. Sandro's arm was draped across Ula's shoulder in a hypocritical show of affection for the benefit of the guests.

"We're all goin' to the party, you wanna come?" Maia asked Penny.

Max came out and put his arm around Penny's shoulder.

Sandro's jaw dropped. "*Funcullo*," he muttered between his teeth. The hand around Ula's neck fell inert at his side as Maia chattered nervously, but Sandro hadn't noticed that she was high yet, higher than ever in her life. Max held on to her. He had scored, and stolen the prize.

Then for the first time Penny saw it, Sandro was several inches shorter than any of them. How had this escaped her before?

"Okay, you gotta get her somethin' to wear, I'm not goin' out in public with her lookin' skanky like dat! So Max, why dontcha take her shoppin', you with me?" Maia snapped her fingers.

Maia must have been studying black Hollywood speech these last few months as if it was Sanskrit and her ticket to Nirvana.

"West Broadway?"

"Eww!" Ula wrinkled her nose.

Maia ignored her, instructing Max. "Broadway's got Prada, Greene has Westwood, Plein Sud, and Spring's got Chanel!"

"I see her in CDG, actually," Ula said meekly.

"Garçons? That's all the way in Chelsea, now. Ula, you should know that!" Maia sneered.

"How about La Fée? Maybe I'll go there and get something too," Ula suggested.

"On Wooster? So witchy!"

"Not the new line."

"Okay, whatever, and Max, you still gotta go, make sure she gets something sexy, but not too sexy, got it? You got an hour and a half. Girl's hair is gorgeous!" Maia said fingering it before turning to go into Ula's. They were talking about her in the third person, as if she were a fashion accessory.

"*Shoes!*" Maia yelled down the hall before disappearing with the Sandro into the dance studio.

After drifting in and out of several shops they ended up on Wooster where headless manikins draped in translucent asymmetrical Greek chitons floated from invisible wires.

"It's so Pythagorean! Fluid yet geometric! A Pythagorean angel of the spheres! Tell me, Penny, do they have angels in this world of ideal order? Can they hear our cries over their crystalline song?" But Ula's furious eyes were on Max.

The raven haired sales girl tugged the chiffon over Penny's head and smoothed the angled hem over its matching satiny under-slip.

Ula plucked a scarlet siren gown for herself and they continued

up the street to the shoe store where Max slipped Penny's foot into a pair of pointy-toed elf princess mules with spiky Lucite heels.

They stumbled back to the studio, where Maia was in mid-dance lesson. Real bump and grind. He was in middle of catching her through his legs as they came in, but his hand slipped when he saw Penny, and Maia landed flat on her backside. Everybody laughed nervously and Sandro and Maia quickly went upstairs to change into their party clothes. Ula stepped into her bathroom and changed, door open, into her dress, the first brightly colored item anyone had ever seen her wear. She came out dabbing extra patchouli under her armpits and beneath the diamond choker in the notch of her collarbones, wordlessly cursing Penny's fantastical slippers.

The white limo's interior was in shades of ivory, down to the shag carpet. Sandro wore his New Year's tux with nothing underneath and when he leaned forward she could see his nipple. Ula's own pale nipples peeked out now and then from the deep V of her neckline. Maia was all blinged out in gold lamé, and even her cleavage was sprinkled with iridescent gold powder, her celebrated breasts concealed. The conversation bubbled awkwardly all the way uptown.

They got out and walked up the red carpet to the club as anabolic black studs kept the crowd at bay behind the purple velvet ropes. Hands reached up out of the crowd with digital cameras, micro video cams, even bulky telephoto Nikons. Amongst the muscle-men stationed along the rope and inside the club were the pros, scanning, elbowing for a prime spot, inconspicuously dressed in black. Barely contained hysteria reigned. And the word was out, that Princess Purple and Max were together at last. The tabloids held their breath.

Penny floated down the red carpet, her shoulder crushed beneath Max's grip. Luckily, Sandro's measured steps were just behind her.

Lights flashed everywhere inside in the cavernous club, many of them from cameras but also from lasers and video wall screens. A low pulse started shaking her bones. No, it couldn't be! Instrumentals enhanced with deep synthesized E.L.F. No one seemed to notice, but Penny in her fog waited for the bodies to fall. She had a drink from a passing tray to steady herself, purple haze be damned. Max held her close, his mauve silk shirt open to the waist. His gold chains thumped and slapped against his burnished chest. The swarm slammed mindlessly against each other, one eye on the star dancing with his mysterious throb, the girl he'd named his guitar after. She caught a

glimpse of bare chested Sandro and Ula. The slithery vamp effect conjured by the dress vanished as soon as Ula tried disco. Sandro did his best with her. He shoved her around the dance floor like the weird old Latino at Penn Station who did the Rumba with a blow-up porn doll taped to his feet. Penny didn't want to think what kind of sex those two engaged in but it dawned on her that the only Sandro Ula likely ever got was a battery-operated plastic one.

Ula drifted into her tidal seaweed dance. Sandro gave up on her and wandered into his own space with trance dance. Everyone began watching him now, a thing so rare to see. They made room around him and watched him in a circle under the pulsing lights. Even Maia, surrounded by her admirers, watched him.

Shiny with sweat, and before the music even began to wind down, Sandro stopped dancing and followed Ula towards Maia's golden throne in the V.I.P. booth.

His wife looked like a vampire and smelled like a corpse, even under her vegetal fumes.

He watched his angel dance with Max as Ula tugged him into Maia's orbit.

All eyes were on Max, the star; except hers, they were so far away. How could it have come to this? He shut his eyes and let himself drown in the music.

Along the way Ula was snagged by some downtown parasite, so he spun alone into the seat next to Maia. She took his chin in her hand and looked into his eyes. He could never fool her.

"What is it baby? Is it Max?"

"No, I want them happy, Maia."

"Max is never gonna be happy, and he isn't ever gonna make her happy."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's using, Sandro. Look at 'em, they're both high as kites. Lucy in the sky."

He saw it now. He buried his drunken head in her breast and wept.

She brushed aside his hair and kissed his clammy brow.

"*Oui, c'est triste.* Oh, baby, why didn't you take her when you had the chance?"

She didn't know how *triste* it really was.

"What am I going to do?"

"Get Max away from her."

So, he walked up to them and said, "Max, we have to talk. *Viens avec moi.*"

He looked back and she had the eyes of a terrified forest creature. On the way Max gave him a funny look, and said, "Hey, man, be happy I could take away her pain."

"Max, I'm glad you fucked her. It is a crime not to fuck the woman you love."

The toilettes smelled bad from sweat and the drunks pissing all over the place and from the soggy cigarette butts that littered the floor. But no one's eyes were on the floor when Max walked in and flashed his lethal grin around the room. It was then that Sandro slugged him. Max fell back into the mirror, raining shards all around them. The guys in the stalls turned around, still holding their cocks. Max was stronger than him, so he braced for the return blow, but there was none. Max just stood there, blood dribbling from his lip, waiting for Sandro to make the next move.

Sandro slammed his body into Max. The smell of Max's cum from the two of them earlier hit his nostrils. Rage froze his gut.

The crowd grew thick around them.

He took Max's arm, pushed up the sleeve and brushed his hand over the vein's keloid tracks.

"I thought you were cool about us, man," Max whimpered.

"Yes, I want you both to be happy. But this, I cannot permit."

He knocked his forehead into Max's, then took his face in his hands and kissed him hard and quick on the mouth. *Il bacio della morte.*

"You touch her and I kill you," he said, in English, so everyone could hear.

He came out to find Penny barefoot and alone at the edge of the dance floor. Ula appeared at her side from nowhere and nodded once in that way of hers, granting him permission to go ahead.

"May I?" He extended his hand, even though he knew his face was all twisted and mean. Penny glanced up with her lost wild eyes and followed him onto the dance floor, as she had long ago for their waltz.

The DJ put on Maia's latest fast track. They vibrated as one, interlocking sine waves held together by the tension that separated them. His heart was going to explode, his brain, explode. He knew Max would be dead soon. He was rock hard under his tuxedo, harder than he could remember. He wanted to tear off that wisp of a dress and have her right there on the floor. He slid his arm around her to kiss her

at least once, but her knees gave way and she crumpled to the floor so fast he was left clutching a cloud of chiffon.

Ula threw the dress over Penny and he whisked her away to the white limo.

"She looks like an angel, passed out in your arms like that. Oh, Sandro, you have to call Züt," Ula said after a few silent blocks. But he hadn't heard.

Desperation had brought them here. Penny stretched out across the seat, her head cradled in his lap. His head back against the window trying not to fall apart. The limo sped through Times Square, the ad lights flashing across his cheekbones. At his most beautiful in these moments. Ula, filled with an urgent erotic need, had to stifle a small sound. How long since he had touched her? She never should have told him about what she had tried with Penny. Never should have done this, done that. And even the drugs no longer worked, at any strength, in any combination, even the new blue ones, as if he had built up an immunity, like bugs to DDT.

Back at Grand, he was like a zombie carrying a dead girl into the elevator.

"I take her up."

"No you do not! She's already asleep, she'll do fine in her room."

"They go into comas."

"She won't, because you're going to call Dr Z. *Subito!*"

He leaned against the battered riveted wall, his eyes shut and with Penny in his arms like an enormous bouquet of white flowers.

In her dark cave lit only by those ghoulish screen savers and the blinking green and red dots, he lowered her on her futon and covered her with her Bambi sleeping bag. Tenderly he kissed her lips then rest his head on her chest as if she were already dead.

Up in the elevator he wouldn't speak, but he was himself again, whatever that meant.

When they were almost at the loft, she asked, "And what if Max comes looking for her?"

"Oh, please."

"What did you do, castrate him?"

He snorted like an angry horse, then snarled, "Yes wife, you would know," and smashed his head into the hull of the elevator. Once upstairs she reminded him again to call Züt.

*"Mais Zut, zut, zut et encore zut! Ce p'tit toubibe va nous faire*

*manger les pisenlits par les racines,"* he giggled in a crazy falsetto as he splashed a drink mostly into a glass, and downed it and a few more in rapid succession.

He looked at the bottle and seeing it was empty, hurled it through the window a good twenty feet away, and in the same grand gesture swept all the glasses and bottles off the top of the Jean Michel Frank hand me down from Dick. The glass and liquor exploded all over the ebonized floor. He watched and listened to it break and tinkle, nodding his head as if to some infernal glass harmonica. He fixed his eyes on the cabinet and launched one powerful kick into its immaculate veneer, eviscerating it of bottles and crystal, that spilled out into the rest of the mess.

Sandro stood there for a moment and stared down at all the shiny pieces of glass strewn over the black mirror surface, at this galaxy of his own making. Then, calmly, he walked over to one of the cast iron columns, grasped it and rammed his head into it. It made a hollow sound, like a Japanese temple bell, with another sound underneath, like a coconut. He ran his hands up and down the black iron flutes, as if begging for release, and sobbed against the column, his ear against it as to an oracle.

Ula remembered that Penny's music traveled through the metal structure of the building as well as through the pipes of the heating system, but then also that time was running out, so she approached him tentatively. Seeing that he didn't move, she rest her hand lightly on his shoulder, and said, "Sandro, Dr Züt."

He whipped around, blindly knocking her to the floor. He looked down at her. Would he help her up or kick her away? He kicked her straight under the Bösendorfer, then leaned back against the column and pulled the phone from his jacket to make the call.

"Hello, Dr Züt, this is Alessandro Tivoglio, I am terribly sorry to disturb you at this late hour but we have had an incident concerning Dr Bell. Asleep in her bed. You are on your way? See you in a few minutes. I will meet you downstairs. Good bye, Dr. Züt."

He slapped it shut, stuck it back in his pocket and stepped gingerly around the glass to the hall. "The ambulance will be here soon, I take a shower."

