

AN
INTERLUDE
IN
DREAMLAND



A NEAR FUTURE MYSTERY
ALAN ROBBINS

**AN INTERLUDE IN
DREAMLAND**

A Near Future Mystery

Alan Robbins

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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



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 robotodontist 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 20th 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 sligher 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.

C H A P T E R 2

▼

THE CRY OF A BANSHEE

“Can’t resist me, can you?”

“I guess not,” Enterman answered uncomfortably.

“Yes, I know. I get that a lot,” the old lady said.

Her name was Etta Travers. So said the sticker on the arm of her glidechair. Enterman had returned to the nursing home to talk to Carlson Willis, the manager. But the path to the office was blocked by a bottleneck of all the glidechairs leaving the dining room. Etta was the old woman Enterman had hugged in the hallway the day before. Unlike many of the others as they were sliding down the hall, Etta was alert and watchful. She saw Enterman walking by and again reached out for a hug. But this time, assuming that he was there just to visit her, she clamped a firm grip on his hand and would not let go. The nurse gladly let Enterman take over and push her back to her room.

“It’s so nice to see you again,” Etta said, bubbling with delight.

“You too,” Enterman said, just to be polite.

Once in the room, he positioned her near the foot of the bed and waited as the glide plate stopped spinning and the chair gently settled down. Etta looked, on the surface, like all the other ladies in their chairs with her corona of fuzzy white hair covering a pink scalp. She was wearing a white knit sweater and had a shawl over her legs, laceless sneakers below. The standard issue old-age costume.

But something was different about her too and Enterman picked that up as well. She seemed younger inside than out. Her moist eyes danced behind thick

twurving lenses that twisted and curved to adjust for the line of sight. The eyes suggested a vibrancy, an inner force. Or maybe it was the way she looked around as she spoke, her neck still limber. Or perhaps the angle of her eyebrows that hinted at curiosity. There was also a slight upwards curve at the end of her lips that still held a twist of humor. These details said to Enterman that she had done something with her life, been somebody. The first ambassador to some new nation in Asia or the oldest woman to visit the moon. Something like that.

“Hey where are you going? Don’t leave yet, Nonny,” she said, as he tried to slip out through the door. “Stay and visit for a while. I hardly ever get to see you.”

“I have to go,” Enterman said.

“I know that you’re busy. You always are. But we have so much to talk about.”

“Sorry but I have an appointment. With Mr. Willis. Some other time maybe.”

To this she only laughed and said: “But you know...time is singular. There is no other time.”

The room was plain, like all of them, filled with just a few mementos of the past. There was a simple beige dresser, a few old still photographs in brass frames, and a ceramic lamp even though the light was coming from the microlumen paint on the walls. The room had a vidcam and one tapscreen for the nurses to use. The bed in the room was called a pod, one of those transforms that could change shape in an instant. At the moment it looked like a cross between a couch and a hot dog bun.

This was a formal space, a clinical place, missing particulars. A place Enterman would gladly leave. But Etta was sitting straight up, her face full of expectation. He did not have the heart to tell her that he was not who she thought he was, someone she must have known a long time ago. And if he would not tell her that, he thought, what right did he have to not *be* that person. At least for a little while. So he decided to stay for a few minutes and become her Nonny.

One of the photographs on the dresser was all faded and crinkly. It was an actual photo in a frame, not a holoshot, and it showed a muscular young man with a grand mustache posing in tights, high lace boots, and an old football helmet. He looked like a tight end from the Perverse League.

“You don’t recognize him, do you?” Etta said. “Of course you don’t. That was taken a long long time ago. Before you were born. Probably around 1915, I think. Take a good look. Do you see who it is?”

“Not exactly.”

“Doesn’t look like the old man you have seen in the usual family photos. Can you believe it? That’s Poppa, Nonny. My father!”

“This man was your father?” Enterman said, picking the photograph up like a clue in a murder case.

A quick calculation told him that if her father was a young man in 1915, she must have been born at around the same time. That made her close to 140 years old. This would have been impossible except that it actually explained a great deal. Her oddly youthful presence for example. Her peppy personality. The glinting eyes. There was only one explanation for all of that.

Etta Travers was a Methuselan.

