

AN INTERLUDE IN  
DREAMLAND

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# AN INTERLUDE IN DREAMLAND

A Near Future Mystery

Alan Robbins

iUniverse, Inc.  
New York Lincoln Shanghai

## **AN INTERLUDE IN DREAMLAND**

A Near Future Mystery

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This book is dedicated to Trudy,  
who brought the past to light  
and helped me look to the future.



The world is a beautiful place  
to be born into  
if you don't mind happiness  
not always being  
so very much fun  
if you don't mind a touch of hell  
now and then  
just when everything is fine  
because even in heaven  
they don't sing  
all the time...

*Lawrence Ferlinghetti*  
*Pictures of the Gone World*



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## C H A P T E R 1

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# DEAD MAN AT A FUNHOUSE

The dead man stumbled.

Not yet grasping the simple fact of his own death, he groped his way clumsily down the hall. It was pitch black. There was nothing to see in the dark and so he saw nothing. But he still had hope.

Fingers twitching, he tried to claw his way to an exit by gripping the wall at each step and pulling himself along. In this way he could feel himself moving forward and, with perfect terminal logic, thought that each inch brought him closer to freedom. He was dead wrong about this. The path he was on was fixed, inexorable. There was only one way out and, despite his best efforts, he was following it with uncanny precision.

When the floor dipped suddenly to the right, he slipped right. When it broke up into a jigsaw of uneven tiles, he tumbled over them one by one. When it began to shimmy, he slipped and fell. Predictable as a cheap comic. And as the walls slowly closed in on him, he turned sideways, gasped for air, then squeezed through the narrow gap with a bloody moan.

A short flight of stairs at the end of the hall renewed his ambitions. He reached for the railing at the side for support, but it only snapped under his grip and sent him plunging forward. The stairs quickly flattened into a ramp down which he

rolled. Then he fell into the chair that was waiting for him at the bottom of the ramp. Exactly like he was supposed to. In fact, his timing was perfect.

The room he was now in was musty and filled with decay. The andirons in the fireplace looked like rotting teeth at an open maw. The rug on the floor appeared chewed, shredded at the edges into purple dandruff. A mirror on the wall was too pitted to see in. The walls were covered with rot. It was a living room for the deceased.

The dead man was still breathing heavy and wet as the chair he was sitting in began to move. It was an upholstered easy chair, thick and worn, but there was no comfort in it. He clenched the arms desperately as it slowly turned about and rolled out of the room.

A clown's laughter filled the still air and echoed through the emptiness. But the laugh was not funny. Not at all. It was dire, like the tolling of a bell. Hahaha hahaha hahaha. The soulless laughter of a clockwork maniac.

The moving chair stopped briefly as a creaky oak door at the far end of the room opened for it. Then it rumbled down another long, haunted hallway where portraits of ancestors lining the walls followed it with their eyes. A black spider at the end of a thread dropped down before him but the dead man did not move. Could not. And the chair pushed on towards a neon exit sign.

If the dead man saw promise in this sign, that too was a mistake. The chair was merely following a track hidden under the floorboards. It passed under the glowing exit letters and moved into a dark chamber where an enormous pendulum axe with a gleaming blade swung by. The air swooped after it. The axe would have decapitated him if the dead man had been leaning forward. But he was not. He was collapsed into the recess of the seat, shaking uncontrollably, his mouth an impossible red slit across his face from ear to ear.

He looked exactly like someone dying of laughter.

The chair suddenly stopped in the middle of the chamber. Yellowed lamps on shabby tables began to glow. This was an antique parlor filled with rundown furniture and discards. An old newspaper, stolen towels from an abandoned hotel, a chipped washbasin. The door of a closet opened on its own to reveal a jangling skeleton. Pale ghosts in raggy clothes danced around him cruelly.

The clown's laugh was now drowned out by a shrill hissing sound. If he could have looked, the dead man would have noticed slick red liquid pouring down the walls in falls. The bloody rush began to fill up the room and in a few minutes it had formed a red lake on which all the tables and lamps floated. The chair drifted across this like a specter.

The dead man was not wearing any shoes and one of his blue socks dangled in the pool. Purple dye crept up his ankle as the chair rolled to a small niche at the corner of the room, which had now become a grisly grotto. As the chair continued forward it crashed into a shelf full of fake books and the entire wall swung aside on hidden hinges.

The dead man in his ghastly chair was suddenly bathed in light.

He was outside in the open air. It was a gray day. An even blanket of clouds covered the sky. The wind bobbed a paper cup down a concrete walkway on the left. The elevated train two blocks away came to a wheezy stop at the station. A group of pigeons fluttered.

His wish had come true; he was out. Free. But it was too late for the dead man to enjoy it. The ride was over, the final exit behind him. The laughing of the clown was now joined by a pumping ditty from a calliope, no less cruel.

High up in the ionosphere, satellites of the Global Communications System that could pinpoint anyone anywhere, completely missed the dead man. He did not exist to them and therefore no longer existed at all. His pockets were empty, his card was gone; to the world and to the Net and to anyone who ever knew him, he was already a fading memory, a mere rumor of a life.

The chair continued to roll forward. It followed a curvy path, twisting and turning, as it moved to the ticket window. There it finally came to a stop, bumping into other chairs that were waiting for customers. But there were none. No one was on line. The gate was locked. It was late in November and the ride was officially closed. The clown at the entrance continued to cackle, its nose flashing at every outburst. The dead man, all illusions gone now, had come to rest under the entrance sign. The sign in spooky letters read: *Spook-A-Rama, The Time Of Your Life*. And beneath that in a more serious typeface: Restored to Its Original Condition, May 2048.

It was there that the dead man was discovered by a morning watchman who came to find out who had switched on the power. The watchman, a retired bus driver who had gotten bored with staying home, could hardly look. The dead man's face had become a dreadful funhouse mask. The red bath in which he was sitting was not just goop from the ride. It was his own blood; his shirt was soaked in a magenta cascade streaming from his mouth. Through the rag he used to stifle his gagging, the watchman could see why the dead man seemed to be laughing. His face had been slit through the cheeks. Into two deep side-splitting slashes.

Hahahaha.

Beans like stars in the firmament lay scattered across the glass surface. Enterman peered into them searching for an insight. But none came. Being naturally stubborn, he would have stuck with it way beyond any hope of success but the call was toning again. Enterman ignored it for as long as he could. He tried to imagine it toning in someone else's life, or in some websim he forgot to exit, or even in one of the other 11 dimensions of the universe. Anything. But the caller was insistent—or else completely bonko—and refused to disconnect. Finally, when the tones began to throb at the same rate as his pulse, he picked up his card and stared into it. But there was nothing there.

"Idiot!" he announced, assuming that the caller had finally given up. He slammed the card down onto the low table like a bad loser at blackjack.

The card was a marvel of modern technology of course. He could not deny that. It was just about the size and shape of, and only a micron thicker than, the playing cards they still used in Atlantic City. But the card in question was not just a plaything. This card was the key to something much grander than a winning pot...namely, all of human communication.

It was officially called a Global dataNet AccessPort but everyone called it simply *the card*. It had taken the place of the cell phone, the laptop, the portable TV, the radio, the digital assistant, the vidcam and much more. The card was access to what used to be called the Web and the phone system and satellite radio and cable television. All of that was now the one thing, the Global dataNet that people referred to as the Glob or the Grid or the Net or simspace or a dozen other names.

The card was access to all of it. It allowed you to send your image or voice or text into the system and get just about anything back out. All that on a thin piece of fluidic micro-plastic using chips made from artificial diamonds which created almost no heat and quantum computing that made everything digital as flat as a Jack of Diamonds.

The card also used haptic holography which meant that you could project the screen or a touchable keyboard into thin air and actually tap on it, feel it, manipulate it in space. Pokable pixels. The card was astonishing, revolutionary, world-changing. No question about it. Yet Enterman, cranky to the zed, hated it. Because with all its capacity it refused to let him do the one thing he wanted to do more than anything. And that was to be left alone.

In no time, just to prove the point, the toning began again. Same person, same stubborn effort to find him. He thought about throwing the card out of the window but knew that some Samaritan would just return it. You could not function in 2050 without your card. Your identity, money, and history were all at the

other end of it. But as he stared at the card lying there on the table considering what to do, he suddenly realized that the call was not coming in on it. The card was just lying there dumb. The toning was actually coming into the apartment which was zapping the sound right into his head. In other words, this annoying someone was calling the penthouse, not Enterman personally.

Rather than answer it, as he was supposed to, Enterman simply instructed the apartment to reject the call. Then he nestled back into the couch and waited for its intellicushions to reshape themselves to his dull butt. When he was again comfy, he gathered up the beans in his hands and studied them. They were ordinary kidney beans. Not phytobbeans that lowered your blood pressure or even those brainy beans they now had that cooked themselves and cleaned your arteries. The ones in his hand were run-of-the-mill natural beans from a local stand, about twenty of them. He held them solemnly for a moment, like a monk in prayer, then dropped them on the plasma tabletop again where they again scattered randomly. To anyone else, a spill; to Enterman, a test. He gazed into the scatter with the bulging eyes of a fortuneteller, trying to grasp their totality. Trying to intuit their shape. But he got nothing back.

Then the toning started again.

Knowing that he was expected to answer all calls but guilty about not, he tapped the table surface in front of him to pump up and rezone the sound on the holophonic system. The steel drums of Trinidad were suddenly everywhere in the room playing *Co-che-oh-co*. Besides focusing the sound right down to his eardrums, the system also negated all ambient noise so that the drummers seemed to be right there in all their tympany. The move worked. The toning vanished into the music like a tune in a tornado.