## SANDRO HAS AN ADVENTURE

Picking out the shards and splinters Ula looked out the window to dull the pain. She heard his steps and turned around, expecting the worst. His hair was still wet and he was dressed for a funeral in his black suit. At his feet were his overnight bag and a suitcase. He wore the mask of steel. An ambulance siren blasted into the street below.

"Are you going with them?" she ventured meekly.

"Don't expect me back for a while, there is something I must do." He stepped into the elevator with his luggage. Down below, the ambulance lit the street up red as Dr Z watched the medics collapse the wheels of Penny's stretcher and hoist her in.

Dr Züt and Sandro sat silently next to the still form of Penny as the ambulance screeched into the heliport on the East River. Sandro expected this to be goodbye, but as the medics loaded Penny into the heavy black copter, Züt said, "Mister Tifoglio, ziss vay please."

Two soldiers marched up to Züt with an inquisition style contraption with a wide belt from which hung heavy chains with metal cuffs. They saluted, spun to Sandro and emptied his pockets into a plastic bag before strapping the belt to his waist and fastening the cuffs to his wrists and ankles. The inside of the machine was ablaze with lights. Consoles lined the sides like an avenue of skyscrapers on either side of the acrid rubber floor. Sandro shivered. The way the shaved pimply hicks on either side of him in their fatigues looked at Penny as she was wheeled past them on her stretcher like a virgin prepared for sacrifice made Sandro want to punch them blind. But what could he do, all tangled up in his chains like Houdini? On either side of him sat these boys, stiff as toy soldiers in their crisp fatigues, only their Adam's apples bobbing up and down as they swallowed. Their vulpine faces were almost identical, flinty gray eyes set too close together, cheekbones like frontier gunslingers, long jaws growing long crooked teeth, big ears that seemed to move independently of each other towards every sound. He imagined K.C. with the barn as one of these wild boys, and he saw one or the other of them grunting over her on the hay, but then, she would never have a boyfriend with such big ears or a pointy Adam's apple, or all those red pustules. He was probably more like the young Redford, or Eastwood or even Pitt, and not one of

these sorry losers.

They sensed him thinking about them and gave him shriveling glances, like he was a fag or something. Well, they were not so far off, all things considered, and they had surely never seen the oeuvre! The thought made his head spin and his entire body hurt. The huge insect shook and lifted above the skyscrapers, over the Empire State Building, that was all dolled up in the patriotic colors. The night's descent into chaos rose up in his throat and gushed out between his knees, through his chains, over his scuffed Church's wingtips and into the rubber grooves of the floor. The machine swerved away from the grid of light and landed about ten minutes later somewhere on Long Island.

Sandro and Züt followed the white cortege from the tarmac into a nondescript building. The medics rushed the stretcher down a long gray corridor and were swallowed up by a bright stainless steel elevator as Sandro was left behind in his chains with the by now thoroughly disgusted young soldiers so they could follow the doctor.

"Time for a little chat, Mister Tifoglio," he said, opening the door into a paneled office overlooking the sound with Connecticut visible in the pale dawn haze outside the plate glass.

The inquisitor settled magisterially behind a desk far too big for his gnome-like physique and took a leather tobacco pouch and a deep bowled pipe from a desk drawer.

"I sink vee had better discuss now the repercussions of what you haf done," Züt said as he stuffed the pipe with his thumb.

"I have not been negligent!" Except tonight, Sandro thought.

"Hmph! You'ff made an impressive mess of sings. No surprises, remember? Vell, vaht happend?"

Sandro looked out the window at an osprey nest sticking out of a half submerged tree skeleton, feeling numb. Wind shivered through the silver reeds that lined the salt marsh; a silent *Jonchaies*.

"Vee gave you the benefit off the doubt in ninety seven with your poor brother's untimely demise. I vent out of my way to help you, to bring you out off your depression. I sought vee had made significant progress! How could you let such a relationship develop with a minor, a mere child?"

"She is not a child, Ula is more a child than her."

"Ula does not use heroin. You were supposed to keep an eye on her."

"Where were your 'eyes' when Max was alone with her? They are everywhere, but they missed this one important moment! I thought

you were the professional here," Sandro snarled.

Züt sputtered away on his pipe, "I sought vee had a deal. You sought you could get away with dis? You and Monsieur Schwanz are facing serious charges with your off color enterprises. I vos only trying to help you, for old time's sake. But zee gall, you sink you are really somesing, don't you! Vell, your adorable aristocratic derriere is getting no more special treatment, not from me, not from anybody, gott zat?"

He pointed at Sandro's pants with the wet mouthpiece of his pipe, making Sandro smirk because of a French argot pun that had nothing to do with Magritte. Sandro shook himself to and stared at the sky outside the window that was turning a uniform gray. Everything out there was gray, even the sticks of the bird's nest, speckled with old guano and feathers. Züt turned around to talk on the phone and the next thing he knew, the two lanky soldiers were shoving him down a long hall into another shiny stainless steel elevator, this one activated by retinal scan. Down interminable gray corridors lined with several thicknesses of pipes that slowly descended with ramps and steps to the basement level of what felt like a much older building, whose concrete block walls dripped layers of paint like sheets of melted butter. They dragged him clanking along the putty linoleum floors to a cell with bars, cinder block walls and ceiling all slopped with the same greasy yellow paint. The two guys pushed him, locked the grill behind them and walked away, his hands and feet still manacled together. He stretched out on the bare mattress, letting his head drop to the lumpy yellow pillow. He was crammed into a cage with a stained bed, a stainless toilet and a sink with a a dented metal mirror. At least he spotted a roll of toilet paper next to the john, but no soap, tooth brush or razor. An errant monk's cell. Not so different from home, just dirtier.

Hopefully they would take the cuffs off his hands and feet when they put him in those orange overalls, or whatever the local costume here was. His watch and his wallet and his lucky coin were confiscated; maybe his luck had finally run out. He knelt on the disinfectant soaked floor in front of the bed to pray. His head throbbed against his fists from the evening's encounter with the column. Stale odors seeped out from the mattress, conjuring up Max's scent, still fresh at the base of his animal brain, and with it the shock as he'd felt the thirsty scars that grew up his friend's arm like the suckers of a deep sea monster. He couldn't pray, so he hauled himself back onto the narrow slab.

Patches of yellow paint peeled away from the ceiling above the

metal toilet—stainless, but not immaculate, considering what went down there. Could it be ammonia fumes curling the yellow paint so darkly around the edges? What kind of people had lain here in puddles of sour fearful sweat? Politicals? What was his crime, again? He wasn't supposed to fall in love. Of course Dick had convinced them he was gay and an accomplice in his trolling. Wishful thinking! And who could take Ula seriously about anything? He'd even gone and married her, though he still couldn't for the life of him remember how that had come to pass, just his staggering out of the Hotel de Ville with Dick and Ula to the square in front with the painted horses of the merry-go-round and then Ula had stopped in front of the ice skaters doing figure eights in the rink and pointed down at this symbol for infinity engraved in the ice, her face lit up with that enigmatic smile of hers.

Tears burned down his face like acid, trickling into the filthy mattress, soaked with them and the other human fluids for years. Humanity was foul. How could the divine hold any interest in these filthy creatures that inflicted such unimaginable cruelties on each other?

For they know not what they do. Did he? Was that the lesson of this cell? He was no better than any of them that oozed into the mattress. God, how he stank! Was it the whiskey bottle or Ula herself that he'd launched through the window? If Ula was dead he could get the electric chair. He fell asleep watching her laugh at him as he was strapped to the chair, drawing the sideways figure eight in the air above his head like a topological halo.

He fell deeper into sleep and met up with the usual gang, dressed up as doctors in white lab coats except for their feet that were bare and brown with long yellow claws. The demons pulled him apart with professional boredom, not grimacing passionately like Michelangelo's splendid creatures but as sniveling mutants, Goya gone sci fi. One of these sliced his torso from sternum to navel with a wand of light, then cut out his heart and his liver and dumped them with his ape like paws into a shiny metal bucket. Another plucked out his eyes with what looked like Ula's Absinthe sugar tongs and skewered them onto thorny rose stems, complete with leaves, and a hag nurse in a starched cap and long white apron reminiscent of Inez's arranged these carefully in a vase. The surgeon sewed shut his lids with a needle and transparent fishing line, and even though he no longer had eyes to see with, he could see all this and marvel. The first guy, or maybe another, cut into his scalp and right through his skull with the shiny wand and scooped out his brain, and into the bucket it went with a slurp. They

pulled down his face so he became a silent screaming flayed face, then they took measurements with a caliper. How he could see this, and so crisply, was a mystery that baffled even his dream self, watching this, feeling no pain, feeling no emotion at all, and how could he think, with his brain in a bucket on the floor? Ah, but dreams are like that, in that world where anything is possible. But this was not entirely impossible, for hadn't Mendez in reality peeled down portions of his face to study the construction of one side for the reconstruction of the other, the one bashed in by Ng's boot? Through the fog of medication all this had gone in one ear and out the other as Mendez recounted the tale in his rat tat tat Mexican Spanish to the bandaged mummy sucking his broth through a straw. But then one never knew if the guy was joking or not, except perhaps for his wife Esperanza, who disgorged fireballs of laughter after everything he said, funny or not, amplified by a laugh track of raucous jingling from the heavy loop earrings that ornamented her own elephantine ears, features too daunting for even Mendez to trim. As for Sandro's physical ears, Mendez had never mentioned peeling them down, even to study, but in the dream they poked out on either side of the floppy sheet of skin along with that other piece of cartilage, his ridged esophagus, still dripping blood.

Sandro woke from his dream into the nightmare of reality, his throat raw and burning from screaming but thankfully not flayed. He was drenched in cold sweat and there was blood around his wrists, so he could at least be proud of one thing; he had put up a good struggle against his phantom surgeons.

The gate of his cage groaned open, letting in Züt dressed in a crisp white lab coat with a stethoscope draped around his neck. It had been a long time since Sandro had seen him in this costume. Never a happy moment, Züt in the white coat. Next to him appeared an embarrassed young recruit. The soldier took a key and unlocked the cuffs on his wrists and ankles with blue surgical gloved hands that were soon smeared violet with blood. Züt nodded and the soldier stood at attention outside the cell.

"Well, are you coming?"

How could Züt, who'd known him since he was a small boy, treat him like this? They walked down endless yellow, gray and then beige corridors to a room with a medic. Züt made him sign a paper so he couldn't sue. He could barely use his hands to hold the pen. He was pushed into a shower and blasted raw with a disinfectant that looked and tasted like Pepto Bismol, then was given a thorough physical, just

like in the military.

"Take off the wedding band, please," Züt ordered. Sandro happily twisted it off and handed it over, and Züt looked around the inside and stuck it in another little plastic zip bag, and into his pocket. Sandro was handed one of those hospital gowns that left you so vulnerable and was led by the doctor and the medic down more corridors, up and down more elevators and down a hall that looked and smelled like a real hospital, to a dark glass enclosed viewing post. Beyond the glass was a bright antiseptic room with a white capsule in the center that could have just beamed down from a Star Trek episode.

Züt took a breath and dealt his prognosis. "Your liver is a spongy mess. Your heart, well you have to listen to your heart! And your cholesterol level is sky high; vot you have been living on? *Paté de foi gras* and truffles? It is a miracle you are alive, but even supermen haf their limits. As soon as you are released, you are on your own! Votever you do, do not touch Dr. Bell, government property! Off limits! Verboten! Deal still stands! Besides, you are married, vezer you consummate or not. I know vot is going on and it is pathetic. Grow up, get real. Ziss is not your little girlfriend's favorite blurb, *get real?*"

He leaned over and stuck the knobs of the stethoscope into Sandro's ears, sliding the cold disk over his heart. Garbled chaos shwoosh-umped in there, no surprise.

Züt gave him a look heavy with meaning. More theater, the guy should have been an actor.

Sandro countered with his trademark sneer.

"Okay, just doing my job, boy. Now we get to vork!"