Enterman had heard about the Methuselah Implant, a controversial experiment tried on a group of centenarian volunteers in the 2020s. It was intended to extend life for decades by manipulating the genes controlling the COX-2 enzyme thought to contribute to aging. It worked too. People who had the implant began perking up and living well beyond the normal life span. But the experiment was discontinued when they found that there was one nasty little side effect...death. Too many of the subjects died as a result of the implant after ten or twenty years. Ironic of course, since what they died of was ripe old age. But Enterman had also heard that there were some survivors and apparently Etta Travers was one of them.

“Yes, that’s him,” she said, snapping Enterman back. “Arthur Cannonball Travers. In his heyday.”

“Cannonball?” Enterman repeated. “As in...cannon ball?”

“Of course as in Cannonball, what else? Didn’t you ever hear of him? You probably only knew him as Poppa Travers. But back then when he was young, he was world famous, all over. He had one of the top acts at Dreamland. He even performed for the King and Queen of England.”

“Dreamland? What’s Dreamland?”

“Oh, I guess you wouldn’t know about that either, would you? You’re so young Nonny. So much happened before you came along. Well, you see Dreamland was the greatest amusement park ever built. It was right here at Coney Island.”

“You mean there was a park here before Coney Island?”

“No, dear. Coney Island has always been Coney Island. There have been many amusement parks here. But Dreamland was the greatest. It was the center of the universe. For us at least.”

“What exactly did your father do there?” Enterman asked.

“He did everything. You wouldn’t believe it. All sorts of things. He was a strongman at first. Oh he was incredibly strong. He used to have a tug of war

with an elephant. Can you believe that? That was his calling card. I wrote a book about him.”

“You’re a writer?”

“Don’t be silly. Under there.”

She was pointing to the lower doors on the night table. Enterman opened them up to find a small shelf with a few hardcover books on it: *Til The End Of Time* by Etta Travers, *The Human Cannonball* by Etta Travers, *That Once We Knew* by Etta Travers, *The Jester’s Horn* by Etta Travers. Enterman took one out and opened it up. He touched the surface of the page and was surprised when nothing happened. Most books now came on chamelec paper...a single sheet that contained the entire book and were read page by page with a tap of the upper corner. The older ones with bound pages like the one he was holding were now called *manuals* because you had to operate them by hand. Etta’s books were true artifacts from the previous century and were probably collectables.

“Now when that picture was taken,” Etta said pointing back to the strongman in the frame, “he was famous for getting shot out of a 20-foot cannon. It was my job to light the fuse. What a time we had, Nonny. I loved walking through Dreamland with him. He was so strong and handsome. All the girls would blush.”

“Let me understand this. You used to shoot your own father out of a cannon?”

“Yes, that’s right. My own father,” Etta nodded. “I wonder what Dr. Sigmund Freud would have said about that!”

“A real cannon?”

“No, no, dear. Not a real cannon,” she giggled. “That would not work at all. A real cannon would have blown him to smithereens.”

“Of course.”

“It was a stage trick. My family were performers, not lunatics. It was a special cannon with a moving platform inside. But don’t get me wrong, it was dangerous. It used explosives. Poppa used to strut around on the stage in his leotards while my mother set things up. Then he would put on his leather helmet, wave to the crowd, and slide down into the tube. ‘See you in Poughkeepsie, booboo’ he’d say to me. Then he ducked inside and the drum would roll...that was my Uncle Erno hitting a snare. Then I would hold the torch up in the air like the Statue of Liberty and start the countdown. The crowd would chant. Five, four...and I would lower my arm very slowly. Three, two...and I would hold the flame over the fuse. One...I would light the fuse and *boom!*”

“Boom what?”

“The explosives would fire in the pistons and send him flying. He had to jump with it or it could cripple him. He flew a hundred and fifty feet through the air and into a net. The crowd went crazy. Those were the days, Nonny, I’m telling you. Not like today at all. So serious, so cruel. Not at all like today.”

“That’s for sure,” he said. The only *boom* anyone knew about now had killed three million people in one shot in 2036.

Enterman put the book down with care and glanced at Etta. Much better than his fantasy of her as a diplomat, this woman was a writer who actually came from a family of circus performers in old Coney Island. It was amazing, he thought; not something he would ever have guessed by looking. And guessing was his genius. To the dull eye she appeared to be nothing more than an old lady in her glidechair. As though this moment were the defining one. But like all the others in the home, even the youngsters in their nineties, she had had a whole life full of people and events and moments worth knowing. Now a few flat photos and a need to tell about them were all that remained. Enterman ran his fingers over the photograph and felt the dry cracks. It would crumble soon and then nothing would be left. Nothing at all. What you had once held so tight would fall like dead petals into the river of time. He looked to the door as *the thing* began to creep into his mind and he tried to fight it and move on. Stop it, he shouted to himself, and he grit his teeth to force the issue. Etta had been watching him intently the whole time and noticed the change in his focus.