Enterman gazed deeper into the array of beans, trying to lose himself in the pattern. Trying to see without seeing, get without grasping...or some such Zen bullshit. But that did not work either. All he saw was a random spread of beans, nothing more. Plus, although he could no longer hear the tone of the call, he could still sense that it was out there somewhere. He could still feel the urgency of it. This was one obstinate son of a bitch, he thought, who wanted him and simply would not give up. It was infuriating.

Finally he decided that there was nothing left to do but answer the call and deal with it. He tapped on the screen to lower the music and bring the call up in a window front and center on the table. But there was no image in the window and that usually meant trouble. Why did the caller not want to be seen? Very impolite. So he turned off the vidcam at his end and said nothing.

“Who’s there? Hello?” said a tinny voice at the other end of the line.

Enterman cringed at the sound but did not answer, hoping that it would just go away.

“Enterman? Is this Enterman?”

The voice was thin and abrasive, like a rat getting a cavity filled.

“No,” Enterman finally barked back, gazing with disgust at the window with no image in it. He tapped the call away quickly, touching the surface of the screen this time as though poking a stinky fish. Then he picked up his beans and went to the kitchen to escape.

The kitchen struck him as a safer room because it was smaller than the great room and had fewer shadows. It was also cool there and quiet. Bio-skylights on the ceiling self-adjusted to the light outside and let in just enough to hint at the sun without clobbering him with it. A stand of regened bamboo along one wall kept the temperature still. The appliances were all metalized morpheum, sleek and slim and ready to transform into whatever was needed for the perfect meal. And the immense cooking island in the middle of the room was smarter than most sous-chefs. This was the kind of pricey kitchen that rich people posed in for the *At Home With* websims. They could look good there even though they never used the room because they never actually cooked for themselves. Spanking copper pots dangling from an overhead rack reflected tiny Entermans as he walked in and sat down on one of the stools which instantly lowered itself for him. But catching his own image in one of the flat-bottomed pots was another opportunity to brood.

He was small in the image but that was the least of it. All in all, he was less than he had bargained for. He was shorter than he had hoped, heavier than necessary. The balding dome at the top of his head was definitely not in the plan. He had always intended to have all that fixed but worried who he would be if he was not himself. And in any case what difference would inplants and explants make to the basic problem. It was not that he *looked* diminished; the tragedy was being it. And there was no bioenhancement for that. Nowhere in sight in that copper mirror was the sunny boy on the monocycle, the champion catcher from the high school baseball team, the graduate student with the famous dissertation, the newlywed. All of that seemed long gone. Now, as he looked into the pot hoping for a better glimpse of himself, all that stared back was an ordinary, squarish, balding fellow slouching on a stool in some rich guy’s kitchen. He slapped the pot to kill the image and sent it swinging.

Then back to the beans.

Holding them tightly in his right hand, he took a deep breath and cast them with great flair. But it was a tense toss this time. The whole mystery of the call

had thrown him off. Who could it be? No one was supposed to know where he was. But someone clearly did. And how did they know? Who was watching him? What did they want?

The beans ended up in a tight clump this time, almost a mound thanks to the counter surface which, also made of morpheum, adjusted to prevent accidents. This made things much harder because some of the beans were hidden. Still, he tried to gaze into the pileup, tried to see its inner chaos. The essence of the bunch. Concentrate, he scolded himself. Forget the call! Use your intuition! With great strain, he peered into the mound and tried to see it for just what it was... a haphazardry with logic. A sputter in the universal plan. And therefore, a thing with structure and truth. Something that could be known to the pre-rational mind.

And he almost thought he had it but then the call was back and the apartment InSens system was judging it to be important and was running it through the tap-screen in the kitchen where it had targeted Enterman like a prey. The InSens was even getting demanding, insisting that there was now an *urgent* call coming in and if it was not responded to soon then building security would be called.

It was no use. He was hunted. By the caller obviously and by the apartment too. And not just by them but by the promise he had made. One promise. It seemed simple enough at the time. It had really been Thoreau's idea and it sounded easy when he proposed it. In exchange for letting him stay in one of the top penthouses in New York—with full use of the wavemill, the FourD, the fancy kitchen, and the hydroBentley—Enterman had agreed to do one thing. One simple thing.

To answer the damn calls!

A fair trade, he thought then. But this time it was different. This was not just any one of Thoreau's calls... the usual lineup of women, lawyers, art dealers. This was not like those pointless messages he had already logged in. This call was for *him*, for Enterman himself. He could almost feel the burden as a kind of pressure on his chest. Unless, of course, that was a heart attack but he suspected that if he had the apartment take his biometrics they would be fine.

This much he knew for sure. That the caller was a woman, fairly young. Named Bonnie or Ronnie or something, with purple lipstick. She was in some kind of fix and she needed help. Probably an only daughter who was used to getting her way. But frustrated and a bit frantic. She was hoping Enterman would use his unique talents to help her. With what? A nasty husband, a missing child, a haunted home? And she already, without ever having met him, had a mound of expectations about what he could do for her.

That was it; no question about it. Enterman knew all this simply from the way she said his name. Not because he was psychic although that was what everyone thought. And not because he read it in the beans; the bean experiment was turning out to be totally useless. Nor had he asked the apartment to run any kind of voicewave analysis on the call. He did not need to. No, he knew what he knew because these were the kinds of things he knew. He knew it because the future left a trail in the present. It was a trail he followed obsessively all the time. All the way to the next calamity.

Or maybe, he thought while trying to look on the bright side, maybe he was wrong this time. Maybe the woman actually wanted a different Enterman, a robdontist perhaps. Maybe she had solved her own problem in the time it took to call again. Or maybe the toning was some kind of mirage, a computer glitch like a holoivid that got stuck in the pipeline. Each of these lived the brief lifespan of a lame idea, then sparked and died. And still the toning continued and the apartment seemed to actually be getting upset. Eventually, as alternate realities came and went, Enterman left the beans and went to answer the call. He tapped the screen on the wall over the counter to answer but slowly, very slowly, to give the caller time to give up.

No such luck.

"I'd like to speak to Enterman," she said, restraining fury. "Stop disconnecting me. Enterman! Do you understand?"

There was still no image but the voice was the same as before...tense and coarse. It belonged to the kind of woman who chewed gum while filing her nails, he thought, or was it nails she chewed while filing her gums? Hahaha.

"Hello? Are you Enterman?" she repeated. "Stop playing games with me, doll-baby. I don't have no time for this shit. This here is serious."

That she had lived all of her past lives throughout eternity in Brooklyn was obvious. But there was also a slight accent—glue on the consonants—that pointed elsewhere. The phrase *Mittle-European* came to mind, although Enterman had no idea what it meant or where it lead.

"No one here by that name," Enterman said with great enunciation.

"Is this the wrong number? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Right number," Enterman said, "wrong person. Very wrong. Give up!"

This time he delicately lowered his finger to the surface of the tapscreen, following the descent closely like an aerospace tech. The next calamity was obviously closer than he thought. But at least by answering the call he had held up his end of the bargain. That was all that he had promised to do and all that Thoreau could expect of him. Done. Finito. End of story.

He never said that he would actually *talk* to anyone.

The next array of beans was more widely spaced, which was a little better. It resembled some constellation but Enterman was not up on his stars. He studied it Talmudically, with his chin resting on two solid fists. This pattern seemed more approachable, he thought. Kinder. He tried to reach into it mentally with a sense of structures...crystals, constellations, strange attractors. Nothing was coming, but he felt that it might. He thought perhaps that he was getting somewhere, beanwise.

“Well? Is this the right place or not? Is Enterman there, yes or no? Talk to me.”

It was impossible.

Somehow he had failed to end the call, perhaps had not pushed the icon hard enough. She was still there from the last time. Crouching there in simspace, waiting for him. As though this screechy little harlot with ruby fang-nails and dead-rose lips was actually in there, inside the liquid aluminum screen, inside the Glob, living in there as his own personal gremlin.

“Is anyone home? What am I, talking to myself here? *Hell-ob?*” she sang.

Outside the window of the kitchen, Enterman could see the muted geometric roofscapes of the West Side of Manhattan. Somewhere below that patchwork of tar and asphalt, ducts and chimneys and solar arrays, there were millions of humans busily skittering. Lost to each other, to themselves, to the cosmos. Yet somehow, within that mess, one person had been able to find *him*. One relentless lunatic. It was horrifying how, despite every effort, you were still connected, Enterman thought. Still known. Always just a microwave away.

“Okay okay,” she squawked. “Let’s stop the funny business, yeah? Point number one, *you’re* Enterman. Am I right or am I right? Point two, you obviously don’t want to talk to me. But you have no choice here. So what I suggest is you stop jerking me. Izzat clear, dollbaby?”

A very slight fibrillation of the tongue helped her get through every ‘r’. Perhaps it was more *Euro-Turkoman*, Enterman thought. The Baltic countries. The lowlands. The Prussian border before the Great War. Her ancestors came here with twelve perfect diamonds hidden in their shoes, and one goat seized at Ellis Island because it had the pox.

But this was all fiction to take his mind off the shock of the call. He knew nothing of geography or languages, much less diamonds and goats.

“I’m not,” he insisted.

“Then who is this?”

“How should I know? I’ve never heard your voice before.”

“Not me! I know who I am. I mean who are you? *You, you!*”

“What difference does that make?”

An exasperated gasp signaled that the woman was finally getting fed up. Good, he thought, now go back under the hair dryer, have a nice hot glass of Transylvanian coffee, tap through your copy of *Midnight Star*, and leave me alone!