Sandro was led into the bright room and fitted with a helmet Doctor Frankenstein might have thought up and told to recline on the padded cot extruding from the capsule. He had a pretty good idea what was in store for him now as he was strapped down, mouth fitted with a boxer's shield. Züt sputtered at him to lie still as long as he was inside. Soon he was alone inside this dim coffin staring up at a sticker of a flying red eyed cartoon toddler. The clanging began, soon to be accompanied by the familiar surge of Penny's earlier piece, the one that had caused all the trouble, and he shut his eyes and wept uncontrollably.

He woke up in his cell with a terrible headache, his tongue swollen and sore and he saw that he was dressed in the orange overalls. They hadn't shaved his head, or his face, so he was well on his way to looking like every other traitor in America, except that they weren't

Catholic. Someone had been thoughtful enough to slip the wedding band back on his finger. At least another day had past, because a silky St. John the Baptist beard was sprouting from his ashen cheeks. He shuddered, thinking of the tiny Moreau sketch in Dick's guest bathroom and of the ring that sealed his fate.

Züt clip-clopped up the hall with an attendant who unlocked his cage and let him out so he could follow them for another complete physical. This time the doctor seemed preoccupied, too surly for drama. He didn't even say goodbye when Sandro was handed his cleaned suit, polished shoes and the Baggie with his personal belongings. After he was dressed and had forced down a cup of battery acid strength American coffee, Züt's goons dumped him at Kennedy where he got on the first plane to Heathrow.

First stop, Saville Rowe and Steeds, for a couple of real suits. He would need them for this mission. Some real banker's suits. Suits that said "I am a player." Then Poole's, for a new tuxedo as the jacket was ruined in the course of that infernal evening, and some shirts. No more head games, the trick shirts were going to the Salvation first thing.

Lunch with Mr Tapir from the bowels of the Courtauld Institute was a success. The Institute didn't pay well, so the guy smuggled art on the side, but unless Tapir was lying, he knew where the missing *Angel of the Annunciation* was, and that it was for sale, perhaps even legally.

Next stop Paris, for Operation Boca della Verita, before hopping on a train across the Alps for loot and then back across to the bank.

Sandro sat under the leering Pan, stirring his espresso as he listened to Pete, who was settled across from him with his legal pad and the usual bag of laundry. After each sentence Pete coughed up a gob of phlegm as yellow as the paper on his pad. Hard at work, he had devised through a funnel of acquaintances gathered during the research for his book, a plan for Sandro, beginning with a flood of anonymous letters to well placed individuals and publications.

Outside on the sidewalk, the newsboy waved the latest issue of the left wing rag and yelled "Libé, Libération!" Market trucks honked and school children razored past.

Pete's raspy voice had difficulty rising above this din. "These *lettres de cachet* or *lettres corbeau*, as they have come to be called after this old French film... well they began as far back as roman times! *La délation*, that's from the Latin, you know Latin, right?"

Sandro nodded tersely, unwrapping his chocolate dipped walnut.

"Hell, I'm sorry. After all you went through, amigo, I bet you dream in it. So, anyway, back to the matters at hand, eh? *La délation* was adopted wholeheartedly and abused to no end by the French royalty before the revolution, as *lettres de cachet*, signed and sealed by the king and his ministers, to apprehend enemies, especially tax evaders... they were deep in the hole, after all, and to get rid of undesirables, get them locked up or exiled to the colonies. (Thirty seconds of hacking followed.) The revolution abolished the practice, but Napoleon resuscitated it and the tradition has thrived ever since in some form or other as a tried and true method of exposing *Les Grand Scandales* in France. After World War One, there was a famous incident involving a series of anonymous letters accusing prominent citizens of illicit love affairs. Great movie material, right? *Le Corbeau*, quintessential film noir of 1943, scathing, misanthropic, thoroughly modern in its murky ambiguities, was blacklisted in '44 for these very qualities, that defied the official postwar policy of optimistic escapism. But then, when this movie was made, during World War II, this underhand and efficient method was again being used against *both* the Jews and the Resistance, so, well, no wonder! And it's used today, yeah! Actually just recently, to bring down respected politicians, and even ordinary thieves and kidnappers!" Pete sat back and took a breath that catapulted him into a series of retches and gasps and another of his timely fits.

"I dunno, this sounds like a very dishonorable way of seeking justice."

"Yeah, granted, but it has an excellent track record - at least in France. If you can fight fire with fire then maybe the way to fight dirt is with—*more dirt!!* Or in your case shit with more shit!"

"Haha, touché! O.K. This is the first good news I have heard. Call his guy, Mario, he is my friend, he will take care of everything and get you a good doctor." Sandro listened carefully but after a while couldn't take the coughing, and he had a train to catch.

Why was he on the *Orient Express* to Venice instead of on a plane? This was a sleeper train! Now, as he strained with the memory of them squirming under the overly starched sheets in the upper bunk of the Palatino, he wondered if this had been a good idea after all. He staggered to the end of the car for some air and lit a crumpled cigarette from the bottom of his jacket pocket. That window was jammed too,

so he wrenched open the door. The moon peeked above the yawning Alps, their dark teeth waiting to swallow her in one gulp. He threw the cigarette he had shared with the wind into the valley, and took out his handkerchief.

So crazy again, he had to take care of business! He held onto the side of the car as it shot out of a tunnel and across another vertiginous concrete and steel bridge above a black alpine chasm, and he did take care of business, alone with the full moon raging above, her sad mutilated face adoring the sun the whole time, and although he could never reach so far, he kissed her and prayed to be with his beloved again at least once before he fell himself into the abyss. But the moon wanted to expose her dark side to him before she was swallowed by the mountains, and wrenched him into an intimate understanding of total and complete blackness, of her true self, alone and dead for so long, an understanding he could fully share but never would have let surface in waking life, and then he was limp and alone again with a dry handkerchief and the stars blinking away one by one until the train screeched into Ventimiglia.

After breakfast in the club car he stepped down at Genoa and bought cigarettes and some newspapers. Back in his velvet seat he read the latest *La Stampa*, *Corriere della Sera*, and *Gazzetta dello Sport*, dozed off, and next thing he knew he was looking past the oil refineries of Mestre to the rain-fuzzed mirage of *La Serenissima*.

He noticed, as he stepped from the landing in front of *Stazione Santa Lucia* into the water taxi, that the canal water was a lighter green than he remembered, the same green as her eyes.

The Gritti room, overlooking the Canal, was on the second floor for a grander view. He flung open the windows right away and the damp salty air cleaned the dead room of its *mélange* of old lady perfumes. The bells from the *Campanile* rang but she was not with him to hear them or put her little machine on the sill to capture the sound. *Santa Maria della Salute* was just across the water so he prayed in that direction for Penny's health and protection.

Back at the armoire he arranged his suits. He realized as he untied the laces of his new Lobb shoes, that he had no galoshes. Slipping off his shoes and socks, he wiggled his toes; a pedicure was long overdo, but then, devil's claws were perhaps not so inappropriate at this time.

He collapsed on the bed. Staring at the ceiling, propped up on pillows and sipping his mini-bar whiskey, his thoughts turned to Coney

Island and the Wonder Wheel. How would he dream here, under this wedding cake ceiling, so like the ceiling in their room by the obelisk and that other Wheel?

"The obelisk that weeps tears of granite in its lonely sunless exile, and longs to be back by the hot lotus-covered Nile" Dick had never tired of quoting Oscar Wilde. Then Sandro had sailed that Nile, wishing every minute he could topple his new bride into the jaws of the crocodiles that waited so patiently among the reeds. Outside this window there was no mocking Wonder Wheel, just the Grand Canal lapping gently against the wall below. He could almost see the goddess reclining on her satin bed, her hand resting lightly, there, with the little dog curled at her feet. Was her window flung wide so she could hear the waves mingle with the sighs of lonely lovers? He sent out an S.O.S., a *Sospiro della Solitudine*, and when he fell asleep, he dreamt of angels.

## GULAG

Medical people shuffled around the vast brightly lit room in paper shoes, their heads covered in paper shower caps topped with noise-canceling headphones, their faces hidden by masks. Her scalp felt cold, like after a buzz cut and she was restrained to the stretcher by a thick band around her middle, suggesting a rough ride ahead. A pair of gloved hands stretched out her arm and tapped the thin plastic tube that fed her vein. A pair of eyes smiled at her from behind their masked headset and said,

"We're going to give you a little sleepy cocktail, okay?"

"Sleep? But I just was..."

In the background, two medics listlessly assembled shiny objects on a table, but snapped to as soon as another green gowned and masked figure hurried in. Impossible to mistake that clop clop even muffled by paper overshoes.

"Music!"

The biggest nurse lumbered over and turned it on. The smiling masked man knocked into the enormous lamp that hovered over her as he tried to stand up. A second later she felt a rubbery thing over her nose and mouth, and saw Züt's eyes on the other side of the stretcher, peering into hers as she breathed in a cool stream of chemicals. Her killer piece crescendoed through the room, the green crowd closed in around her as a spotlight blast on over her head, and she fell into darkness.

The next thing Penny saw was a slash of light in a darkened room. She couldn't move her head at all. It felt locked to the bed by some kind of brace that was anchored to various spots on and into her skull, and although the skull itself didn't hurt, its contents did. Above her eyes she could see the pale edge of the bandage that wrapped around her head. Her scalp pulsed and tingled with an odd electrical zap that did not feel entirely biological. Her hands were strapped to the sides of the bed, so she couldn't check any of this out, but was reassured by wiggling of her fingers and toes, which meant that at least she wasn't paralyzed.

Züt clattered in. "Zat was a close call, you know drugs do absolutely nutting for your intelligence, so vot's zuh story?"

She wanted to tell him to go fuck himself, but it was too much effort. She hadn't O.D.'d or anything, not on Max's baby dose, so what was the story?

"Vee had to drain some fluid from your brain. I sought it best to investigate your little problem, and I believe I haf eradicated zee cause of your seizures. You haf a very curious brain morphology, Dr Bell. No, no, no, don't sank me yet, it vill be a vile before vee can be sure of zee benefits. At first you may feel some disorientation, but it should pass."

Züt listened to her heart, checked the head screws, the monitor at the foot of her bed, and left the room.

Next morning a nurse came in, unwound the bandage, swabbed at the connections of the contraction into her skull, and smeared some acrid brown ointment around her head before rewinding a new bandage around her head.

Her hands were released during this, and a tray brought in with a dish of Jell-O and a carton of milk. She was allowed to hold a spoon and maneuver the shaking red cubes into her mouth, no easy task.

Penny could feel a new bumpy scab on the back of her neck, but the bones felt just fine, so why the head vice? She asked the nurse if she could open the blinds and the woman ambled over and pulled the cord so Penny could stare at the lazy clouds as she sipped lukewarm milk through a bendy straw.

"Why did you put my head in a cage, afraid it'll fly away?" Penny asked Züt when he showed up again.

"Safety measure, for zee seizures. Be patient!"

She hadn't had a seizure since Paris, months ago. What had they done to her?

Days went by, highlighted by the arrival of the food tray: gray or beige meat accompanied by some form of potato and a canned vegetable, also either gray or beige, then Jell-O, each time in a different primary color. Eventually, after several rainbows worth of Jell-O, the head cage was unscrewed, leaving only the turban.

Züt accompanied the orderly pushing her wheel chair to the magnetic resonance chamber. "Ven vee play your music inside here, please remain appsolutely motionless."

From now on now she pretty much lived in the MRI tube, her head encased in a glossy white helmet that sprouted multicolored wires. Above her head on the tube's inside wall a sticker of Blossom the Powerpuff Girl forged along with her into the magnetic unknown as

they were subjected to endless runs of Penny's E.L.F. recordings. The low clanging and thumping ostinato of the MRI mechanism added an intriguing layer to the compositions, in which they were looking for modulators, still trying to figure out if she was actually interpreting a score as she claimed or actively monitoring her improvisation to change the public's emotional states. Züt had to determine whether her talent was in the improvisation itself or if the waveforms she produced drove her software, producing the E.L.F.'s and difference tones. In other words, how far was she straying from the score? Software or wetware? Information you couldn't get from simple surveillance. Had to dig deeper for that, but she knew he would find nothing, because there was no test for Stendhal syndrome.