“Come on, Nonny, don’t run off. Please. I hardly see you anymore, you’re so busy all the time. Stay and have tea. We’ll talk.”

“I can’t, Mrs. Travers.”

“*Mrs. Travers?* Is that a hint or just a slip of the tongue?”

“I mean Etta.”

“That’s better.”

“I have an appointment. I have to see Mr. Willis, the manager of the...you know.”

“Will I see you tomorrow then? You always make me take the initiative. It’s very unladylike, you know.”

“Yes, tomorrow.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

She turned her head to the right as he left, offering her cheek for a kiss. Enterman squeezed her shoulder instead.

Poor Nonny, Etta Travers thought. Always so solemn. So sure and certain. Always trying to put things right, to make a neat impression. Pretty Nonny. He simply did not understand. They came from two different worlds after all. His in the industrial Midwest, hers from the circuses of Europe. His life was all about order and profit, while hers centered on fanfare. Could she ever make him see, make him understand, with his watch and his wherefore, his ledger books and his neatly combed hair? And his father in the beef business of all things? What could he know of booms and cannons, of the brassy carnival?

*Over there in Dreamland I was born,
To the toot toot toot on a jester's horn.
Did cartwheels down the glittering street,
As my love laughed and kissed my feet.*

Poppa wrote that on the back of one of his visiting cards. The strongman with his couplets. He knew. And my mother who played the clown, she knew too. We all did. Even I knew, she thought, that Dreamland was not in the past, it was in the blood. And though it was long gone, you could not grow up in Coney Island and not understand what mattered. What it was like to tug against elephants, to run from a midget with a slapstick, to fire rockets toward the moon knowing they would never land there. Or what happened when you put cotton candy in your ears. But could Nonny ever understand all that? Would he try?

Slowly, she thought, as carefully as you would bake a pie, she would show him. For it was all there in Dreamland, land of dreams. The joy of the silliness, the um-pah of the steam organ, the exhilarating delirium of beer and electricity. Sodom by the Sea they called it. But what did they know, the rich folks from Manhattan and Long Island? All dolled up in their carriages and with their parasols. They only came here on Saturdays to forget their world, to escape from the parlors, to find a thrill.

But we were different because this *was* our world. We lived it here, close to the fire. Ready to sing or cry at a moment's notice. This world where land met water, this Coney Island. Where stars were caught and tamed, where tinsel explosions marked the pulse of a thousand desires.

No matter, Etta Travers thought as she got herself into the bed and morphed it into a caress. There was time, Nonny, so much time. We are young, with all our lives ahead of us. Time to rush into the sea and kiss, sing ridiculous songs, and fall into each other's arms. Tomorrow, she thought, I will begin to tell him. Starting with the simple things like tumbling and juggling. And moving slowly to

the rest. I will take my love by the hand and lead him into Dreamland. I will hold his waist as he bends over and touches the heartbeat inside the Atlantic. Yes, plenty of time for this. Our whole lives. And with that thought in mind, Etta Travers drifted into a peaceful sleep.

“Sit sit sit,” Carlson Willis chanted.

He was a friendly man with mocha skin, a smooth face, and a sweaty neck. A handshaker in the grand style...once he had it, your hand stayed good and shook. Enterman vibrated with the greeting, then followed Willis’ gesture to a seat.

Enterman had already asked a few staff members about Sunday morning but without any success at all. No one had noticed a thing and so Willis was the next logical choice. His office was near the front entrance to the facility and Enterman hoped that he might have noticed something. His entire desk was one big tap-screen as it was in most offices but one wall of the office was filled with old-fashioned paper files on his clients. Some people still only trusted what were now called POPs...pieces of paper. Enterman could imagine what they contained. Long lives converted into columns of dates and dosages. Willis closed the file he was working on and looked at Enterman like he had something to sell.

“So, you have some questions about Mama,” he said. “I mean Mrs. Nostromento, of course. We all called her Mama here. She was a real personality. Quite a character. The staff loved her, we all did. Are you a relative, Mr. Enterman?”

“It’s Enterman. No, just a friend of the family.”