“Lookit, Mister Whoever-you-are. Can you at least do me a simple favor? Can you give a message to Enterman? A message? It’s important. We’re talking life and death here, not some bullshit.”

“I told you,” Enterman said coldly. “There’s no Enterman here. There’s never been any Enterman here. I don’t know who you want or what you’re talking about. You’ve got the wrong number and I’m not him!”

He reached over and gathered the beans for a final throw.

“Well you tell this Enterman person that *Mr. Thoreau* said to talk to me! Mr. Thoreau *promised* he would talk to me. Got that?”

At the mention of Thoreau’s name, Enterman’s wrist locked, causing his fingers to slip and forcing the toss way beyond the end of the counter. The kidney beans went rebibbling everywhere. One remained on the counter. Only one. Alone and exposed as he himself felt.

“Hello? Are you still there? Did you hear me?” she squawked. “What I said? I said Mr. Thoreau said Enterman would talk to me. *Promised* he would.”

“Talk to you about what?” Enterman asked, rubbing his head.

“About a favor, doll. A favor. You kapeesh?”

A sudden exhaustion came over him along with a sense of resignation. The feeling a spider must have when the whole stinking web is trashed by some fool with a foot.

“Mr. Thoreau, understand? He *personally* said Enterman would *be glad* to help me. As a favor to him. Am I speaking English here or is this getting through? Hello? At least grunt to tell me you’re alive.”

He grunted

“Good, now we’re getting somewheres. Tell me this, if it’s not too much to ask. Do you know when Enterman will be back?”

“He’s back,” Enterman said reluctantly.

“Good, great, wonderful. This is like pulling teeth. Can I speak to him?”

“You are,” he sighed.

“I am? Enterman?”

“Speaking.”

Connie Bell cursed as she looked at the card in her hand thinking that this Enterman creep was still there online. But he had already hung up. At least he had promised to come out to Brooklyn and talk to her in person, but that only after hemming and hawing for twenty minutes. What was the problem with these guys? she wondered as she tapped her ruby fang-nails on the counter. Thoughts of *these* guys led to *those* guys which led to *all* guys and then, quick as a snit, to all men everywhere. And in no time at all, Connie Bell was lost in her own regrets, wondering what had happened, what might happen, what would. And exactly why all the men in her life were scumbag creeps. Boys running around playing boy games. Shooting guns, drinking, and avoiding all duties whatsoever. While she, and the other women she knew, all stayed home and ran the world. The real world of diapers and dinners. It was pathetic. From Joey in seventh grade who slobbered on her and gave her an infection all the way to what's-his-name from the beach that summer that she started smoking.

And of course there was always Tony who simply ruined her life.

And here, just in time to fill the gap, was another one. This Enterman creep. What was his problem? It would have killed him to answer the call and act like a normal human being? But no, better to futz around and waste her time. Better to avoid promises and play games. Jackass!

She poured another cup of coffee from the pot, placed it on top of the other brown rings on the Midnight Star, and sat down to think it all through. Could the creeps be her fault in some way? Something that *she* did to attract them. Her boobs maybe or the kind of purple lipstick she wore. Or the way she needed so badly to be loved. Something that said—no, something that screamed—*scumbag creeps welcome*. Like a sign that read...take a number, I'll be with you in a sec. Or maybe something in her past that she had to atone for. A sin, a wrongdoing. Like the time she threw the boiling pot of water in Tony's face after he casually dropped—casually!—that he had popped Lena during the ceremony. So whose fault was that anyhow, the bastard! It was good he was dead. It marked a change, a new beginning. The chance to start all over again. She was still young. Maybe this time she could meet a man. A real man, not some dick with a scheme. But judging from the last conversation, that was not in the works. No, the sign was still up and the doors were wide open. Next!

Enterman! she spit and dumped three lumps of sugar into the coffee to replace the bitterness.

The closet, Enterman thought, was even better than the kitchen. Yes. It was a walk-in with plenty of room. And with the door locked, no one could sneak up

on him. There were no tapscreens in there so no calls could come through. Figuring that the apartment InSens probably could not even find him in there, let alone record his vitals, Enterman went in, sat on the floor, and watched the clothes hang. The rainbow of silk shirts, the chorus line of Italian shoes, and the electric rack of smooth suits seemed oddly soothing. Thoreau was too tall and too skinny, but the fact that these expensive clothes did not fit him was somehow comforting to Enterman. It simply meant no decisions to make, no choices. Nothing to do in the closet but watch and wait. Nice and simple...like prison.

But this peace of mind was short lived. He knew that he would eventually have to leave the closet. And not just the closet but the penthouse, the building itself, even the neighborhood. The call was a siren that he could not ignore. The woman had insisted on explaining the situation *in person* so he promised that he would go to Brooklyn to see her. A promise now recorded somewhere in the Glob. There was no way around it. He really *was* going to have to go out there. Outside where everything was, where things poked and stuck. Outside where doctors told you there was something funny on the scan, where psychos practiced on pussycats, where the Grid tracked your every move, and where cars suddenly lurched, for no reason at all, through restaurant windows that you were sitting near just three minutes ago if you were lucky. Outside where people were. Out into that endless, bottomless sea of circumstances that could quickly swell, rise up like a tidal wave, and engulf you.

“Fuck you!” he announced as he sat there on the closet floor and smelled the fine French neofleece of the shoes. But it was not clear who this was meant for.

Thoreau had invited him to stay at the penthouse as a kind of vacation. He had propped the scanner to let Enterman in and told him to relax there and wait out his latest rage. How could Enterman refuse? It was a lovely sanitarium...a 15-room suite with a terrace overlooking Central Park and a telescope. All he had to do was order up Irani food, roam around in the Gilligan’s Island websim, relax on the caressive couch. It was the perfect place to hide out and recover from himself...and the plan was working. Every day he needed less and less BeCalm, the serotonin inhalant. He had even stopped his pranting...a unique kind of pacing rant that he had perfected to let out his anger. He was able to focus on his beans. Things were better. But how long would that last outside in fatworld—in the sweat, as they called it—in raw life?

Eventually, Enterman managed to get himself up and dressed. He put on his standard smarT-shirt which instantly went gray to reflect his mood, the black microweave sweat pants that adjusted to the temperature, the tan high-tops that recontoured his feet throughout the day, and the brown jacket with orange and

violet flecks that reported vitals to his card. This was his usual outfit since these were the only clothes Enterman owned and he wore them like a uniform of his own personal army. In a long old-fashioned coat with no IQ at all, he checked himself in the mirror and was, as usual, dissatisfied.

This time it only took a half hour to actually open the door and walk out through it. Far less time than the last and proof that his recovery was working. It was not that he was too afraid to do it; this was no dopey phobia. On the contrary, Enterman was stuck by his own rage. He was not hiding out at Thoreau's but stewing there. And proving once and for all that it really was possible to despise an entire cosmos. All those stories on the other side, all the details of all those lives out there. Circumstances that could be imagined, pursued, and concluded. The tragedies, the triumphs. All the fragments he could not seem to avoid no matter how hard he tried. The swarm of incidence. All this struck him like an infliction and made all doors insufferable.

So by the time Enterman finally clenched his teeth and said his fuckyous and got himself through the doorway to the elevator where he scanned his hand for access, he saw it as a great achievement. A triumph of the will. Even as some kind of heroism tying him to the vast human adventure, maybe all the way back to *Homo erectus* who dared to leave the cave and go out to get a bite to eat.

The subway ride to Brooklyn is and has always been long and dark. It is a journey of the psyche as much as the body. It begins bathed the glassy light of Manhattan, descends into the mud, and ends in a netherworld where ghosts named Lennie and Sheila and Uncle Barney once lived in a 60-watt twilight. In spite of the Glob and the card and FourDs and holovids and regened food, Brooklyn was still the first stop on the train to yesterday. The borough of grit and grime. It was the place you went when nowhere else called. Brooklyn...where white bread was invented and the knickknack. Walt Whitman wrote a great ode to it that was lost in a fire on the Fulton ferry. Brooklyn...perennial home to immigrants and mobsters. There were only two reasons to undertake this journey...you went to Brooklyn to confront your primal self or to buy a mattress cheap.

Even if he had not thought about this, Enterman knew it embryonically. He had been born and raised in Brooklyn, only leaving it in his twenties to get married and start his career. He knew Brooklyn, knew its rhythms and its rhymes. Knew its streets and its slang. Somewhere inside his cells, mixed in with the cytoplasm and the protein, were the pale mitochondrial traces of Brooklyn. The attitude not the acreage.

As the neighborhoods flew by above—Brooklyn Heights, Borough Hall, Crown Heights, Flatbush—Enterman gazed anxiously out the window of the rollicking train into the guts of the subway. It was dank there in the tunnel, rotty and full of slime. The ad geniuses had come up with the idea of placing images every few feet throughout the underground. As the train passed by, these stills animated into zoetropic movies to sell stuff. Yet even these ghostly sellers could not perk up the view. Enterman watched them pushing their cars and inhalants and only felt weary. There would be no rest on a fine mattress at the end of this odyssey, that much he knew. When he refocused his eyes on his own reflection in the glass he could see the face of someone about to be tested.

The car he was in was empty and for some reason all the digiscreens were out. So no commercials, no public service messages, no news. But thanks to Enterman's unique craziness the trip was still filled with incidents. Filled with the tales of lives lived that constantly yanked his mind, all triggered by the remnants of people who had passed through the subway car. This was his own personal storytelling madness, a way of dealing with the profusion of details by reading the past in them. He noticed everything, every speck seen and guessed, and he wove these obsessively into stories.