The experiments continued: CT, MRI, SPECT, PET, all merging into a tediously senseless daily routine. Tedious and senseless not just for her but apparently for all the staff, who exchanged mutinous looks in response to every one of Züt's barked orders. Penny suspected the unseen forces behind the project were getting impatient and that results were not forthcoming.

Pushing her walker back from another claustrophobic morning of Magnetic Resonance Spectroscopy tests, Penny opened her door and slammed off the fluorescent light before she collapsed on her bed, feeling more rhesus macaque than homo sapiens. As she reached for her plastic water jug she noticed a pale rectangle sitting next to it. She grabbed the envelope and flipped the switch. Inside was a drawing, neatly torn from a small hand made sketchbook. At the top of the drawing, looping across the sky in his tiny anachronistic script was the poem,

*"Nada te turbe,  
Nada te espante,  
Todo se pasa,  
Dios no se muda,  
La Paciencia todo lo alcanza,  
Quien a Dios tiene Nada le falta Sólo Dio basta.  
Il tuo Alessandro, per sempre."*

Below the poem in the same sepia ink was a drawing in profile of a girl looking straight ahead, the wind swelling her hair out in a mass of renaissance whorls. He must've sketched her on the pier that day as he sat next to her watching the barge, or perhaps later from a distance through his monocular, or even from memory. A series of quick pen jabs described the blunt edge of the bench that jutted from beneath her

bare shoulder, the frayed edges of her tank T shirt that disappeared into her curls, the squiggle indicating the Hudson's hazy nether shore. The head, hair and the curve beneath her breast were all lovingly, hypnotically rendered in almost three dimensional form.

Meanwhile, back in Soho, Ula plucked from the mail a card from Venice, from the Gritti. It was another Rachel Whiteread, from the general to the specific, a plaster cast of a mattress on its side against a wall in an empty room, from an old Venice Biennale. On the back, he wrote only that he had found *him*.

He blew in a few days later with new bags, new shoes, a new suit, British, and a small metal briefcase. He kissed her and hugged her like nothing had ever been wrong between them, then took her out to dinner at Le Cirque, her favorite. He was at peace with the world, he said, and to prove it he gave her a diamond pendant, bigger than all the others. But he slept alone in his closet that night as he had every other night. The next morning he showed her the contents of the briefcase.

## FROM OBSCURITY TO CLARITY

The MRI room door buzzed as Penny was ejected, and in the penumbra behind the glass partition she saw the octagonal reflection of Züt's glasses. Behind him appeared Sandro with an empty wheelchair. By now Penny could walk well enough, but regulations always had you a step behind your potential, she noticed.

Penny's head was still wrapped in her turban of bandages, so she could understand his face when he saw her, yet he didn't miss a beat before his lips were warm on the back of her neck, ignoring Züt altogether.

Züt sat next to her in the back seat of what was obviously his own mustard colored Volvo sedan, with an oval CH sticker on the back above the DC license plate. Sandro sat in front next to the rent-a-driver, away from mischief.

Penny gazed out the window as they sped down the Long Island Expressway, the doctor hunched over his laptop. Sandro, more jittery than ever, nearly jumped out of his seat with terror as a tractor trailer thundered past on their right, its cargo wrapped in post 9/11 wavy flag wallpaper. Züt glanced at Penny after the monster truck and its E.L.F.'s passed.

Penny wondered why they were in this old jalopy. And why Sandro was there at all, doing the work of an orderly in that snazzy new James Bond suit. And why didn't he smell like whiskey? Or cigarettes? The car was saturated with Züt's pipe tobacco, but there was not a hint of the Marlboro's.

The first thing she saw when Züt flipped on the lights was that the Madonna had company. In an identical though slightly more chewed up frame was the angel, very worm-eaten around the edges but otherwise fresh-faced, his long tapered fingers daintily holding his scepter as if it was a lily.

Before she could take in a breath Sandro's arms enveloped her, to Züt's abject horror. She couldn't feel anything at all except the gentle shaking of his frame and the tears meandering down her back. She couldn't cry. She wanted to melt into him, but there was a wall between her and how she wanted to feel. He appeared to sense this and backed away, or perhaps it was the fear, because he stole a quick glance at the

doctor, who cleared his throat and commanded, "Mister Tifoglio, enough!"

Beneath the paintings, her frayed lumpy futon was replaced by a sleek black leather sofa. And her favorite white trash coffee table? Replaced with a marble slab on chrome legs.

"Dick, in a fit of generosity. I hope you dun mind." He apologized and leaned over, grabbing a handle at the back of the sofa and it slid down into a double wide sleep surface.

*"Ecco, lá,* he snapped his fingers.

"How did you know?"

"She has the same one upstairs, heheh. I warn you, it is not so good for sleep!"

"No kidding!"

Her computer tables?! She tottered over. Looked like Schwanz Design, alright. She only hoped it was safety glass on those spindly sawhorses.

"What's this? One shove and it all comes crashing down! Could at least use some duct tape around those edges."

The stacks of disks and the hard drives all seemed intact.

"Okay, thanks anyway. Guess he scarfed my fifties relics or something, I mean they're antiques, or something, right?"

Sandro hung back, silent.

Züt came humming out of the bathroom, "And if you need assistance, just ask zuh room, I haf installed a device."

"Great, whatever. Its good to be back. I'd better crash, now."

Züt stood in the doorway, a self-satisfied smile across his tiny face. Sandro half smiled and followed the doctor out.

Penny flopped down on the leather platform, not bothering to unroll her sleeping bag just yet. She took one of the two leather pillows and tucked it under her head, but tossed the other on the marble table. She was just thankful Dick hadn't installed those smutty blob lamps.

Wasn't there some duct tape in the kitchen corner under the sink? Better check. Nope, her cabinets were all cleaned out and arranged with wire tubs filled with Martha Stewart's idea of under sink necessities: a big bottle of lemon Lysol, a collection of fancy polishes and bright, folded cloths and sponges, but no duct tape. Penny stumbled to the bathroom to pee, but, surprise, a fancy contraption with a Japanese menu at the side with pictogram explanations stood in place of her john. She couldn't hold it long enough to decipher any of these, especially as her vision was still a bit double, so she peed in the

normal way. But how did you flush? There was no paper! She pushed a button blindly and a jet of warm water hit, then a blast of hot wind, enough to make anyone's pubic hair curl. Confused and a little nauseous from the artificial floral mist that had filled the room, she pressed another button that started up a massager function, startling her off the animated toilet and headlong into the new mirror.

Next morning, there was a knock at the door. Expecting Sandro, Penny bolted up and opened it, but it was Ula behind big black sunglasses and draped head to toe in snowflake sprinkled arctic fox, a small bag of groceries in her hand.

She pulled a roll of duct tape from the bag and placed it on one of the glass desks. "Sandro said you wanted this. Can I put the groceries away?"

"Hey, what's with Dick's stupid robo toilet?"

"Stupid? But it's brilliant! And Züt's filled the Toto with a cognitive mood enhancing spray! What a team—"

"He's got that toilet spewing mind altering gases, but there's no paper? The man is insane! Ula, he reamed my brain for what, exactly? To justify his delusions of grandeur? He's a menace to society and should be *locked up!*" Penny shouted into the room.

Ula left the bag on the counter and sailed out the door, hissing, "Shhhh... or you'll get us all locked up."

Penny emptied the bag on the counter and stared with dismay at a fistful of limp celery and three bruised apples. She had an apple and got to work with the duct tape along the edges. She wanted to smash her fist through the whole thing. Instead she opened her mailbox and angrily flushed out the spam, almost missing a message from Max, from the day after the party. She had almost forgotten about it, no wonder Sandro was so weird.

"My Purple, take care of him. Max."

What was that all about?

"*Sandro, can you hear me?*"

She waited. Her phone rang.

"What is the problem?"

"Gee, I'm glad Ng's bugging is more professional than his Hentai. Hey, what's the story with Max?"

Silence on the other end.

He cleared his throat.

"Max is dead."

"What! What? When? Why didn't you tell me?"

In the same flat voice he said, "Maia found him. I learned of this when I returned from Venice."

"Venice?"

"The angel."

"Did he OD?"

"No, it was the Beretta."

"Oh, Sandro."

After a while he said, "You will be okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Don't worry about me."

After hours fumbling with her equipment to suit the new configurations, Penny decided to get out, maybe go to Chinatown and get some dumplings. Her balance was precarious, but she figured she could buy a cane at the Chinese supermarket, and they sold toilet paper too.

She put on her old camo parka and set out. Ramón and Bobby were too busy with their big metal shovels to notice her.

The drifts and slushy street corners made Dumpling GoGo's a little far so after Pearl River Market she ducked into a nearby Vietnamese restaurant with her bamboo cane and toilet paper. She parked herself in the back of the brightly lit eatery to soak in some local flavor, a welcome change after perpetual hospital blandness, and blew on her hot Rau Muong Xao Toi, (hollow vegetables with garlic sauce.)

Penny was about to sprinkle nuoc man sauce over her bowl, when Ng barreled in. She watched him through the wall mirror as he stopped at the take-out desk to flirt in Vietnamese with the phone girl until his order came when he spun around with his bag and stomped out into the darkness of the approaching snowstorm.

Trembling, she paid and phoned Sandro as soon as she was out, but the line was at first busy, then unavailable, so she hobbled back along Canal Street and buzzed him from the elevator.

At the top floor, the door was open and his dark silhouette stood against the light of the wall screen that lit the dim loft. He lowered the remote, Marlboro hanging from his lips, and picked up a tumbler of amber liquid. Back to reality. He sat down on a sofa identical to hers downstairs and zapped the interactive windows of the trading channel as stock figures streamed across the top and bottom of the screen. A PIP window of grim heads reported the news alongside a collection of seismic looking charts. In the penumbra of the storm, the open plan loft looked like an air terminal, with the piano poised by the enormous windows like a big black bird ready for take off into the

churning clouds.

"I was at Nha Trang, the Vietnamese place on Baxter, you know, and guess what? Your pal Ng walks in! He really did put in that so-called intercom, didn't he!"

He aimed the remote and pressed mute.

"You knew?" She balked.

He nodded.

"So what's what's going on here? Who's he working for? Even Ula's acting paranoid about Dr Z."

"Beh, what can I do?" He shrugged and zapped to the foreign exchanges.

"You? Shit! Shit, just do something, anything, don't just stand there and let them walk all over you!"

He grabbed a crystal caraffe and poured some more whiskey into his now empty tumbler. "Shit! Shit! Just do something! Anything!" he mimicked.

"What's happened to you? *Oh god, please!*" she shouted.

From their caverns his eyes glowed the ghastly green of T.V. stock boards.

"Yes, pray. That is all we have now, amore mio."

He ground his cigarette into the ashtray.

"And money, and patience," he said, smoke curling out his mouth and nostrils.

In all that Penny had forgotten to pass by the electronics store, and she needed empty disks bad, so she stumbled down the stairs and out into the snow before the electronics store on Canal closed and before the storm hit.

The kid was in the back sorting out a new shipment of video cassettes and DVD's for the porno section behind the back door. Someone shouted in Cantonese at the kid. Penny was in a hurry, so she walked towards the back of the store where there were stacks of videos, one of children, and another of bloody naked women, their mouths duct taped, their eyes bugging in terror with Gladiator guys in black leather and chains.

The shouting must have escalated to threats because the kid was so scared he didn't see her walk up. The guy with the mouth turned around and it was Ng.

Penny stumbled out and thrashed her way through the melting drifts and slush back to Grand Street. She rang their bell again. Ula still out again having her chemical peel, or aroma therapy or Pilates, as if

she needed any more stretching or scooping out.