“I see. Well let me just say how sorry I am about what happened.”

“About what happened? *What* happened?”

“But isn’t that why you’re here?”

“Isn’t what why?”

“Mama’s gone. She’s not with us anymore. I’m sorry, I thought you knew.”

“Gone? That’s terrible,” Enterman said. He had only seen her for a few moments the previous day but still felt a sense of loss.

“Yes,” Willis said.

“I just came to visit her yesterday. When did it happen?”

“Early this morning. Two men came to take her. I tried to dissuade them but they were quite adamant. I naturally thought she would be much better off here. At this stage, Mama needs the kind of attention only we can provide.”

“You handle funerals too?”

“Good heavens!” Willis jumped. The question seemed to hit him on the head like a brick. “A funeral? For whom?”

“For Mama,” Enterman said. “Who else?”

“Oh dear,” Willis said, looking deeply pained. “I didn’t know. I’m so very sorry. We all are. Allow me to extend my condolences.”

Willis reached out his puffy hand again but for a soft shake this time. Enterman took it, quickly reviewed the conversation in his mind, and realized there had been a mixup.

“Forgive me, Mr. Willis,” Enterman said, “but didn’t *you* just tell *me* that Mama died this morning?”

“No no no,” Willis said, suddenly turned litigious. “I never said that. Certainly not.”

“You said she was gone.”

“Yes. But when the two men came for her she was perfectly fine. There are witnesses who can attest to that. She must have passed on *after* she left the premises.”

“Then how do you know that she passed on?”

“Didn’t *you* just tell *me* that?”

They looked at each other like actors who had memorized the wrong pages of the script. Clearly it was understanding that had died and not Mama Nostromento. Both men took a moment for the grief, now wholly unnecessary, to pass.

“Let’s try this again,” Enterman said, reliving the first handshake in his mind.

“Yes indeed,” Willis agreed.

“You’re saying that Mama was fine when two men came this morning and removed her from the home. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Exactly right. I tried to tell them she needed special care but they had orders from Mr. Nostromento and simply would not listen.”

“I just came from seeing Mr. Nostromento. He didn’t say anything about removing her from the home.”

“Not surprising,” Willis said.

“It isn’t.”

“I have found Mr. Nostromento over the years to be—how shall I say?—somewhat less than forthcoming. This is a very secretive family, as I’m sure you agree.”

“I see.”

“And no doubt he was upset about the break-in last night. We all were. It was a terrible happenstance. But luckily no one was hurt and we have doubled our security because of it. I guaranteed the two men who picked her up that nothing like that would happen again. I guess I failed to convince them.”

“Someone broke *into* the nursing home?”

“Eldercare facility,” Willis corrected. “Yes, last night at around two o’clock in the morning. They ransacked Mama’s room. Tore up the bed, slashed the pillows. Even emptied the bedpan. It’s appalling, of course. And I can’t fault him for being upset. Nothing like that has ever happened before. But this is, after all, an open facility. People do come and go. We’re not immune to life here.”

“Why did they ransack the room? Were they looking for something?”

“I don’t know. I cannot imagine what it might be. There are no valuables here, except for a few in the office safe. But they did not come near the office.”

“Were other rooms ransacked?”

“No.”

“But Mama wasn’t hurt.”

“Thank heavens.”

“Did she see the people who did it?”

“I’m sure she did. She must have. They had to move her to get to the bed and pillows.”

“What did she say about it?”

“Nothing, of course.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Have *you* ever spoken to Mama?”

“No.”

“Well, there you are.”

“Is she mute or something?”

“Mama Nostromento is suffering from some form of dementia caused by a neurovirus, we think. The symptoms are similar to Alzheimer’s but her condition has never actually been diagnosed. The family simply will not allow it. The point is that she has a great deal of trouble communicating and this is only going to get worse as the disease develops. That is why I strongly urge you to ask Mr. Nostromento to return her to our care.”

“What did the police say about all this?”

Willis leaned over as though speaking into a microphone hidden in his tapping thumbs.

“Just between us, Enterman, we have chosen not to bother the authorities. What can they do after all? What’s done is...how shall we say?...”

“Done?”

“Exactly. And, to be perfectly honest, I would rather not have word of the break-in get around. It will only upset the families of our clients, if you see what I mean. Not that everyone was all that unhappy about seeing her go, mind you.”

“Was she a problem?”

Willis hesitated before answering as he sized up Enterman's tact and eventually found it full.