As he looked around the car cataloging what he saw, nothing was missed. Not the smell of hair lingering over the seat nearby that was from some old codger named Mr. Lansing, he told himself, late 70's maybe, but still dapper, former owner of a car dealership, cheated on his taxes and got away with it. Or the sound of air whistling through the window that was partly open due to a chubby brunette named Diane who had thrown something out, like a gum wrapper maybe. But which gum...NuChew with the glistener? And did she plan to marry the guy from the repair shop with the scar going across his eyebrow? And then there was the tiny spot of dried grease on the metal pole that he knew must have come from a subway workman, a Ralphie no doubt, fat man with hypertension and two kids, one slow, scumming up the pole as he complained about overtime on his way home. Bad heart, big scare, disability. Can't go eel fishing no more.

Stories.

All the stories Enterman told himself compulsively to make sense of everything he noticed and through which every smudge and every creak meant something. Each one implied a history, a whole life narrative that he could only guess at. But guess is just what he did. In fact, he could not stop himself. That was the way he spent the time in his mind. Guessing at these truths, making up these stories, filling in the gaps left by traces of events. It was a mad game, a raging stab at

engagement. Futile and exhausting of course, but it was downright scary how often he was right.

He cursed and closed his eyes to press it all out. Other people's lives could wipe you out. Instead, he tried to think of something simple. Something pleasant and personal. Like round breasts in a lacy white bra, for instance. But it was no good. They too were only a missing piece, one jigsaw out of place. Because they belonged to someone in particular, someone with a name and a past and present, who went somewhere and did something. And naturally, lived to regret it.

Meanwhile, in another part of Brooklyn—this Brooklyn with so many parts that it was hard to see the whole—Salvatore Impelchik was sitting in an old retro-fitted white Buick Skylark and engaging in what might loosely have been called thinking.

Yeah, it was good to kill someone, Sal thought. Real good. It was pure and simple. No ifs, ands, or buts. No maybes, no sort of's, no we'll-see-about-thats. None a that bullshit. You killed someone, you just did what had to be done. Like a man. You looked the poor motherfucker in the eyes, held him by the throat, and sliced into his stomach just below the ribs. You didn't think twice about it. You didn't take a vote. You didn't ask God in heaven what he thought about the whole fucking thing. You just sliced up the motherfucker.

Then you watched him squirm just to make sure he was going to bleed to death and not pull through like some hero. After that, slicing through his cheeks so you could open his jaws like a bear trap was just icing on the cake. That was the fun part. But even there, you didn't make a big deal. You didn't gloat. You did not get yourself on the news. You were a professional. You knew it, everyone knew it. People expected that. You knew what you had to do and you did it. You didn't ask permission. You didn't dick around. Didn't stop to consider the motherfucker's point of view. Did not think about getting yours in return. That was all for pussywhipped limpass wimpshits.

On the contrary, if you were a man like Sal, Sal thought objectively, you were pumped from the effort and so you went and had a slice pizza. And a cold beer.

It was perfect, he thought. It was what priests must feel as they carry out God's work. Or the fucking President of the United States of America when he bombs one of those asshole countries out there. It was what had to be done and people should be grateful that there was someone like you to do it and not some fuckup dickhead who was gonna bring all sorts of bullshit into the equation.

Yeah, grateful.

"Wassamatta whichyew?" the man sitting next to him in the car asked.

“Hah?” Sal jumped.  
“Y’pizza. You ain’t eatin.”  
“Oh yeah. I was thinkin,” Sal explained.  
“You’re dreamin.”  
“I was thinkin.”  
“Don’t think. Bad for the gut.”  
“I was thinkin about that motherfucker.”  
“He was fucked.”  
“You got that right.”  
“We put’m outta his misery.”  
“He should send us a thankyou.”  
“Dead guys don’t send.”  
“His family then.”  
“You’re a comedian, Sal. Real standup.”  
“I’m just sayin. One less asshole. They should thank us.”  
“Don’t bust my fuckin gut.”  
“I think we should pay the family a visit...what’s it called?”  
“Condolence?”  
“Right. And lettem thank us proper.”  
“Mr. Targul wouldn’t go for that.”  
“Hey, *fuck* him! He ain’t my Mother Superior.”  
“You wanna cross Mr. Targul?”  
“No, I’m just sayin.”  
“He’ll cut y’fuckin dick off and fuck you widdit.”  
“I’m just sayin.”  
“You’re too funny, Sal. A real comedian.”

The car had unusually wide seats which is precisely why they had bothered to save it from the scrap heap and refit it with a diesel/hydrogen engine. You could really spread out in those seats, not to mention shove a corpse in the back without straining. Or have lunch in the front without being cramped. Sal took a slice of pizza from the box on the seat between them, looked at it for a moment, then flapped it back down. He took a deep breath and tried once more to state his case.

“See what I’m sayin? We don’t get hardly no thanks for the work that we do,” he said flat out. “People think that we’re some kinda monsters.”

“I get tanks plenty.”  
“Like what, Willy? Who thanked you?”  
“I get tanks plenty.”

“Oh yeah? And howzat? What kinda thanks we get?”  
“Y’get fuckin paid, don’tcha? Just like me.”  
“Y’missin my point here.”  
“No I ain’t.”  
“Y’missin my point.”  
“Eat y’pizza and shuddup.”  
“Garbage men get medals for all the crap they clean up. Why not us?”  
“Thassa good one.”  
“Maybe I should write to the Mayor.”  
“Do dat.”  
“Make a application or somethin.”  
“Funny man.”  
“I mean it, Willy. This gets me.”  
“Yeah?”  
“Yeah.”  
“Okay. You made y’point. Now shuddup before I smash y’fuckin face into the wall and eat y’pizza.”  
“I’m just sayin.”  
“You don’t hafta tell me.”  
“It ain’t right.”  
“I get tanks plenty.”

Somewhere out in the middle of the borough, the train punched through to an elevated track. Sunlight drenched the car and suddenly all of south Brooklyn was on view below. Out there beyond the window of the train car, the borough stretched out through Bensonhurst, Sunset Park, Kings Highway, Gravesend, Brighton Beach. Neighborhoods laid out like ancient kingdoms, square and flat, united under the sign of Coke and pizza. But Enterman knew that light was time, as Einstein said, and that looking at things was looking into the past...microseconds for the near, light years for the far. And so out there too was the greater borough, the Brooklyn of myth, that glorious past when Brooklyn was the world. The Navy Yard, the Paramount Theatre, the Horn & Hardart Automat. The Dodgers. Postcards from a gone world.

But that was then, he thought as the doors slid open and he got out. Now Brooklyn was just like every other place...hooked in, pumped up, all shiny new logo and sales pitch.

Directly below where he stood on the elevated platform, a trashy looking girl on a neat street leaned on a used Shanghai and smoked and talked on her card. A

dog whizzed on a tree. Someone was pushing an electric cart full of groceries. It was all there. Past, present and, if the physicists were right, the future too, all enfolded around possibility like a braid. The insight made him feel uneasy because it meant there was no end to anything. Enterman closed his eyes and tried to stop thinking but even that became an effort.

Following the instructions the woman had given him, he descended to Stillwell Avenue. There he could smell the sugary air of the Atlantic a few blocks away. Sunlight through the slats of the elevated track above held Enterman in an interplanetary shimmer as he stood under the platform on the street and tried to orient himself. Coney Island and the ocean to the right, the rest of Brooklyn and Manhattan to the left. Other stuff front and back. But there was also that weird sense of imminence in the air, of looming doom. As though fate itself was holding its breath. It was an odd feeling but he could not quite fix it and so he chalked it up to anxiety like everything else, and pressed on.

He was wrong about that; it was not anxiety. Unknown to Enterman, this section of Brooklyn was prone to quakes. It sat on a collide. Not the tectonic kind where undersea pressures build; this one sat at the edge of clashing cultures. All along Surf Avenue, Russian-Americans and Hungarian-Americans and Serbo-Americans had staked their claims. To the south, between the El and the water was the old neighborhood with Jewish-Americans and the Italian-Americans. African-Americans lived to the east near Brighton, and Asian-Americans were moving in to the west down towards Seagate. Not to mention the Lithuanian-, Pakistani-, Filipino-, Mongoli- and a dozen other hyphenations that were marking out their enclaves. Brooklyn was like this, a perennial anteroom to the American dream.

But in a four-block area not claimed by any of the other groups, ethnic clubs, gangs, or neighborhood associations, were a small band of strangers, strange to all the other strangers, with a past just as glorious as Macedonia or the Han Dynasty, a tale even older than Scythia or Rome. It was to these very outsiders that Enterman, who knew nothing of ancient history but was simply bouncing around like a lone bean tossed onto a table, was about to be abruptly introduced.

The house on Clinton Street was one of those indifferent row houses that pimpled the face of Brooklyn. Leftovers from a cheap building boom of the 1940s and barely upgraded for the new millennium. Some tedious architect back then had come up with a design that took the mother of all the arts, stripped it of any flair, and sold it at a low mortgage. The brick facade, the concrete stoop, and the iron railing were all built to go unnoticed through generations of TV sitcoms

and frozen dinners, computer games and low-carb popcorn, all the way up to simsets and phytopotatoes that inoculated you against piles.

Enterman opened the gate of a mesh fence that protected a barren patch of dirt and walked up the cracked concrete pathway to the front door. There was no hand scanner, only an antique buzzer covered with a happy face logo that he munched with his thumb. The buzz sounded like a zapped insect. A green fiber-glass awning over the front step gave him a sickly pallor as he waited.