Sandro met Penny at the door then shuffled back towards his place in front of the TV where a soccer game was on inside the PIP window around a Matrix-like wash of numbers that cascaded down the screen. He zapped off the TV, picked up his glass and stood there unsteadily, his shirt untucked, and looked her over.

"You did not shout or call."

"I was just at the electronics place, the one with the porno outlet in the back, you know? Well, guess who was there, delivering a shipment of fresh kiddie porn and snuff?"

"You are crazy to be on Canal street, with the trucks." He drained his glass.

"It was Ng! Oh, please."

"Are you sure?" He scratched his jaw.

"He was shouting at the top of his lungs and the poor kid was scared shitless! We gotta call the cops, now."

"Don't bother," he snickered.

"How can you be so blasé about all this?"

"Penny, please listen to me. Do not get involved—a much better idea. Forget about it, please. You may not know this, hick, but pornography is available on the Internet now, and his days—all their days are numbered." He sighed deeply and led her to the elevator. At the elevator, he mumbled, "I miss our *soirées* at the piano in Paris, you can always come up and play, you know, anytime." He put his keys into her hand and opened the gate.

The keys weighed radioactive in her palm. Like she was ever going to go up there and play nocturnes alone with him. She slammed her head into the raw steel. Downstairs, Ula waited to go up, wrapped in her white fur and holding a slick little Bliss bag stuffed with spa products. Penny took her aside. Ula just scoffed. "You know Dick's always juggling little schemes with Ng's help, so I'd just forget about it. I do."

"Well, okay, but I thought you should know what's going on. He's acting like we're all in for it. Oh by the way, he gave me these," said through the crack in the shutting doors as the doors shut.

"What? Oh, thanks," Ula said.

Penny stopped when she heard popping sounds at the end of the hall, like bubble wrap. The boiler room was open, but Ramón was not in there checking the water level. She saw a figure crouched in the shadows behind the hot water system. A messy roll of bubble wrap

stuck out from under his arm, catching the light from the door. And there was the black ponytail.

She retreated as silently as possible, locked herself in her room and rang Sandro, who answered on the first ring.

Penny didn't wait for him to talk. "He's here, snooping around the boiler room, I swear. With a roll of bubble wrap under his arm—who'd you think, Santa Claus? Ramón and Bobby aren't around. Come down? I don't want you to have to go to Mexico again." He was silent for a moment.

"I come down. Ula is in the bathroom."

Thirty seconds later he was at her door armed with a flashlight. He was all dressed up with a tie and that new suit of his.

Of course by then both Ng and his bubble wrap were long gone.

Penny was about to thank Sandro and go into her place when he whispered, hesitantly, "We go to a café. We must talk. In private. Obviously you can walk. Do not bring your phone."

They marched in silence through the blinding flurry to Untitled. He hurried past the front, where you could smoke, to the sunlit back, where you could talk, although the music discouraged that. The Japanese tourists shook out umbrellas, surveyed the contents of their shopping bags from a day of furious shopping, and yelled into their phones. Tables of doll like girls nibbled at huge pieces of cake and giggled and nodded back and forth between them.

She sat in the orange swivel chair at the Saarinen table Ula raved about, under the black sky light, between two wispy Ficus trees. He went to the counter to order. The table was a little wobbly from years of abuse, but the wood was still soft as satin. Sandro came back with a *doppio*, and an Earl Grey for her, both in paper cups.

He sat in a flimsy old fiberglass chair, his elbows resting on the wood, hands steepled like a priest about to give a sermon, but he said nothing for a long time and just looked at his fingertips.

"O, Dio," he whispered to himself and to God.

While she waited she noticed a white mark where his ring should have been, and the raw redness around the knuckle where it had scraped the skin during its hasty removal.

"Please forgive give me for what I tell you now."

He looked around the room, and picked at the skin of his lips with his teeth. Still, people in the room rested their eyes on him as they ate their cake. He didn't see them. New techno music blasted over the

sounds of the espresso machines.

"Penny, you are right about Dick, the porno thing, not just the kiddie stuff, but with, you know, the gay porn." Sandro said that last bit real fast.

"You'll have to speak up!" Penny yelled over the techno.

*"The gay porn! For many years! Before the paintings. He made films with me and 'Gelino! Gemini Blu is everywhere, still,"* he yelled back.

Penny gulped. The slob with the orgy video?!

"Shit, I saw that!"

*"The film? You saw it?"* By then all ears in the café, and most of the eyes, were on them.

"No, the cover, at the Canal street place. A long time ago. I thought it was like, an orgy of gay guys." She tried to keep it down.

*"Eh? Orgy? No! Just me and 'Gelino!"*

Several women couldn't resist, turned around and balked. Probably those that understood English.

"Okay, whatever, so, go on." She put her finger to her lip.

He rubbed his hand over his jaw, scooted in closer.

"I dun't remember anything... that, getting married to Ula, my life. My mind is full of holes!"

"Ok, so is that what you wanted to tell me?"

"Interpol found Dick was involved in these things, and in order to stay out of prison, he made a deal for harnessing your discoveries."

"You knew about me?"

"There is more, let me think."

"Ok, slow down. They've been stuffing you with scopolamine, GHB, whatever, since you were a kid. No wonder your mind is a sieve. So, then? Interpol and me? That's new, but not exactly surprising."

He rubbed his face again, his eyes darted back to the front door, and down again at his empty cup, which he crumpled in his hand.

"I get more coffee, or, no I get a beer. I think you need something. How would you like a piece of cake?"

"No thanks, get your beer, I'm fine."

He came back with a Heineken, no glass, half of it drunk on the way.

"I do not know how to say this." He was silent another long moment.

"O, Dio. I knew about your government's interest in you, for military crowd control, for riots, things like this. From Züt, Ula's doctor

from the first breakdown, then 'Gelino's and then mine, and then yours."

"Züt must know about the drugs, then?"

He shrugged, "His prescription! But he is Interpol."

"Makes sense!"

"Yes! So I am used by him, them, for.... o, Dio." He hid his face in his hands.

"I am the colorful thing at the end of the line for the fish to bite." He buried his face again.

"Bait?"

Penny went numb.

"Züt told Ula your story, gave her some samples of your music, Emailed her your site. He used her too. She went crazy for you, of course. It blew my mind also, but your photo is not so good there."

He smiled quickly then stared at the wood.

"Dick and Züt found the studio next to yours for her. Züt came to me with the ultimatum and what could I do?" He kept his eyes on the wood and bit down on his lip.

"They knew I couldn't resist you," she said. She wasn't even mad, except at herself. Boy, had she been stupid that day.

"The surveillance clip at Max's... Züt's?"

He nodded.

"Who broke into Ula's, then, Ng?"

"I did."

Her stomach flipped over.

"You! Why?"

He considered.

"I was supposed to meet you, but on their terms. When I realized they would stop at nothing I wanted to get you out of there safe, give Ula a scare, almost get her on our side, so she would not get in the way."

"Didn't quite work out like that, huh?"

He shook his head in shame.

"And Ng?"

"Their dirty little secret, no?"

"God, I'm such a sucker," she said.

"O, no!" He didn't look away, this time.

They sat at the table like two old people, surrounded by the pounding chaos, the twittering electronic birds and whistles, the voices, the clatter of chairs. He sighed and looked vacantly around.

"We can talk here now, but... my hand, the loft, your place, the phones, all bugged."

He showed her his empty ring finger.

"So, what isn't?" She still hadn't figured out the little knobby bump under her skin at the back of her neck.

"Hmm, I think, perhaps, the elevator?"

"Oh yeah, that makes a lotta sense."

"You are sarcastic?"

"Well?"

"I thought with all the metal?" He looked vaguely disappointed. "How is your head?"

"Dr Z's playground? Not gonna do cartwheels down the beach anytime soon. My short term memory's fried. You hangin' in there?"

"Me? You ask about me?"

"Hey." Penny touched his wrist. He shut his eyes.

"I thought I could protect you. Maybe I still can, but it will take time." He seemed about to say something more. As their fingers slid into each other the ache spread up to her chest and tightened around it and it was the same for him, as his face was shattering.

"O, Penelope." He pulled away, got up and grabbed his coat. "I have to go now," he croaked, and bolted out.

His beer bottle was all that was left, still half full. She stared at the grain of the wood, thinking about everything and nothing until it got dark and the waiter whisked away the flat beer, the tea bag on her spoon, her empty cup.

## LA GRENOUILLE

Dr Züt got up from his table at La Grenouille and kissed her hand.

"I see you are growing zee hair back, and your sense of balance has returned," he beamed.

The waiter slid out a chair and Penny sat down, still winded from running straight from the subway to Madison after another underground bomb threat delay.

Züt looked down at his half empty glass.

"You vill forgive me if I indulge in ziss glass of Sancerre vile vee eat?"

"Whatever." She took one look at the extravagant flower arrangements and shuddered.

"You are in a strange mood, Penny, vot iss on your mind?"

"Not much, thanks to you. Why don't we order first. Is this work or is this is a date?"

No reply, so she scanned the menu, deciding on the Sole Meuniere, and water for her fish, avoiding the appetizer list that read like a biology class assignment.

"How iss the music progressing?" Dr Züt asked as the plates were brought in.

"It's not."

"You haf a creatiff block? It could be zee antidepressants."

"I threw your magic pills away. And I don't have a creative block. You wiped my short term memory, you moron!"

The waiter at the next table interrupted the pouring of wine into a Falstaffian gentleman's glass to glare at her.

Züt hissed at her over his pile of sautéed frog's legs, "Your hostility is rooted in disillusionment from your failed music career, and more importantly, in the co-dependent relationship zat hass developed between you and Mr Tifoglio, who is married, and, ass you know, a devout Cattoleek. It is important for you to understand the reality of your situation and work sround your feelings."

"You gotta be kidding, right?"

"How iss your sole?"

"Just fine thanks, what's left of it."

"Penny, ziss kind off behavior is self indulgent and self destructive, but is typical of zee awaking sexuality of adolescence, which in your case is I believe somewhat delayed. You need people of your own intellectual caliber to guide your development, not histrionic artists viss confused sexual identities. Let me steer you sroo zis troubled phase. You haf so much to contribute to humanity! You are so young, such a lufflee girl—"

He leaned over the table and caressed her cheek.

She recoiled, blurting out, "You lecherous old creep, you know why your pet project was a flop? Why all those hours of video were for nothing but your own jerk-off satisfaction? Your favorite little guinea pig wasn't worth a dime to them because you found nothing in there. Why? *Because it's not about the fuckin' waves!*"

Shaking his head and dabbing nervously at his mustache with his napkin, he shot his hand out across the table and gripped her wrist.

"Penny! You are a very sick girl. Please, please gif me a chance and I vill take care off you."

"Can you give me back my brain?"

He sighed. Penny yanked her hand from his momentarily slackened grip and whispered, "Sorry, I gotta go."

"Penny, don' be shtoopit! Sink!"

But she was gone.

## THE WILIS

From Ula's studio, "I don't need you, I don't need a man, I have a thousand virtual me's, who needs *you!*" The door slammed and a chain of growled *funcullo's* retreated to the elevator. After that there were no more joint practice sessions.

With beach season in mind to chase away the blues Penny bought a real bathing suit at the fancy Euro lingerie shop next to Chanel on Greene Street, because it was just around the corner, and because the kid sizes at sporting shops and in the catalogues were too tight in the boobs now. The one-piece was soft teal with a raw edged opera neckline and it cost three hundred dollars on the platinum. Back at her place she changed into it, pulled an old pair of cutoffs, and slipped on her radioactive green flip flops. The day was overcast and unseasonably warm, in the high nineties, and thunderstorms were forecast for later. But that made it the perfect beach day, because the riff raff were afraid of lightening, and the lifeguards weren't yet there, so it would be deserted.

She stuffed her pocket with her Metrocard, the platinum and a fifty in a ziplock bag and rang the elevator. Sandro was in the elevator. He'd missed the stop, accidentally or on purpose, maybe lost in his ironclad private fantasies, and leaned against the steel, drunk as a skunk.