"You seem like a modern sort of fellow, Enterman. If you know the Nostromento family, you must know what I mean. They are all a little bit on the *different* side. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Are they?"

"I would say so. The Friday night chants with twigs and tambourines, for instance?"

"Oh those."

"The bathing of the feet in seawater? The headless pigeon in the burlap bag? This is not usual. You know when we had our last headless pigeon here?"

"No."

"Never."

"Tell me something, Mr. Willis," Enterman said, "Are these people gypsies?"

"I thought you were a close friend of the family."

"Distant."

"I see," Willis said, sitting back from Enterman to take in the bigger view. "All I know is that they are very secretive and very tightly knit. And somewhat strange. When Mama first came here, for example, they were not able to provide us with a single link of any kind. No financials, no health records, no birth certificate, nothing on the Grid at all. As though the woman had no past at all in our modern world. Most unusual, Enterman. Everyone is on the Grid. Everyone. How else would we know we exist?"

"But you took her in anyway?"

"I had no choice. Mr. Nostromento gave us an enormous amount of cash to cover her expenses and then some. Enormous," Willis said.

And he gazed upward, his fingertips touching, in a moment of silence to grieve for the passing of the cash flow.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, at a dark booth in a Hungarian restaurant that was closed for lunch, Sal Impelchik squirmed in his seat and tried to make his case to the shadowy figure sitting across from him.

"That ain't right, Mr. Targul, if you don't mind my sayin. That just ain't right."

"Speak your mind, Sal. Feel free."

"Well, what I mean is...we done like you said. And I think that..."

Sylvo Targul slammed his thick hand on the table and it fell like the wrath of God. He was not a big man but he knew how to throw his weight. Everything on

the table—silverware, dishes, food—bounced into the air. Sal was able to catch the glass of water a moment before it landed in his lap.

“Think?” Targul said quietly.

“Well...not think so much as...figure.”

“Oh. So you *figured* something. Did you, Sal?”

Targul leaned forward to block the light so that his face was completely buried in an ominous gloom. He was dressed like a Baltic assassin, which is precisely what he was. Black turtleneck and overcoat; an outfit that vanished in the shade. Yet even through that darkness, Sal could detect the heat of his rage like a glow.

“Hold on a minute, Mr...”

“You listen to me, Sal.”

The words came out with the slow finality of a death sentence.

“Sure, Mr...”

“You work for me, yes?”

“Definitely. I mean, of course, Mr...”

“So that much is clear.”

“No, I’m only bringing this up because...”

“And while you work for me, Sal, there’s a very simple rule to follow. You know what that is?”

Targul picked up a fork as he posed the question and began to examine the tines closely, like a coroner studying toes.

“Rule?”

“It’s this...you don’t think. You don’t *figure*. You don’t analyze. You don’t assess. You don’t evaluate. You catch my drift here?”

Sal smiled blandly to hide the terror he was feeling and inched back slightly into the cushion of the booth. But Targul, master of nuance, compensated by leaning that much more towards him. One of the overhead lights hit his face from this new position, spotlighting a cold dead eye. Targul raised a grotesquely broken first finger as though reprimanding a bad boy.

“This can only get you into trouble, Sal. Look what we have here. You *figure* that I shouldn’t dock your pay because you fucked up, yes?”

“We didn’t fuck up, Mr. Targul. We whacked him like you said.”

“Watch your tongue.”

Targul looked around the restaurant as if to make sure that no one had heard that confession. But the restaurant was empty.

“You call that bloody mess doing what I said?”

“I mean,” Sal explained, “that we did the job.”

“You did half the job.”

“He didn’t have it, Mr. Targul. We searched him all over.”

“Then had some fun?” Targul asked, drawing a line across his lips.

“No, that was a business decision. It was the only way to make sure he wasn’t hiding it in his mouth.”

“Oh. So you made a *decision*. Then you did some *thinking*. Then you *figured* you’d come here and make your case.”

“I wouldn’t call it a *case* so much.”

“Sal. Do you know what I’m doing?”

“Well, I just thought that...”

“I am sitting here *figuring* too. I am figuring why I should not rip out your testicles and feed them to the rats in the kitchen. Why?”

Sal laughed at the image, in lieu of puking, but Targul interrupted as he reached out and jabbed the fork into the tabletop so hard it stuck and quivered like an arrow. The move was so swift that Sal touched his crotch to make sure he was not missing anything.