Connie Bell answered the door. She was in her mid-twenties, and had the exact orange hair, ruby fang-nails, and blood-red lips he had imagined during the call. She looked cautiously up and down the street before letting him in and said nothing to him once he was inside. Her slender stiletto heels seemed to tap out a warning in Morse code as she led him down a dark hall to the rear of the house. Enterman did not know a dit from a dah.

They arrived in a cramped kitchen in the back where the washing machine was chortling through its chores. Everything that should have been soywood was vinyl with a grain, and all the yttrium was plastic with a cheap aluminum coat. The paper products—towels, napkins, notepads—had messages on them like *Treat Each New Day Like A Daily Gift* and *Grant Us The Wisdom To Know The Truth*. While most homes had tapsreens or digiwalls all over, this one had only one or two and seemed stuck in some kind of late 20<sup>th</sup> century rerun. Enterman stood awkwardly against the refrigerator and watched the eyes on a mechanical cat clock bounce back and forth and back.

“Have a seat. Take a load off. Be at home,” she said as she lit up a cigarette, squinted through the smoke, and eyed him sharply.

He was decent looking, she thought, not at all the standard creep she expected. He was thickset but not fat. Not tall but not shrimpy either. He had a straight nose, even lips, and a sharp chin. The balding, to her mind, meant seriousness. His silvery eyes were soft, suggesting a sympathetic nature. That was good. Maybe he really could help her. She was sick of the pretty boys who looked at you like you were just a board with a hole.

Enterman sat down at the antique Formica table and tried not to stick his sleeve in a cold pepperoni pizza from Fornatello’s that was lying in an open box. Even though there were no vidcams anywhere to be seen, he knew that he was being scanned. Not by the Net but by Connie Bell herself. Whether she was probing for lust or for trust, he could not tell. In fact, it was hard to see her at all through the haze.

There were dozens of cigarettes in the ashtray on the table. She had obviously been sitting in the kitchen alone all day, he surmised, eating and smoking. High

anxiety. But why? Her husband had left her; that had to be it. Left her with the mortgage and the kid. He was mean to her, of course, but she wanted him back anyway. What was his name, Tony? Maybe she thought that he had run off with her best friend. Did she really expect Enterman to find him?

“So you’re this Enterman person, finally,” she said blowing another gray column to hide behind. The newest cigarettes were supposed to balance your lungs but these seemed ancient like the kind that shriveled them. “So tell me how come you don’t wanna talk to me when I called. You afraid I gonna bite or something? What do I look like, a Martian?”

She did. She looked exactly like a Martian, he thought. And not the wise traveler of Star Voyage either, but a hungry one. Alien Gobbler, the creature that ate South Brooklyn.

“I’m incognito,” Enterman said.

“Well I’m goddamn sorry to hear it,” she barked. “I don’t feel too ace myself. Lookit, dollbaby, let’s not start off on the wrong foot. Relax, why don’t you. Have some pizza and a beer. You’ll feel a hundred percent.”

Her accent was actually less pronounced in person than it had been online and her voice was a tiny bit softer. Just a touch, hardly noticeable. The difference between a pneumatic and an electric drill.

“No thanks,” Enterman said. The pizza looked like a road kill. “Why don’t you begin by telling me why I’m here?”

“Why you’re here? Because y’dying to trow yourself in bed with me. That’s why. Am I right or am I right?”

She switched the cigarette, and the squint, to the other side of her face and adjusted her spine so her breasts were aligned. They were perfectly fine breasts, Enterman thought, but somehow that thought did not go anywhere. Normally it would, but everything was wrong about the situation...the timing, the place, the position of the planets. Besides, he knew that it was just a wisecrack. She was not really flirting with him. Not looking him in the eye, not biting her lip or playing with her hair, none of the usual cues. It was something else. She was just being a woman alone in her house with a strange man. There was a natural air of drama about it. That was all.

“Lookit,” she said, stumping her cigarette into the pizza, “your friend Mr. Thoreau was my lawyer. Years ago when I had this lawsuit. He’s a goddamn good lawyer too. He got me a lot of money for it. But that’s not why I called you, okay?”

“It isn’t?”

“See, the thing is this. I got some trouble now and I axed him for help. And he said I should go and call you.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“He said you’d help on account of you owe him this big favor. Now is this true or is it ain’t true? Tell me now one way or the other since I don’t got no time to dick around.”

“Trouble.” Enterman repeated. “What kind of trouble?”

“Y’gonna help me then?”

“I guess so.”

“Guess is bullshit. Yes you’re gonna help me or no you ain’t.”

“If I can.”

“Swell, another Mister Don’t-pin-me-down. What is it about you fellas that you never want to say yes or no, once and for all? What’s it...something about standing up to take a piss?”

“What kind of trouble?” Enterman asked again.

“It’s about my husband,” she said as she stuck her finger into a pot of coffee to see if it was still hot. It was. “Fuckinshit. S’cuse me. Wanna cup?”

“No thanks.”

She poured more coffee into her chipped cup, then descended from her high heels and scuffled over to the table. Her walk without the pumps was flat, like a woman who had married the wrong man after high school, got pregnant too soon, and spent her days playing websim soap operas and ironing blue work shirts with the name Surebuilt stitched on the pocket.

“What about him?” Enterman said.

“Who?”

“Your husband.”

“Oh him?” she said, slurping from the cup so it would not spill. It did. “Shit. He’s gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey! No fault of yours. You didn’t even know him, right? So what are you apologizing for?”

“What happened to him?”

“He disappeared.”

“And what exactly do you want me to do?” Enterman asked.

The perfume she was wearing smelled chemical, taken from one of those promotions in the Glob that you could download at home and sample. It mixed with the odors of the smoke, coffee, and pizza in the thick air of the kitchen to create a new bouquet...a reeky fragrance that made him gag.

“We’d like to find out what happened to him. That’s natural, right? I mean he was my goddamn husband, wasn’t he?”

“Who’s *we*?”

“My clan. My family, that is.”

“What about the police?”

“No police. That’s out. We’re a close knit group. We’ve lived in the neighborhood here for longer than anyone can remember. We keep to ourselves and we expect to be left alone. Do you understand what it is I’m trying to say here, Enterman?”

“Not a clue.”

“What do I have to do, paint pictures? What I’m trying to say without saying it is...we don’t want trouble. We keep things to ourselves. No outsiders. Thoreau says you’re good people, so okay you’re good people. That’s fine with us. But the police come into it, they start in axing goddamn questions, word gets around. Pretty soon we’re on fuckin 60 Minutes with that Mike Wallets sim for fucking shiteating sake. S’cuse me. You see what I’m saying?”

“When did your husband disappear exactly?”

“Who Tony? Two days ago. On Sunday. He left the house here and went over to visit Mama at the home. He went in, he went out. And that’s the last anyone saw of him.”

“His name was Tony Bell?”

“Not exactly. That’s what people call him. His real full name is Antonne Bel-larosita. Beautiful, no? He shortened it to sound more street. You know, more American. Like a hood.”

“He was Italian?”

The skin between her eyebrows rippled with concern. “Why do you say *was* right off?”

“Mrs. Bell, I’m not sure how I can help you...”

“Christ!,” she said, cutting him short. So short he could have joined the circus, Enterman thought. Okay, bad joke. But then the whole thing was a bad joke. Did she really expect him to give up his closet for this?

“Lookit, Enterman. My husband has disappeared. My husband, the man of my life! It’s not like I been married sixteen times or nothing. He was my high school sweetheart. And now he’s gone. Kaput! We don’t know where he is. So I tell you all this and you’re what...you’re touched by this? You feel bad for me? You don’t give a shit? What?”

“I’m sorry for you. I can see that you’re upset. But I still don’t understand what you expect me to do?”

“Mr. Thoreau said you could help us.”

“By doing what?”

“By doing whatever it is you do.”

“But the police are the ones who should look into this kind of thing.”

“I told you already. Fuck the police. They’re just a bunch of fuckin-shiteatin-assholes. S’cuse me.”

Upset by her own bile, Connie released a belch by pressing a button on her sternum. Then she leaned over and rested both breasts like grocery bags on the table. Her eyes were moist. She reached out and took Enterman’s hand in both of hers and held it softly. The nails were like a cage around his fingers.

“Please,” she said quietly. “It’s just a matter of axing around. He was visiting Mama at the home on Sunday. The nursing home. That’s the last place he was. Maybe somebody there saw something. Maybe a witness. A license plate, a car make. Something.”

“But what about a family member doing all this *axing*.”

“No,” she said, swatting the idea away like a gnat. “Nobody would talk to us. But you, you’re an outsider here. They don’t know you and that’s to your advantage. Plus, you got a good face. People would tell you things, I can see that. On top of which, Mr. Thoreau recommended you and we trust him. He says you found people before. He said you got this special ability. What’d he call it? He said you were...uh...a...”

“A sucker?” Enterman suggested.

“Thoreau! *Dave Thoreau!*”

Enterman was shouting but the reply seemed to be lost in a storm of frazzled bytes. To get better reception, he was standing in a vacant lot on the corner of Stillwell Avenue and West 17th Street. He was also trying to look inconspicuous which was not easy for a man alone in the middle of nowhere, with a finger in one ear, shouting into his own palm.

“You gotta move!” said a crackling voice from the card he was holding. The image on the card was fuzzy too, like beard shavings. “You must be in a bad spot. A molecular inversion somewhere up in the stratosphere scattering the signal.”

Enterman had no idea what that meant but it sounded good, so he wandered around the lot to fake out the inversion and make himself a better target for the signal.

“This better?” he shouted.