"And where are you going, almost naked?"

"The beach."

"It is cloudy and is going to rain."

"Yup."

"Coney Island?"

"Of course. You look like shit, got the birthday blues?"

He nodded.

"Come with me, then."

"I would love to, but I must buy a cake."

"They're supposed to buy the cake!"

"Can I get you a taxi?"

"I'm taking the F train, it's air conditioned."

"I walk with you."

They walked up Mercer as he smoked a cigarette and looked down her suit.

"Cute bathing suit, *ton décolletage est magnifique*, but you should wear a shirt."

At the Houston Street entrance, he said, "I should be there to protect you from the Puerto Rican boys."

"I can take care of myself. Sure you don't wanna come?"

"I would, *poissons dans l'eau*."

"Happy birthday." She kissed him lightly on the lips and he took her right there on the stairs with the people swearing and rushing around them, and kissed her as long and deep as he could, cradling her face in his hands. She kissed his palm, and whispered, *amore mio*, and ran down into the station.

Memorial Day's approach had the beach all spruced up and ready for the summer crowds, but today both boardwalk and beach were deserted, just as expected. A band of orange pollution wrapped itself around the horizon and the ocean spread out flat as oil slick under the stifling ozone sky.

Penny kicked off her flip-flops and ran into the water, shorts and all, and swam out beyond the breakers. She didn't float looking at the sky, but swam furiously up and down the coast with her head in the water until she couldn't think any more and was just another mammal, swimming and breathing.

When she was so tired that her eyes stung and her lungs hurt from filtering out oxygen from the soup, black clouds rolled in from Connecticut, so she walked out and got back on the frigid F train, dripping like "Swamp Thing."

The elevator door opened with Sandro in the same position against the back of the car with his eyes closed, dressed in his killer Tux, and holding a big yellow box wrapped in a brown faux-rustic ribbon.

He was even drunker now, the whole car smelled of Black Label. His eyes opened to slits. "Did you float?"

"I swam like the devil. The sea was as flat as glass. Where're you going, like that?"

"They are taking me to Giselle."

"You like that ballet?"

"No, it gives me the wheelies, huh, huh, huh," he smashed his head back into the elevator.

"What's that?"

"The Wilis, the Willies, a ballet joke."

"Oh! The heebie-jeebies!"

He giggled, "Yes, them."

She clapped her hands and started singing and jittering, spraying water all over the elevator.

"Whoa! Sweet mama! Say, I got the heebies, I mean the jeebies, Penny's doin' the heebie jeebies dance! Yeah!"

He swayed over her. *Mia vita*. He buried his face in her hair. "You smell like the sea."

He picked up a strand of her sea damp hair and sucked on it. "Mmm, salty." He staggered back against the steel, dropping the cake.

Penny picked it up and put her arm around him and took him to the sidewalk, where she hailed a cab.

Swerving around the curb at Canal, he fell into her and started kissing her throat and playing with her breasts under the wet bathing suit. After lingering around her lips and nearly asphyxiating her with his cloud of alcohol, he mumbled, "Penelope, promise me you never become a wili," then gave her big hickie smack in the middle of her neck. "Remember, always."

At Franklin she paid the cab and accompanied him to the building.

"Less go in an nava drink, jus' you an' me, *amore*."

"Later, my sweet love, later." She pushed the buzzer, then shoved him gently into the elevator with his box.

Of course, she was not invited to the birthday bash, but she knew where they were headed, so she called the theater. The Kirov at Lincoln Center? Sold out, of course.

Penny got into her concert uniform, the black silk sleeveless top and the slim Sander slacks, and pocketed her card and four fifty dollar bills.

Scalpers mulled around the entrance, and she got a third ring center seat for one hundred and fifty dollars. In the first ring directly beneath her was Ula, hard to miss in her transparent layers and bird's nest coiffure, and Sandro, already asleep on her shoulder. Dick and Beatrice prattled away next to him.

The sets were like something in a silent movie and the prince was there mostly as wallpaper and as a crane for lifting the ballerina. Peasant dancers whirled around in groups or showed off one by one or two by two as the others clapped politely before doing their own thing center stage. Giselle's village boy friend was an angry little guy in a green velvet Robin Hood outfit who didn't stand a chance, even though the prince dropped his sword like a crowbar, obviously never

having practiced *l'escrime* with the bloodstained family arms.

At intermission, Penny watched the people drift around the refreshment table from the balcony. Nadelman's colossal marble muses stood guard at either side. She spotted Ula handing Sandro *doppios* as she guzzled champagne along with Beatrice and Dick. Some people stared in recognition at them, but with Sandro swaying, didn't dare approach. Ula pushed him outside for some air, but there was no air outside that night, so he just leaned on the balustrade and smoked. Penny could see him through the glass, a black silhouette against the lights of the Lincoln Center fountain. She wanted more than anything to run down and leap into his arms. Instead she pulled herself back up to her seat for the second act. The bell rang and the people start filing in and edging down the rows.

Sandro dutifully followed Ula to their seats. Dick and Beatrice were already in theirs, scanning the parterre for the familiar faces of business associates. Penny ducked back into her perch.

The music started up for act two, and it was all about act two. The Wilis were chilling enough without the blue floodlights. A regiment of identical zombie girls hopped forward, frozen in that position Ula called arabesque *penchée*. Thunk, freeze, thunk another inch, freeze. Inexorably they thunked through the mist on that one foot, to Giselle's tombstone and the crumpled figure of the grieving prince beneath it.

Sandro watched the whole act gripping the arms of his seat, with Ula resting her head on his shoulder, but she was not asleep.

After all the sweaty, shiny eyed dancers had taken their bows the privileged marched crisply into the wings to pay homage. Penny galloped to the patio in front of the fountain and leaned over the balustrade. In the crowd's midst were Ula, Sandro, Beatrice and Dick, zigzagging in the general direction of the waiting taxis on the curb.

## SHOWDOWN

After that Penny saw neither Ula nor Sandro for nearly a month. Testing, she would yell up at the ceiling. She telephoned him at different hours but his phone was disconnected. Ula did not answer anything, mail or phone. Exasperated and somewhat worried, she called Ramón. He had no idea where Sandro was but had seen Ula with Dick and Beatrice early that morning, when he parked her car while they went upstairs.

That was really odd. Dick out and about with Ula early in the morning was a possibility, but Beatrice? Never sober these days, she rarely was out before late afternoon, when Penny occasionally spotted her lurking around the Soho boutiques. Penny called their business phone, as she didn't have their home or cell numbers, but got the answering machine and Dick's professional design voice.

Next Monday, market day. She elbowed her way through the crowd—wizened old women, flocks of sturdy matrons, thin chain smoking hustlers, Buddhist nuns pulling faded plaid shopping carts, their eyes on the ground, except for a sharp size up of the available bounty. The bins overflowed with every assortment of edible material, from fresh to mummified. Some had dry stuff, alien lotus pods, roots with gnarly attenuated limbs, and piles of shrunken shrimp, flattened dry squid and salted fish and just behind them a box spilling a galaxy's worth of star anise, others with colorful mystery beans, spices. Then there were piles of bundled wilted leaves, variants of cabbage, mostly, and various fragrant and pungent exotic fruits. In plastic buckets swam slabs of tofu and pods of fresh lotus root. So Penny bought some of those, then asparagus, ginger root, a handful of star anise, a baggy of five spice powder, a garlic bulb and a variety of greens for a hearty stir fry.

She opened her door and there he was sitting at the console with the headphones on.

"You're back!" she dumped her bulging knapsack on the counter. "Where the hell have you been all this time?"

"I see you stock up," he removed the phones and spun around to face her. He'd ditched the wedding ring.

She didn't know what to do, so she stood in front of him and

waited for him to explain. He said nothing and looked at her as if a million years had passed since that last taxi ride on his birthday, and lifted his arms to her. An invitation or a supplication? It was hard to tell.

She hesitated "But, I thought—"

"*Vieni.*"

"What's going on?"

"Shhh." She straddled him on the chair and he buried his head in her neck, inhaling her hair. Mid-afternoon he wasn't drunk?

He rocked her slowly side to side, oblivious to the cameras that may or may not have been there, as if he didn't care anymore.

"I love you so much, so much," he whispered into the back of her neck.

She lifted his head from her mass of curls and kissed him. She couldn't have spoken now if her life depended on it.

She pulled him up, towards the narrow slab of couch. He stopped just in front of it, gave the couch a withering look, and said,

"You know, there is no one upstairs."

"Oh? Where is she?"

"Madison Avenue, to see Ira. She wanted me to take a nap, so, I am thinking, now is good. Oh Penelope, I have been such an imbecile, but now, everything is different."

"What happened? You okay?"

"We can talk later, now we go take a nap together, *bene?*"

Once in the elevator, he slammed into her, laughing softly to himself in that crazy way of his. She tugged at his shirt, but in her zeal, it ripped open and a couple of the hand sewn buttons popped out, ricocheted on the metal, and bounced to the floor. They had their hands on each other, when the elevator door opened and Mrs. Cummings, the third floor pet photographer got in with her obese pug.

Sandro straightened up. "Going up, Alison,"

"We're in no hurry, are we Winston?"

The leather clad socialite grinned, ogling his bare chest through her bug-eye shades.

At the top floor he and Penny skipped through Ula's sterile loft to the back where he pulled her into what looked like the laundry room, with a shelf of freshly folded sheets, towels and handkerchiefs, an ergonomic ironing board, a washer and a dryer. Beyond them rose a wall of zip up canvas wardrobes. He quickly turned the deadbolts and pulled her past the canvas fortifications. Beneath a small window was a

folding metal cot all neatly made up, with Angelino's baroque crucifix on the wall high above the pillow, with the old milk crate coffee table next to the bed with the lute and his Francesco da Milano scores.

So, this was where he lived, like a stowaway in his own house. They kicked off their shoes and whatever else was still attached to them and fell together into the narrow cot and lost it completely.

"So, what happened?" She asked as they lay there one on top of the other in a sea of sweat.

"I woke up with tubes in my throat in a room full of dying old people. Züt had told that me my heart and my liver were not so good when he examined me at the Gulag—yes I was there also, but in a different section. It is no matter now. So, I am thinking—"

"In the hospital? I.C.U.? Nobody told me!"

"Why would they? They are expecting me to die any day now. Pfft! Yes. So, I am thinking. Züt ordered me not to touch you—government property. Dick and Ula ordered me not to touch you—their property. He has me by the balls and doesn't she! I have been a good boy and I have not touched you, (mostly.)"

He sighed, "Oh Penelope, what have I done?"

What could she say?

"Do you think I am a coward? I have been. But now I say *va funcullo* to them all. If I do not live long, I can at least live that short time in happiness, with you. What can they do, kill me?" After a burst of bitter laughter, he choked on heavy sobs.

After she had calmed him down, he mused, half to himself, "Ula and Dick, I understand, but Züt? His only concern is for his career, the spying and the science! And that has not gone so good for him, so, what does he care I am your boyfriend?"

"Oh, Sandro. Don't go there."

"Eh?"

She shook her head.

"Penelope, *di mi*, what did he do to you, besides?"

"Nothing, but at this fancy restaurant, the other day, just before Giselle, he um, said he would take care of me, and, oh, whatever... Guy's a real creep, like I said. Get the picture?"

He nodded.

"Hey, we're together now, it's okay."

Dozing off in her arms, he said, "Giselle, you saw Giselle? I did not see you there."

"I saw you. Go to sleep, my prince."

"I am not a—"

"Shh."

Soon, he was whistling softly in her ear.

The flimsy door shook as if it would cave in. Night had fallen out the little window. He sat bolt upright.

*"Open up you son of a bitch. I swear I'll break the door down!"*

With the light switched on the white canvas blocks and appliances loomed. The stench of laundry detergent and cedar cloaked naphthalene permeated the enclosed space. Penny blinked and wriggled into her clothes. He thrashed around with the sheets and kicked his ripped shirt under the bed. She slid into the nearest wardrobe, in between two suits, and handed him a new shirt.