“Do you understand my point?”

“Sure, Mr. Targul. Of course I do.”

“You do?”

“Sure. It’s only just that...”

“What, Sal? What else did you *figure*?”

“Nothin,” Sal said, noticing that there were four more forks on the table. “Nothin. I’ll let you do all the figurin.”

“That’s a good boy, Sal. Now you’re catching on.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Good. I understand that there is now someone new in the picture. Somebody snooping around. This is not good. That is the last thing I need. So what I want you and Willy to do first is to get rid of him.”

“No problem. We’ll take care of...”

“Then I want you to get out there and find it.”

“Well that’s exactly what we...”

“No fuckups and no figuring. Just get it. Somebody’s got it. Now you get it. Then we’ll talk about whether you get to keep your balls or not. Yes?”

“Fine with me, Mr. Targul.”

“You understand me?”

“Abso-fuckin-lutely.”

“That’s a good boy,” Targul said as he slowly leaned back and straightened up the tableware. But he left the fork standing for inspiration.

Enterman thought of visiting Mama now that she was back at the old mansion but it was getting too late for that. Almost seven o'clock. On the other hand, he was not looking forward to the trip home either. The ride back to Manhattan was dull and eternal. Waiting for the stations to pass one by one by one was like being reincarnated as a toll collector, the ads outside the train like endless cars honking.

Willis had transferred a number of forms officially releasing Mama from the nursing home to Enterman's card. Someone in the family had to okay them but since they all seemed to avoid being part of the Glob, he asked Enterman to deliver them in person. Since Connie Bell's house was on the way to the train station, Enterman stopped there first to do the favor.

She answered the door wearing an unearthly silver robe and space shuttle slippers. Her hair was a sophisticated array of plastic booster rockets. A pea-green slime caked her cheeks, chin, and nose. *Klaatu Birotta Nikto*, Enterman thought. It was an alien message from an old space movie. But he somehow managed to utter some English instead, got her to approve the forms, and told her about the break-in and about Mama being moved back to Gaspara Nostromento's house.

"Shit," she spit. "Nobody don't tell me nuthin. What am I, chopped onions over here?"

"Do you have any idea who would want to break into her room? Or why?"

"The fuckin nurses probably, s'cuse me. It musta been them bastards looking for money. They probably heard we paid up front for Mama and think we're trillionaires or something. Only Mama, she don't have no money."

"Do you think this could all be connected with your husband's disappearance?"

"Who Tony? Say, I didn't think of that. You know, Enterman, you're a smart kinda guy. That's using your noodle. It's possible. Like maybe Tony stole something offa them and now they're out to get it back. So they're lookin for it everywhere."

"Them who?"

"The nurses."

"I don't think the nursing staff at the home would ransack their own client's room."

"No, yeah?"

"Who else could have been involved? Did Tony hang out with anyone in particular? Friends, business associates, cousins?"

"I dunno. He sure as shit didn't hang out with me and Annie. Tony had his own friends. Outside the family, I mean."

"Who were they?"

“They were all lowlife creeps. I didn’t know them. Prison buddies mostly.”

“Names?”

“Beats me. There was this guy named Silver or something. I dunno, I kept my distance. These guys weren’t exactly an officer and a gentleman, if you know what I mean. You talk to Mama about it?”

“No.”

“She’s a case and a half. But you know something funny? She and Tony got along. Of all people, with his cons and swindles, he actually liked the old lady. He went to see her every Sunday. Go figure it. I mean, what the hell do you think they talked about, the two of them?”

“Semiotics?”

“Maybe, I dunno. Mama’s okay though, right? She wasn’t hurt or nothin?”

“I think she’s okay. She may have seen the burglar.”

“Ha! Good luck finding that out,” Connie said, grimacing as she adjusted one of the retrorockets near her temple. “If you can figure out what she’s talking about you oughta get the goddamn noble prize. Fuck if I know.”

“But she talked to Tony?”

“I dunno. Hey lookit, Enterman, why don’t y’ come on in and have some coffee. I’m just watching this thing on UFOs. Do you believe in ’em?”

“I’m beginning to.”

“Babydoll!”

Enterman braced himself for an assault. But he was relieved to find that Connie was puckering for someone behind him who had just entered the gate. It was a small girl, an earthling. She was wearing a mauve coat shaped like a bell, her feet moving like clappers underneath. She marched stoically up the path and into her mother’s arms, not at all upset by the green mask.