“No, use the dot.”

“The what? The pot?”

“The dot! The audio dot! It’s on the card.”

Enterman put his finger on a small round dot at the upper left corner of the card and then touched the soft valley of skin just under his ear lobe. The dot that he placed there was a sonic resonance patch, a remote transmitter. It picked up sound waves through his neck and transmitted them to the card, allowing him to talk normally, even whisper. It also converted the sound signal from the card and stimulated his auditory cells so he could hear as though the sound were inside his head. More holophonic magic.

“Is this better, Leon?” he asked, trying to angle himself towards some geosynchronous satellite he could not see but knew was up there somewhere.

“Better,” Leon answered. “Can you hear me now?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Always use the dot from now on,” Leon scolded. “What about the vid? Can you see me? I’m upgrading the resolution on your screen.”

“You can do that from there?”

“I can do anything from here. I’m omnipotent. I am the God of Telecom. And don’t shout. The dot is very sensitive. It’ll pick up your goddamn thoughts.”

“You’re kidding right?”

“Of course I’m kidding. If I could pick up thoughts, they sure as hell wouldn’t be yours. Now what do you want? I’m busy.”

In normal use, the card gave its owner instant access to all the data in the Glob. That was the whole idea. It was like an old computer terminal accessing the Web but nuked to the nth degree. By using the screen or the virtual keyboard or verbal commands, you could work your way through a trillion menus of data access. But you could also lose your mind via information overload.

Leon was created to solve that problem. Leon was an information service that Thoreau subscribed to. Most such data servers were run by ArtAn, artificial analysis systems with sophisticated humanlike interfaces known as virmen or virtual men and women. But Leon was one step better than that. He was an actual person—a human being named Leon Weyerhauser—who sat at a central data hub and acted as a kind of traffic cop...fielding requests, answering queries, managing information. Having an actual human being at the other end of your infiface was very hip, very helpful, and hugely expensive. Only Net executives, celebs, and media lawyers could afford it. And they did it for the same reasons they would hire chauffeurs when their cars could drive themselves or use family physicians instead of robodocs. In the virtual age, having a real person at your beck and call was the ultimate perk.

But unlike the avatars of ordinary search engines, Leon was also a bit iffy. Success relied a great deal on Leon being in a good mood. This was rare.

“Well, what do you want?” Leon repeated testily.

“To patch my call through to Thoreau.”

“Well I can’t do that.”

“I thought you were omnipotent.”

“I *can* do it all right. I mean I won’t. He asked me not to. He’s on a yacht in the middle of the Caribbean for chrissake.”

“So? There’s no Glob in the Carib?”

“So he said not to bother him.”

“I know, but this is important. You have to get him. It’s an emergency.”

Leon’s face disappeared from the tiny window just as Enterman noticed that he was being observed by some kid standing at the chain link fence around the lot. To avoid attention, he started pacing off sections of the dirt as though measuring the empty lot for the city. The kid grinned like a dope. Was a dope, Enterman thought, with bad breath and funny feet that the other kids made fun of. Melvin. A dopey little Melvin who would grow up tubby and marry a woman named...

Suddenly Thoreau’s face appeared on the card.

“Enterman? Can you hear me? Is that you?”

“Thoreau? I can hardly hear you.”

“I’m out on the yacht. The transmission’s a little screwed up. Wait a minute, I’ll switch bands. Is that better?”

“A little.”

“There’s no picture. Have you been kidnapped or something?”

“No.”

“So what’s the matter? Is everything okay in the penthouse?”

“That’s not why I’m calling.”

“Have there been any messages for me?”

Enterman tapped the card and accessed the notes he had made on the calls, reading these summings as headlines. Like most lawyers, Thoreau reveled in upshots.

“Miller extended the deadline for the signatures. And Gordon Borden said to go ahead with the Pike Finley deal. He got the commitment.”

“Fantastic. That’s only worth about seven million. Not bad for two phone calls. Anything else?”

“The Jaguar’s fixed. The fuel cell died.”

“What Jaguar? I have a Bentley.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Nothing from Shepherd?”

“Who?”

“A guy named Shepherd.”

“No.”

“Fuck. Are you sure?”

“Look, Thoreau, who exactly is this Connie Bell?”

“You should see the water down here buddyboy. It’s crystal clear. We went snorkeling at dawn this morning. I mean this is a fucking paradise. I may retire here. Like tomorrow. I told you to go to law school with me, *schmuck*.”

“Connie Bell,” Enterman repeated.

“What?”

“You said I’d help her out?”

“Oh that. Just help her find out what happened to her husband. He disappeared or something.”

“Why me?”

“Why not you? You’re not doing anything.”

“Yes I am. I’m looking after your thirty million dollar penthouse. Protecting it.”

“No you’re not. What you’re doing is staying at one of the primo apartments in New York and paying *bupkis* for it. This is the least you can do.”

“I told you I’d dust.”

“At two hundred grand a month I don’t have dust, pal.”

“Put some in, I mean.”

“Just do it, amigo. It’ll be good for you. Get you back to real life. All you have to do is ask some questions. This guy, the husband, was apparently a real creep. He probably just ran off with some little chicky-poo. Find out what you can. Use your quote *secret powers* end quote.”

“What about hiring a private detective?”

“No good. They don’t want to do that. They want a very discrete investigation. I told them I’d help them out and that means *you*. Anyway, it’s right up your alley.”

“Who is *they*?”

“I gotta go buddy. Carmela’s cooking some fish on the poop deck. Listen, if Shepherd does call have Leon put it through to me here on the yacht. No one else though, just Shepherd. Keep on top of it and I’ll see you in three weeks.”

“Who is *Carmela*?” Enterman asked.

But Thoreau had already vanished into a hurricane of ruzz that shot through Enterman's head like an earache. The jolt made him jump which made the kid burst into laughter and the kid's mother pull him away from the fence like at the zoo. Fuckyou Melvin, Enterman spat.

He hated kids.

It was only three o'clock in the afternoon, still early enough to follow a few of Connie Bell's suggestions. Luckily, there were only a few to follow. Despite their six-year marriage, Connie Bell could not provide much information about her husband. He was a guy, she had explained. Just a guy's guy. He worked at the Coney Island Amusement Park where her family ran some of the rides. He liked—in order—ice cold beer, old carburetors, Godfather websims, and their six-year old daughter Annie. The holophoto of him that Connie presented to Enterman showed just what he expected...a typical neighborhood delinquent in a muscle shirt and black jeans with too many plans and too few ideas.

According to Connie, Tony had left the house at eleven o'clock in the morning on Sunday and went to visit Mama at the home. The Mama in question was not his own mother but Connie's grandmother. Her name was Mama Nostromento. The home was a nursing home—what was now called an eldercare facility—known as the Central Borough Care Center. Mama Nostromento was a resident there. The facility was only a few blocks away from Coney Island and seemed a likely place to start. Enterman found the bland clinical building on the corner of Mildew and Rank and went in. The receptionist at the front desk pointed him to Room 213. But his walk down the long corridor was more of a gantlet than a stroll. The hall was too bright and too cold, devoid of decor. Strict and functional. It was painted in Pepto-Bismol up to a midpoint, then NutraLax the rest of the way. It smelled like a colon.

The wall on the left was lined with glidechairs containing one ancient, white-haired lady in each. Hunched over in their seats, the chairs hovering gently, their heads bent at odd angles, their eyeglasses glimmered in the starchy light. Veiny arms were capped by gnarled puffs of fingers, and legs like poles were stuffed into square white shoes. It was a reception line in the wedding of life and old age. Enterman had never been in a nursing home before, never wanted to be there again. He sped up.

The rooms he passed as he pushed himself down the hall were numbingly clean. Their white monotony was only broken by the blinkering of the digiwalls and an occasional cutout of an orange jack-o-lantern left over from the previous

month. Turkeys would come next, then snowmen. Seasons by scrap. Time was flattened there, thin as oaktag.

A woman sitting in one of the glidechairs looked up as he passed by. Her face was corrugated but her eyes twinkled behind glasses that rippled. Like most of the other women there, she was too old to have robosurgery and so was wearing morphing lenses. Enterman smiled and so she reached her doughy arms out to him.

“Give us a big kiss, it’s been so long,” she said.

He knew she was talking to the past not to him, looking into the mirror-maze of events and yearning for what she saw there. He skipped by her, happy to have escaped. But at the end of the hall he stopped and turned. She was still watching him, still waiting. Yanked by the pull of her wishes, Enterman walked back to give her a hug around the shoulders. And why not? he thought, everyone was in love with some fiction or other. He had simply become hers.

“You haven’t been to see me in so long, I forgot how handsome you were,” she said.

“Nice to see you too,” he said, pulling away.

“Come back soon, I’ll tell you a few more sweet lies,” she whispered.

He promised to do just that but then practically sprinted away to the elevator.

Room 213 was different from the others—everything about it—from the twiggy odor to the dusky light to the dense air. There was no digiwall, no tap-screens. No tech at all to speak of. The room was what everyone called a blind...a room or place that was not tied into simspace, not on the Grid at all. Such places were unusual in the wirefree world and Enterman felt a bit cut off there.

The railing on the bed had been covered with a thick black lace curtain, all around like a web. Instead of the usual bouquet of daisies on the windowsill, there was a glass bowl filled with water and surrounded by a ring of smooth stones. More stones lined the edges of the bed. A tray nearby held a huge pile of apples and hazelnuts. The only decoration on the wall was a massive collection of feathers, all tied together with a sprig from some bush and laced with a chain of berries.