He zipped her in, opened the door and mumbled something to Ula. He must have hugged her because she cooed, "Oh, sweetheart."

"Je suis affamé! Quelle heure est-il?" he asked.

"Hmm, hell of a nap, what happened in here? I let you out of my sight for five fucking minutes! You're not supposed to be engaging in that sort of behavior, remember? And now you're hungry! Well, I can't eat another thing, I got so stuffed with Ira—Brazilian seafood, and those god awful cocktails, Caipirhinas, yech! Three of 'em! I've got to throw up, then I'll crash. I just wanted to see if you were um, but, obviously, you're doing just fine!"

"Merci, princesse! Amuse toi bien."

"Fous moi la paix." She slammed the door.

"Avec plaisir, madame!"

Penny unzipped herself from the dresser and stepped out. He smirked, his finger on his lips. Right out of a Mozart opera. Some things never did change.

"I am so hungry, and there is never any food in this place, the only food here now is inside her stomach, and not for long! Let's go eat," he said. He buttoned up his new shirt, put in the cufflinks. Penny scooted under the bed and got the old shirt. He smiled, nodded to himself.

"We go to your place first? But then we need to talk."

"I'll cook you dinner, okay?"

"You know how?" In all their time together, there had always been servants.

"There's everything for a stir fry downstairs."

"But then I think we need to celebrate."

"No booze."

"No! Em, perhaps a dessert, something light, something chocolate! We take a walk and talk and then you cook me dinner and we can celebrate!"

They tiptoed back out through the open space, although who could've heard them over the terrible sounds coming from behind the glass partitions of the bathing area?

"My birthday, did you go to Giselle in your new bathing suit?" he asked as they crossed Mercer.

"Yeah, right."

He said nothing, his hand toying with her hair. Traffic on Grand was backed up, horns blasting, until a polyethylene turban emerged from the tangle of cars. The guy snickered to himself as he shuffled to the sidewalk, his trousers belted with a length of grimy rope.

"Not a performance artist," Penny decided aloud, and dumped the old shirt into the public trash can on the corner of Broadway.

"Maybe a saint?" Sandro ventured, watching the tiny figure approach his corner.

Two chocolate opera slices sat waiting for them on the otherwise empty display shelves of the diminutive bakery. On the multi-tiered cake carousel was a fruit pie and above it a fat white cake decorated with coconut flakes. He pointed, grinning.

"The cake, it was a mess."

"Did it taste okay?"

"I did not eat it." He shrugged.

The girl at the cash register looked at him with abject pity. He gave Penny a twenty and ducked outside.

When she came out he was sitting on the bench. In the street light she could see how gaunt his face was. Around them the dinner crowd filed into the brasserie that adjoined the bakery.

"You want to go there instead, Sandro?"

"*Non, chez toi*, so I can take off your clothes off and feast in more ways than one."

Not likely, by the looks of him now.

They started down Crosby, Penny swinging the little bag, Sandro walking beside her jiggling his change.

"You remember Pete?"

"Sure, sound of one hand clapping."

"He finished the book."

"About the Factory?"

"No, about us."

"Huh?"

"No, you remember, The Consequences of Entitlement?"

"Oh, puhlease!"

"We met in Paris. I had Mario get him to the hospital for his lungs, he was a mess. So, he stay at the house, my mother is too busy here competing with me for an early grave, so it is okay. Rosalinda is from Lucca and takes care of his convalescence and he finishes the book, about us, about Dick Schwanz Enterprises and the things he has done through the years and it has just been published. Even better, he knows how things work in France, from his research and from his knowledge of history, well, film. He has sent anonymous letters and emails to all the papers, to all the society people, to the politicians, everyone. Even Interpol cannot stop this. It will become a Baudrillardian monster of the masses and engulf Dick in the mountain of his own filth. Already, Liberation has interviewed Pete about his book, and he has appeared on Bouillon de Culture! This is it, amore mio, D-Day. Dick will die of shame, perhaps even in prison!"

"Wow. Hey, I thought you said Pete was on the lam."

"Pete? Oh, that was just about money."

She remembered him zapping the green screen, exhaling those swirls of dragon smoke. Mumbling nonsense about praying and patience.

"Money. Gonna need a lotta that, once the shit hits the fan, huh?"

"Dun't worry, I have taken care of it. There is an account, for you alone, this is the number. The key is in the angel frame." He whispered the number.

"Hey Sandro, I can't remember this number now!"

"It is also written on the back, in sepia like an antique catalogue number," he said, putting his arm around her shoulder as they turned the corner on Grand to get the elevator.

Into the rice cooker went water, rice and one star anise seed. Penny placed her flexible cutting mat on the marble slab by the couch and cubed her tofu, sprinkled it with soy sauce, sesame oil, dusted on five spice, smashed and diced the garlic, the ginger, sliced the lotus root, cut up her asparagus, Chinese style, at an angle, then minced some cilantro, green onion and put each in a bowl. She chopped the baby bok choy, mizuna and some lush mystery leaves that looked like a cross between spinach and beet greens. She wiped the marble clean and

brought her bowls and flexi-mat with the greens to the cramped cooking corner. The rice cooker jitterbugged on the tiny counter.

"That music that was on before, when you came, it is new?" he asked.

"Sort of. Guess I'm still trying to redeem myself, bells and glass harmonica setting, using 15/16 time signature, monophonic polyphony, using the Wendy Carlos harmonic series —"

Sandro wiped his brow. "Ah, yes Wendy Carlos, previously Walter. It is very melodious, would be nice with some singing, no?"

"Yeah! Voice tends towards just intonations, that's good."

She fired up the wok and when the surface appeared hot, the oil no longer glassy, she dumped in her garlic and ginger, tofu, then vegetables, tough ones first, then tender ones later to steam lightly.

Mr Mocha sputtered into action on the flame. "Wow, you could sing the Angele Dei into the microphone and I could stretch it, warp it, put it through my formant processor, even download you into the vocoder; wouldn't that be cool?"

"Angele Dei ...you download me into the what?" he asked, bringing over the coffee.

"A vocoder, Wendy Carlos, Clockwork Orange? Ode to Joy? Beethoven rocks the house? It makes your voice sound like a machine, a robot! C'mon, analog man, just for fun!"

He made a face and popped the opera slice in his mouth.

Penny bit in and looked up, "This has booze in it, Sandro."

"And butter! And chocolate, all those evil things, just like Opera!" He belted out a B flat major scale. She'd only heard him sing twice before.

"You'll do it?"

"Beh, the dance for me is finished!" He downed his demitasse.

"I thought you liked the flying," she said over the dishes.

"Yes, but I am like Icarus—I crash land. First the knees and now the liver. I listen to Montaigne now."

"Gotcha, The middle way. Okay... so you're hired!" She wiped her hands and handed him the microphone. "Here, but, easy does it, don't fly away!"

She pressed record and he sang.

Afterwards, stifling a yawn with the back of his hand, he collapsed into the couch. "You sleep here, no? Would you like me to open it?"

"I'm not that tired, yet." She scratched her head, adjusting

different knobs and sliders.

"I am, can I take a siesta here?"

"Sure, but like you said it makes for lousy sleeping."

"Yes, long live Italian design." He pulled out the bed and stretched out on it.

"Mask?"

"*Grazie.*"

When she turned around, he was asleep again under the Concorde sleep mask, his ear and sinewy neck a graceful abstraction. Blue veins strained under the yellow skin of the hand that rested on his chest. Snaking out from the black mass of hair at his temple was a strand of white.

Numb, she turned off the lights and sat down with the Angele Dei, on the vocoder program of her trusty Control Freak Midi Control Center. Dissatisfied with that, (of course he was right, analog man's voice needed to breathe) she fed it to the formant synth, smeared the gel and slapped on the trodes, letting her brain waves do the work.

Later, when the city was asleep, he woke her with a kiss, removed her headphones and the gooey connectors.

"Come sleep with me."

Around dawn he snuck back upstairs. The room still smelled of five spice and frying oil, so she opened the door to get some labyrinth air into the room. Not even a ghost of patchouli haunted the hall. She got in her seat, applied her gear, fired up the machines, and started where she had left off the night before.

"Hi."

She turned around. Ula's odor and silhouette were in the doorway.

"Hi, I'm busy, okay?"

Ula sat down in the middle of the couch with her arms crossed. Behind the patchouli lurked another fragrance.

"What can I do for you, Ula?" Penny asked, backing up her work to disk, then off site, just to be sure.

"Where is he?"

"Dunno, you lookin' for him?" She pulled off the phones, the trodes, and wiped her brow with her sleeve.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I believe this is his."

Ula pulled an old rag from her bag. Even in the semi obscurity, Penny knew it was the shirt, retrieved from the public trash can.

"What the hell is that?" Penny said without getting up.

Ula walked up to her and slapped her. She smelled like shit.

"You touch him again and I'll kill you," Ula hissed.

Penny got up, slammed on the fluorescents. "Uh unh, I don't think so. My turn."

Pale fire flickered from Ula's serpentine slits.

"Oh, I'm really scared," Penny said, not untruthfully, as she spun back to her computer, Ula in the periphery of her vision.

"You don't make backup files, if I remember?" Penny typed madly. Hacking other people's sites wasn't exactly in her repertoire, but she had learned a thing or two at M.I.T. and knew the power of a carefully positioned UNIX `rm -rf *`.

"Files?" Ula inquired.

"Keep everything on the web, right? *Brisé volé disparu...voilà!*"

"What?"

"I zapped you out of cyberspace. Don't ever hit me again." (She had tarred up the site before destroying it, just in case.)

"You what?"

"You heard me."

Ula sat back down, taking a second to digest.

"You're fired! we'll sue you!" her royal highness said. With more urgency she crushed and kneaded the shirt, sending fecal clouds into the room.

"No, I'll sue *you*, and you know what for! And hey, you didn't hire me, *he* did, and he works for *me* now, *capice?*"

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Ula managed to squint down at her from her seat on the sofa, as if she really was a person of authority.

Penny called out to him, still standing in front of the console, typed, pulled out disks, slapped in more, backing up all systems.

*"Could you please come down here? It's important. Showdown, Amigo. Forza del Destino!"*

Ula started to get up.

"Sit down. Ula, how would you like some tea? Coffee, maybe? We need to talk."

Penny left the computer and went to the counter, put grounds in the pot, patted them down, screwed in the top, and slammed Mr. Mocha down on the flame.

She figured, get Ula in social mode, minimize the reaction. The odor of Ula's slap rose to her nostrils over the fresh coffee grounds, so she wet a paper towel and rubbed her cheek as the coffee gurgled up.

She brought over the coffee, holding her breath.

Ula sat very properly at the edge of the couch, the twisted shirt in her hand as if it were just a tear soaked hankie.

"Here's the thing, Ula. Sandro, our dear Sandro, is probably dying. You did know that, right? I know the two of you don't go in much for pillow talk, but the doctors must have said something as he lay unconscious in ICU?"

Ula was motionless, mask of disdainful hauteur frozen in place.

"Well, we're not gonna let that happen, are we?"

"And why not? He wants to die, he always has, he's a sickie,"

Ula sighed into her espresso.

"No, Ula, he's a sucker. Big difference."

Irritation twitched across Ula's lower lids as she set down her demitasse.

"Suffering is his greatest talent," Ula declared, a slow smile spreading across her lips. "His salvation, and ours," she whispered and shut her eyes, a frisson of delight rippling through her.

Penny stared in disbelief.

"Holy shit, Ula! I can't believe you're not locked up! He's got bolts in his door to protect himself from you and from your poison potions."

"Oh, mind your own business, he's no angel, you know," she scolded, wringing the shirt into an even tighter rod.

"I don't care if he's Satan!"

Sandro stood in the doorway, wrinkling his nose.

"You were talking about me?" He sauntered in, feigning nonchalance. Ula turned away like an insulted cat.

He glanced at Penny, who did her best to keep it together.