Mama Nostromento herself was propped up on a bunch of fringed pillows. One of them was embroidered with words in a foreign language Enterman did not know. Her shoulders were covered with a color-crazy shawl. Around her neck were a series of brassy necklaces and two huge earrings hung from her lobes like bells.

Enterman watched her as she slept. She was quite old, like most folks in nursing homes, but she was not withered from age, quite the opposite. She was overweight, swollen. The white bedsheet covered her like a tarpaulin and one naked

foot stuck out at the bottom where her sole was crackled like antique china. Her hair was a silver wool pulled tight around her head. Her face was wide and seemed to be resting on a second chin under the first. A pale mustache lined her upper lip; sprigs of thicker hair seeded her underchin. There was a large spool of skin on her cheekbone. Between snores, her lips parted slightly to reveal tiny points of greenish teeth.

She looked like a grande dame of the palm readers lying in state in a gypsy mausoleum.

The entire left side of her face was pinched into a wince and her left hand was clenched into a tight warped fist. Even as she slept, the knuckles on the fist bulged and trembled. It was hard to tell anything about her, to tell her story. The whole situation was entirely too strange for Enterman to suss in spite of the fact that he was obsessed with trying. So he sat down in the chair at the side of the bed and waited, not wanting to wake her but not willing to leave. And not quite knowing why he was doing either.

The sunlight faded, sounds of chairs gliding down the hall died out, visitors said their goodbyes. Mama never once woke up. At least that is what Enterman thought. His back had been turned when, just as he was getting up to leave, she popped open both eyes. Like cherry bombs. They caught him in a freeze frame midway between sitting and standing. He did feel a change in the room, a flutter in the air density, but he could not pin it down. And when he looked back, her eyes were shut closed again. He left thinking he had not disturbed her at all.

And then again there was the night, always the night. Despair grows best at night. The negative light of the moon nourishes it. And the dampness in dreams keeps it soft and swollen. Like mold growing. Daytime is fine for thoughts and plans, but hearts mature from dusk to dawn.

Enterman dreaded the night.

If each day had become a menu of irritations from which he had to choose, the night's offering was far worse. There in the silence his emotions were free to roam. Stories loomed. For some this was a form of liberation but not for Enterman. Freed of all conscious intention, his thoughts always came back to *the thing*. Back to the accident. No matter where he wandered in his distractions, at night he always always came back to her, to Isabel. And to the chilly cave inside where her memory now was.

He shivered.

Four years had passed since it happened yet every night it was the same routine. It started with the usual sleepy drifting. Then the memory of some sensation

would begin it. Something trivial like the color of a particular pair of shoes or the sound of her hum. The smell of that biosoap she used. The little crease at the side of her neck near the collarbone when she turned her head. Anything like that. Then came the rush of recollections, the flood of moments past. The meal on that boat when they got sick from the wine, the day at the museum when they were caught smooching, watching that play and playing footsies. But none of that lasted very long. In a flash it was the event itself that came...the knock on the door too late to be good news and then the cop with the kind face telling him that there had been an accident. The feeling of being punched in the soul. And all the rest. The eternal trip downtown. The weeks in a state of disbelief. The eulogy. And then all that remained...the draining pain, the emptiness, the rage. And the fuming at the God he did not even think existed.

Always the same ritual. The entire cycle of grief, quick as a flip book, leaving him worn out and alone.

As always, he tried to think of something else. Anything else. Other details: the 2043 World Series numbers; winning numbers in the lottery; the number of teeth on a comb. Number of islands in the Gulf. Any number that would numb. But it was no good. Dreamy sleep was an enemy because in every corner of the silence she was there again. It was Isabel's body he smelled, her lips he touched, her ghost that haunted the inside of his eyelids. As though he had stared too long at the blinding sun. He had. Now the blaze was written inside his closed eyes and the memories burned there forever. There was no shutting them out.

No matter how he twisted and turned he could not get himself to forget. No way to unknot the neurons. He did not need nightmares, he had his memories instead: the angular shape of her chin, the toss of her auburn hair, the bumpy-bump of her spine. He remembered everything. Remembered so well that it hurt. They had just gotten married and moved into the new apartment. They put their name in the lobby scanner, they made plans, bought a oaklite table. That table, the dark one with the angled legs from the Indonesian fellow with the basement store. Then just like that...the accident and the long slow tearing of the heart. I really love you, she said. I love you, really. Really love. Her voice, now just wind in a windy tunnel, hard to grab.

He knew he was supposed to let go of her. Let go of all of it—everything they had together—and move on. That, after all, was the great trick of being alive, the grand sad feat. You were supposed to hold on to what you had with all your might, to completely immerse yourself in your little world, and then, at any given moment, be ready to let go of it, any part of it or all of it, totally and completely. Just like that.

It was a nice trick if you could do it. Enterman knew that. But he could not do it because knowing was not doing.

And so every night, he went through the same bitter routine until he fell asleep. And then once asleep, the same dream. It started out pleasantly enough in some apartment somewhere. Big apartment, full of windows. Suddenly becoming aware that he is dreaming, he floats up and out and into the sky. And she is there. Soon they are flying together, hovering above the city, as lights glow below. Then just as suddenly she begins to fall. Fall and fall. He tries to stop it, tries to change the outcome, to wake up. But this is useless. He cannot reach her hand in time and can only watch her plummet.

As she hits the hard earth, she shatters like a crystal ball into a zillion sharp slivers that cut.

In the morning, recovering from the night and after the usual battle with the front door, Enterman scuttled back to Brooklyn. It was the first time in months that he had something to do and this alone gave him some impetus. Perhaps Thoreau had been right after all, he thought, as he again descended from the elevated train. Perhaps getting out would help. On his card he had the list of people Connie Bell suggested that he talk to. He spent the morning visiting them all: the friend named Jerrie who sold biotic jewelry from her living room while her baby barked; the fix-it man with the titanium arm and the pile of smart shoes that had gone dim in his shop; the waitress at the Tree of Life diner with the pencil in her hair; the hairy guy from the Knicknack Knook. Even Moe of Moe's MegaBingo. But in spite of what Connie had suggested about their willingness to talk to him, they all met his questions with blank stares.

Which brought him finally to the old house on the corner of Lincoln and Washington Streets. It was not a house really but much more...a true mansion from the days long before the steelwood prefabs that filled the neighborhood now. It was built, Enterman decided in a storytelling reverie, by some rich clothing magnate from the Black Forest who had invented multi-knit socks, who had twin girls both named Lucy, and who went nuts and left the house to alcoholic heirs.

With the sunlight dusting its speckled skin, the house resembled a monstrous and neglected sand-castle. It was set at the back end of a lot surrounded by untrimmed bushes and a stone wall with an iron gate. Most of its many windows were broken or boarded up, and the stone arches over them were decaying like bad gums. A three-story turret on the right and the second floor balcony on the left were both hazardous now, as were the massive stone steps that led to the

entryway. Enterman was sure that he recognized the place from a slasher websim called *Death On The Second Floor*.

Soon it would be bought, he thought as he walked through the gate, and broken up and sold as hypercondos. They would give it a name like The Washington Arms and put it on the Grid and put a hand scanner next to the front door. Helical toilets and digiwalls all around. But for this one last moment the house seemed defiant, a big old strange house hanging on stubbornly to its past glory.

The home belonged to Gaspara Nostromento. He was Connie Bell's father and Mama Nostromento's son. Connie explained carefully that he was also the head of their "so-called clan." Clan. That was the word everyone used to describe the odd extended family to which they all belonged. The clan, from what Enterman could surmise, was more than a handful of uncles and aunts. It was more like a tribe, a large collection of smaller families...the Bellarositas, the Nostromentos, and others. They all lived in this section of Coney Island, insulated and separate. They never mingled, they never left the area, they kept to themselves. And they married within the family...no newcomers came in.

Connie had said that if all else failed, Enterman should go and talk to the old man. To Nostromento. All else had failed. So he stood at the front door and banged the brass knocker that was shaped like a pumpkin and waited.

The fellow who answered the door was a somber gent in a dark, ill-fitting suit. A budding undertaker, he duly undertook Enterman through a series of vast, empty rooms. Sliding oak doors that were off their rollers and missing glass panels, separated one grand room from another. At the end of one hall there was a large pig tied by a rope to a table. Enterman exchanged double-takes with the pig but got nothing from it. His guide followed a path of footsteps on the dusty floor to what had once been the library of the mansion and ushered Enterman into the room. He motioned for Enterman to wait, then left abruptly without saying a word.

The library room was ashen and bare, snug as old bones. The walls all around were lined with empty dusty shelves. Once a treasury of books had filled those shelves, their gilded spines touched gingerly by a lover of texts over a brandy and a loosened collar. But now only a few sickly volumes broke the horizontal monotony of the lines. There was no light on inside the room but broad thick bars of daylight coming in through window slats were sculpted by the dust into buttresses. Bleak wainscoting around the perimeter gave the room the feeling of a crypt where skulls were kept.

Gaspara Nostromento was sitting behind a large desk at the other end of a frayed carpet. He was wearing an old gray suit with wide lapels that could have

been salvaged from a lawn sale. A white shirt without a tie was buttoned up to his neck. His black hat sat flat on his head like a lid. He was leaning back in a chair, one heavy boot up on the blank surface of the desk, and holding a cocktail glass in his hand, studying the swirl. He seemed to be in his 60's, but tight and spry. His eyes were deep, the sockets severe. The skin that covered him was leathery and cracked at the folds. A scratchy white beard covered the jut of his jaw. His head was narrow, as though squeezed in a vise, Enterman thought, or maybe a vice. And if so, which one?

Enterman sat down in the only other piece of furniture in the room, a cheap folding chair on the near side of the desk. It warped under his weight. Nostromento gazed grimly into his eyes, caught himself predicting the past, then grinned around a cob of yellow lower teeth. His beard had flecks of paper in it. There was a smell of ammonia in the air.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Nostromento asked.

The old man's voice was sonorous but with a slight rasp. He could have been an old stage ham reduced to doing commercials for cyto-brand. His accent placed him somewhere on the rail line between Bucharest and Brevin, Enterman thought, assuming there was one.

"Drink?" he repeated, pointing to a grungy bottle on a wooden tray that held a strange white liquid. His third finger had a silver nail. The fluid looked like ooze from a dyspeptic goat and Enterman refused.

Pretending to scratch his nose, Enterman whispered the words "record this, please" into the thin air.

"What was that?" Nostromento asked.

His hearing was apparently better than his bearing.

"I said no thank you," Enterman fibbed. "I came to talk to you about Tony Bell."

"So you did. So you did, indeed."

Nostromento's response was cut short by the sound of wailing. It was distant and muffled, but a hellish sound nonetheless. Like a cat trapped in a burning trash can. The sound gave Enterman the creeps and he shook to rid himself of it.

"Have you found anything out?" Nostromento continued, quite unfazed by the sound as it died away.

"I went to the home to see Mrs. Nostromento yesterday but..."

"Mama? You went to see Mama?"

"Yes, Mama."

"*Essavolente Mama hiero.*"

“Excuse me?” Enterman said, but Nostromento replaced the question with one of his own.

“And why, might I ask, did you do that?”

“To see if she could help.”

“I see. But when you got there, of course, you could not wake her.”

“That’s right.”

“Of course not. Sleeps like a goddamn corpse she does. Sleep of the dead. Nothing on earth can wake her. *Etta Dormetere*.”

Enterman raised his eyelids to wait for a translation of the last part but it did not come, so he continued.

“Then I decided to come here. I thought you might be able to give me some information.”

“Did you now? Did you think that? And what made you think that?” Nostromento asked, dropping his foot like a rock and sitting straight up in the chair.

“Connie said you might. She said I should talk to you first.”

“Ah, Constantina,” he said and relaxed again. “So why did you go to Mama first then?”

“I don’t know. It was on the way to the train, so I stopped by. Is that a problem?”

“Ah! On the way. I see, I see. No, it’s no problem at all. And now you have some questions you would like to ask me? What would you like to know?”

“First of all, Mama Nostromento is your mother, right? And Connie is your daughter?” Enterman recapped.

“You have a perfect understanding of these matters, Mr. Enterman.”

“Enterman, no mister,” Enterman corrected. “Just Enterman.”

“Very good.”

“Now my understanding is that Connie married her husband Tony...”

“Antonne,” Nostromento said, giving the end an uptwist so that it rhymed with Jonah.

“Yes, Antonne Bellarosita. She married him about six years ago. They have a daughter named Annie.”

“Anadastara,” the old man said, relishing the syllables. “Anadastara Bellarosita. It is beautiful, no? Like a song. Why do they change it, these kids? Annie Bell, Annie Bell. That sounds like a clothing outlet.”

“I understand that this whole neighborhood is kind of an enclave.”

“Enclave? What does it mean, enclave?”

“Everyone in the neighborhood is part of the same family, from the same background. Tony too.”

"The clan you mean. Our clan lives here."

"That's what I thought," Enterman said and waited for further explanation. But as it was not forthcoming, he took a stab. "You're not gypsies by any chance are you?"

Nostromento exhaled a single blast of a laugh.

"*Encantera Gypsienda*," he said to the air. "No, I don't think so. I don't believe that is the case at all."

"No?" Enterman asked. "So where exactly are you people from? The clan I mean. Originally. The Black Forest or something?"

"What does that matter?" Nostromento huffed. "That has no bearing on our present troubles."

"I'm just curious."

But the moment in which he might have spared Enterman his discomfort was filled with the wailing again. This time it started out at a high pitch, surfed through a low moan that went on for some minutes, then took a brief melodic turn before it died out again.

"Did you hear that?" Enterman asked.

"The fire engines?"

"No, that sound. Like a..."

"Is there anything else, Mr. Enterman? I have business to take care of today. Or is that all you wanted to ask."

"It's Enterman, plain and simple."

"I see."

"I am trying to piece together what Tony did on Sunday, the last day he was seen."

"An excellent idea. And I am sure that you will."

"Connie said that Tony left the house at around eleven on Sunday to visit Mrs. Nostromento."

"He did, did he? *Antonne equesta diano lunde*," Nostromento said low. Then in a louder voice he added, "Mama, Enterman. Everyone calls Mama Mama."

"Yes, Mama. He got to the home at around twelve-thirty. But the home is only a few blocks away from where he lives. Do you have any idea where he went during that hour and a half?"

"I wish I did."

"The receptionist at the home said she thought that he visited with Mama for about fifteen minutes, then he left. He normally would have either gone home or back to work. But he was never seen again. Is that about right?"

"I ask you."

“Don’t you know?”

“Of course I don’t know. That is exactly why we are hiring you, sir. To find out.”

“Connie said that Tony worked at Coney Island. What did he do there?”

“I couldn’t say,” he said.

Nostromento’s chair squeaked as though a mouse was caught under one of the legs.

“You don’t know?” Enterman asked.

“You will have to ask Connie that.”

“I did. She didn’t know either. All she said was that he worked at the Spook-A-Rama, the funhouse ride.”

“She said that, did she? You see, it all falls into place. Now that you mention it, I believe he did work there.”

“But the park is closed for the winter. So what did he do there?”

“He must have been a watchman. That would make the most sense, don’t you think?”

He was lying, Enterman thought, that much was clear. He could sense it in Nostromento’s voice. Restraint in trying not to say too much. Alternating questions and statements. Typical pattern. But there was something else too. Something he was doing every time he lied. A break in the pattern of his behavior. A hesitation, perhaps. What the gamblers call a *tell*. It was too subtle to be picked up by the ordinary observer but clear to Enterman because he was not ordinary.

“Connie said everyone in the family works at Coney Island,” Enterman said.

“I suppose you might say that.”

“Because I might say anything or because it’s true?”

“What we have here is a complex situation, Enterman. Our clan has had a long history with Coney. Way back before the amusement park even, back to the time of the hotels. Once Steeplechase opened, many of us started working at the rides. Still do. All sorts of jobs, you see?”

“Tell me, did Tony visit Mama often at the nursing home?”

“Connie knows that. Mama seemed to have taken a liking to him, but for what reason I cannot say.”

“Did Tony have a car?”

“He may have.”

“Did you ever meet the man?” Enterman said with annoyance.

“I am sorry but I cannot help you much. I did not know Tony very well.”

“He *was* a member of the clan, wasn’t he? Your son-in-law? You must have seen him at family gatherings.”

“*Ette Antonne shee*,” Nostromento said in an aside. “Yes, he was that. He was one of us. But not someone I saw very often. You see, although it is our custom to marry within our own group, Antonne was a—how do you call it?—a black sheep. In trouble with the law. He was in prison once. A terrible shame to us.”

“But you still want to find out what happened to him?”

“Certainly. He was my daughter’s husband, after all.”

“Was?”

“Is.”

The chair squeaked again. That was it, Enterman thought. A squeak on every lie. Like an exclamation mark. Nostromento was recoiling from his own fibs and that made the chair squeak. Enterman decided to test out the insight.

“And you have absolutely no idea what might have happened to Antonne Bel-larosita,” Enterman asked.

“No. No. No idea at all.”

Squeak.

“I’m afraid that doesn’t give me very much to go on,” Enterman said.

“But I am certain that you will turn something up,” Nostromento said.

“And why is that?”

“You were recommended to us by a great lawyer. He told us you have special abilities to discover things. He said you have had great success finding people.”

“I found a missing child once, that’s all.”

“Yes but by noticing things the police did not. By seeing deeper than the ordinary person. You have some kind of special sight.”

“I just have a good sense of intuition, that’s all.”

“That is why I know you will be able to help us too. I know it. Perhaps you might go back to the home. Ask a few questions. Perhaps someone there saw something. A license plate, perhaps. Something small that most people would miss. We are putting our faith in you, sir. To find out what happened to our boy Antonne.”

“License plate?” Enterman repeated.

But their conversation was again interrupted by another wail. This one was long enough to be used in an ad, a theme for the house of pain. In deference, Enterman waited for the hideous tune to run its course. Nostromento gazed upward as though peering through all the floors of the house and into the clouds above.

“What the hell was that?” Enterman finally demanded.

“Hmmm? What’s that you say?”

“That sound. Don’t tell me you didn’t hear it that time.”

“Sound? Must be cats. Cats all over this neighborhood. They eat the trash.”

“That one was *being* eaten.”

“*Solunnia!*” Nostromento said as he gulped down the last of his drink.

Standing up, he looked slighter and frailer than sitting at the desk. His shoulders were narrower and his wrists bonier.

“Good morning, Enterman. I wish you good luck with your investigation.”

“Could Tony, by any chance, have taken off on his own?”

“Taken off?”

“You know, run away. Left Connie and the kid and the whole clan behind.”

“You tell us, sir. You tell us.”

“Because if that is the case,” Enterman said, “then he may not *want* to be found. It’s very easy to cover your own tracks. That would make it pretty much impossible to find him. I couldn’t help you then.”

But Nostromento was no longer listening. Instead he was staring off into blank space, slowly talking to no one at all in his own strange tongue, as though translating the entire conversation for the resident ghosts in the library.