"What has she done now?"

"Nothing, Sandro. It's nothing, we were discussing business. Ula has apparently fired me, so now, I'm hiring you! Oh, yeah, she found the shirt."

He glanced from one woman to the other, then saw the shirt in Ula's hands.

"I make more coffee?" He picked up the empty cups.

Ula whipped around. "Is that all you can fucking say?" She threw the little mother of pearl buttons collected from the elevator floor into his face. When she saw this had no effect, she shook out exhibit A and held it up to him. The thing was covered in spilled coffee, soda, globs of gum, and the potent human smears. She

scrunched it up and lunged at him, grinding the shirt into his face, and sending them both flying into the glass tables and the wall of synthesizers. The espresso cups, laptop, flat screens, and synthesizers all came crashing down as the table disintegrated into fragments of glass and ribbons of shard-encrusted duct tape. The equipment lay in a heap on the floor, screens broken, shorting out, dead.

Sandro pushed Ula away and wiped his face on his sleeve. He saw the shit on his fresh shirt, and unbuttoned it. Ula glared at him from her spot between the couch and the door, shouldering her reeking bag.

Penny ducked down and yanked the power strip from the plug.

"Like father, like daughter." He took a step forward. "They have to rub your nose in it!" He took one more step.

"The Schwanz's and their love of *shit!*" And with the last word he smacked Ula across the face so hard she fell back across the marble table into the sofa. Madame's wig slid to the floor, exposing Ula's mangy pate.

Sandro ripped off his shirt and rubbed his face with the cleaner parts of it as he paced around the room to control himself. Ula sat on the sofa hugging her bag and stared ahead.

Penny picked up the hairpiece and dropped it in Ula's lap.

"Out. Now."

Still in shock, Ula rose slowly and drifted out into the hall, clutching the hair. Penny closed the door gently behind her and locked it.

"Why don't you wash off?"

"*Baugh, que puzzo.* Yes, I take a shower."

He disappeared into her bathroom.

She took the zip drives and stacks of disks over to the marble table. Untangled the trode wires and wrapped them around their box. She called Ramón. He was out, but Bobby answered.

"I'm calling the police," she yelled to Sandro.

"No!" Sandro shouted back from the bathroom, where he toweled himself dry.

"She threatened to kill me before," Penny said.

"She will go to Dick's now. They can deal with her."

"I'm afraid she'll try to burn the place down or something when she gets her wits back."

"The wits will not come back for a long time, I think, but Dick and Züt will," he said, half dressed and on his way to the kitchenette.

Bobby knocked and Penny let him in as he popped a huge pink gum bubble.

"Wow, wha' happen'? P.U, shmells 'ike shit."

Sandro came back with a mop, a bucket of Lysol and his pants rolled up to his thighs. Bobby watched in fascination as Sandro mopped.

"Dja call 911?"

"No."

"Buh—"

She looked at the boy.

"Bobby, take that gross gum out of your mouth and listen carefully. I need you to go to the hardware store and get a really big, scary looking lock for that door, okay? Don't get your dad involved. Ula went berserk, and we all know how your dad is about her, right? Here's three hundred dollars, keep the change."

"No problem. Hey, did she take a dump on your floor?"

Penny rolled her eyes and latched the door after him, collapsing on the clean sofa.

The place, at least, smelled like lemon disinfectant now.

"Here is coffee, dun' worry," Sandro said, as he sat down next to her in a daze.

"Something really bad may have happened," she said.

"Really?" He made a sarcastic face.

"No, I zapped the holo Ulas from existence."

"All one thousand? How did you do that?" He looked up from his demitasse.

"Just now, when Ula threatened me, I wasted her site. One mean line of Unix, 'rm -rf'....end of the world... deletes everything," she said, blowing on her coffee. "I made a tar archive, (that's a standard way to back stuff up,) but now both computers are history." She downed the contents of the demitasse and fell back into the sofa.

"No more immortality for her, bravissima, that was brilliant!"

"Not so sure." Penny sat up and put her head in her hands

"Bof, I dun' really care, you know."

"Yeah? Well, they do and they'll sue the pants off both of us, you know it. We could even go to jail. Jeez! Why does everything gets so fucked up around us?"

"Instant karma, she calls it."

"Shit! I'm sorry. This whole thing is my fault. Okay, I was furious. I thought I could act fast, as usual, and get away with it. But

instant karma, who can beat that?"

Bobby was back with his drill and the hardware. "She's some lady, Ula. There was the window, remembah?" Bobby mused, and drilled.

"That was me," Sandro said wearily.

"Bet she made you. And the laundry door, two times!" He showed two fingers, making a point.

"Yes, yes, my room," Sandro said, his head back against the couch. That explained the deadbolts.

Bobby was finished in no time. All she needed now was a new computer and cables to see what if anything had survived.

The hard drives were fried, their data lost in the ether. The hospital grade steel EEG set-up was fine. So were the disks, and of course, the off site storage. Never had she been so thankful for her exemplary computer habits.

Messages flashed from Dick, Beatrice, Ira and Züt. The vultures circled overhead.

She sat on the table, watching him stretched out on the couch, dark brown circles around his eyes. The Madonna and her angel still beamed down on them, wistful and calm.

*Nada te turbe...* Penny recited the mantra to herself as she turned off the lights and stretched out beside him and trembled from deep within. The building joined her as the Broadway express rumbled through, not so far below.

Awake, he pulled her over on top of him and gently rocked her. "Shhh, shhh," he whispered into the enveloping stillness and kissed her ear. Then the phone rang

They waited until the machine kicked in and listened to the message. From Dick.

"You'll never get away with this, you big cunt! Prepare for some fireworks. That one armed slob on Bouillon with his pack of lies? You got one hell of a lawsuit to look forward to, kiddo"

"Shit, shit shit! What do we do now?"

"We get on a plane."

"What the fuh—"

"Get dressed, get your passport. A few disks. Gear is *foutu*, anyway. Pack the paintings, you have the cases? I get my lute and the crucifix. Here is my card, you make reservations."

"Wait, Concorde is history, remember?"

He was gone. Wait! Who or what could be waiting up there for

him? She had to go up. She ran out, but the elevator was already grinding up. Four flights by the stairs was quicker than waiting for it to come down again, so she unlocked the door to the ground floor. The stairs, so rarely used, were gritty and smelled vaguely of motor oil and that gray industrial paint. The light was dead, but Rodriguez had mentioned the wiring was iffy these days. Small wonder with all the rewiring Ng had done. She started up anyway, the narrow beam of her microlight showing the way, as the wire-reinforced windows were too grimy to let in anything but a smudgy halo of light. All she heard from the street was the whoosh of rubber on asphalt. By the top floor, it was eerily quiet.

Lights glimmered dully through the translucent sheets of glass that served as room dividers, from the bedroom Blob Lamps and from the icy glow of the bathroom. In the main room two dim lamps lit the penumbra; one by the piano, one over the bar. Sandro wouldn't be there, but someone was. By the window, a man with a drink. It was Dick straining to see down the street, towards West Broadway. On the piano bench next to him stacks of manila envelopes were lined up, with a gaping empty briefcase just below it.

Penny tiptoed on her stealthy Converse soles towards the laundry room. Good thing Sandro had thought to leave all the doors open. He sat in the middle of his narrow bed, lit obliquely by the street light glow, the shards of his lute lined up on his lap. Having not been up since Ula's big fit, he had no idea that she had taken her revenge on both Sandro and the world of music in this fashion.

He saw Penny and made room for her beside him, gently placing the slats of wood in the wastebasket.

"Dick's in there waiting for someone. He's got your taxes out on the piano bench. Do you know if Ula is still here?" Penny whispered in his ear.

"Taxes? Pfft. We need to go, but my crucifix is screwed into the wall. I am such a paranoiac."

Penny climbed up on the bed to check. Wouldn't want that falling on her sleeping head either. Talk about the wrath of God.

Sitting back next to him she said, "Why do you need this thing? Just think of all the suffering it's caused. If we try and take it down now—more suffering! Let it go."

"OK. But the paintings?"

"Fuck, just play it by ear. And the angel has the key code, remember?"

He got up, patted the lute dust off his pants and they began to tip toe down the hall. From where they were they had a partial view of the main room, and a fair enough idea of what was going in the glass labyrinth. From several layers in, a dark silhouette stepped out through the white glow of the bathroom and transmuted the ghostly elongated form of naked Ula in the incandescence of the Blob lamps.

Sandro and Penny exchanged glances, their blood run cold. But Ula was busy with her own affairs, possibly getting ready for bed after her bath, or whatever occupied her in the bathroom long enough for her father to come in, pour himself a drink, rifle through her financial records and now stand by the window with a drink.

Would she come out and shut the living room lights, considering that she was stark naked and there were no curtains? Had she even noticed they were on?

Sandro and Penny were of one mind now, and neither moved a muscle.

A car screeched to a halt right outside on Grand Street. Dick shoved up the window to yell out. The sound of the brakes and of the ancient window brought Ula out from her magic glass fairyland.

Penny and Sandro would have been in plain view had they not been in such deep shadow. Ula, still unclothed, watched Dick from across the room as he leaned out the window and yelled, "Beatrice! Non! Restes là en bas!"

Ula flew across the room and pushed him over the edge.

Sandro and Penny took their chances and made a bee line for the stairs, leaping down at least two at a time. All they could see beyond the Carrera parked across the sidewalk was Beatrice's bowed head as she made the sign of the cross.

"I didn't push him, the drunken fool *fell!*" Ula hollered from the window. People began to slow down and gawk at the skinny naked lady in the window and the old man sprawled on the pavement.

Beatrice rushed to her car to grab something from her glove compartment and ran across the street. Stiletti firmly planted on the Yamamoto sidewalk, she aimed up at the window. The crowd backed away. POP!

Ula gripped the windowsill and convulsed, but not because she had been shot. "Heheheh. Missed! Ha, ha, ha, you pathetic fat faced has-been. Where are those hard earned Spaghetti Western talents when you need 'em most? Yeehah! Yippity doo-dah. Giddy up, girl. Take two! Gather 'round and watch the show now, boys and girls."

Flashing her trademark killer smile, Beatrice hissed, "Idiota."

The shot slammed Ula headlong into the Bösendorfer, blasting a chord over much of lower Manhattan, from East Broadway to West Broadway; from Canal past Prince to Houston.

## EPILOGUE

Rumor has it, five years later, that an avant-garde composer returning from Dean and Deluca's that night was so struck by this chord it inspired him to explore an entirely new musical direction— that of Extra Low Frequency Waves. The Vatican has since denounced the man as the Antichrist. Fundamentalist Islam has issued a Fatwah. There is so much chatter in the media it threatens to obscure the issues of the next presidential election, where there is so much at stake as the world tumbles ever deeper into chaos. But Sandro and Penny pay no attention to this man or to the devastation he wreaks. They know it takes more than a few E.L.F.'s to bring down a civilization and are far too busy writing their latest opera with a certain one-armed librettist, and tending the chickens of the Villa Pollodio.



## Biography

Elsie Russell's bohemian upbringing with artist parents in Europe and the states provided much of the material for this novel. Her mother Andrée, a Beaux Arts Graduate, frequented the postwar Paris avant-garde art scene with her photographer brother Robert Déscharnes where she met Alfred Russell, then a rising star abstract expressionist painter, soon married him and had Elsie. Robert Déscharnes went on to become famous for his art books and life-long friendship and collaboration with Salvador Dalí. From the start she was dragged around with the rolled up canvases until deposited for high school in Rome at St. Stephen's, a prep school warehouse for jet set kids where she got a great education with her disaffected aristocratic classmates. Summers were often in Cadaquès, Spain, with her cousins and Dalí and his colorful entourage. Later, while struggling in New York as a painter, she met her spouse Jeff Harrington, Juilliard trained composer and software architect, exposing her to yet another world of dazzling misfits. For more information about Elsie Russell please visit her website: <http://elsierussell.com>