“Thanks, hon,” Connie yelled to someone else at the gate and ushered the girl inside quickly. Then she turned back to Enterman. “I’m here if you find out anything.”

Enterman turned to leave, wondering how he would get through the long trip. He had the beans of course, but there would be no way to toss them on the train. He could watch the news on his card but that was always the same run-around...the morale of the troops was up, the economy was down, the space elevator was stuck in the middle. Or he could pick up a book to read but chamelic paper was hard to manage on a moving subway. Which left all the tiny specks of data on the train that he could read like tea leaves about the lives of all those who had passed through it. But that was exhausting.

Or nothing. That was it! he thought. He would sit on the train and think of nothing. Stare mindlessly at the floor, shift his feet, thinking of nothing at all. Not *the thing*, not the stories in his head, not all that could happen or might happen or would. Just nothing. Big fat nothing. Such was the state of his desperation that this idea struck him like an insight. Think of nothing all the way home. It would be a kind of vacation.

All this entered his mind before he had even turned around and taken the first step away from the door. It was at that moment, stepping down and looking up, that he saw her. She was the person Connie had thanked for bringing her daughter home and she was still standing at the front gate. It was obvious that she was not a neighbor because she looked entirely out of place there in Brooklyn. And certainly not a relative either, nor a member of the clan. Not a friend, or an associate, or even an acquaintance.

Enterman knew all this because the woman he was looking at was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Not just woman...thing. The most beautiful thing ever. Including everything. Including New York on a sublimely clear night from a plane hovering for a landing at JFK2 Airport. With the cabin lights out. And clean windows. And no work the next day.

She stood motionless as he approached the gate, a mirage he assumed would vanish by the time he reached her. At which point the milk-white complexion would turn out to be an effect of the light not the skin. But that proved not to be the case. Or that the perfect nose—the triumph of six or even seven plasma nose-jobs—would be merely pert and pinched. Not true at all. She was not even bald, as she might have been, since her long blonde hair was simply pulled back tight over marvelously intricate ears. And her eyes were not just wide and bright but actually, as he first thought, the exact color of the shallow water off the west coast of the Cayman Islands in April. Exactly. He knew that for a fact even though he had never even been there.

As he stepped through the gate, she smiled a bright keyboard of whole notes, framed with a red silk ribbon for lips. Enterman grinned back. She was 30ish and tall, as tall as he was. And the tall heels on her black shoes made her even taller. Her long coat was open in front, revealing a sculpture in a niche. The white knit dress she wore was tight to the surface, showing wonderful curves of breasts and waists and hips. All the curves one could ever want in a body. The dress was short, a curtain raised over long slender legs. These were legs to slaver over, from neat feet to hilly calves to sleek thighs. They were perfect legs. The kind of legs Mother Theresa would have had if goodness were flesh.

He hesitated for a moment before deciding what to say. Or whether to leap-frog words and simply throw himself on the ground to bite her ankles. But in that eternal moment as he waited and held his breath, she reviewed her mental calendar, made dinner plans for the next two weeks, got into a Capsule car that would not rev at first, and eventually drove off.

Enterman forgot to think of nothing all the way home.

Rita St. John kicked off her heels as she approached the entrance to the Belt Parkway and pressed on the speedle with her bare foot. True to its name, the Capsule was tiny, barely encasing her long frame. The car looked like some kind of seed pod with a sense of humor. Made of carbon composites, it was so light and efficient that it got 200 miles to the gallon; 201 because you could easily pull it the extra mile. It was so low to the ground that Rita could really feel the acceleration, like leaving the gravity of a thick rock called Brooklyn. Her mood lifted. Still, she was beginning to think that the job she had taken was pointless. There did not seem to be any real danger. No one was going to hurt the kid. There was no real reason to drive all the way out to Coney Island every day for it. Nothing was happening there. No movement. That was a feeling she disliked. She decided to give it one more week, then move on.

As she passed the majestic expanse of the Verrazano Bridge, she tapped the screen and brought up a lecture by Baba Ram Dam. He was talking about the doing of not doing, how the mind tricks itself into thinking it is in charge when it is not. And how liberating it is to surrender the needy ego and give in to the great chain of being. The flow of action, impulses, leptons, hyperstrings. To touch the breath of Gaia. To let the universe decide, to act without acting, go without going.

Ommmm.

The idea was comforting to her and as she approached the tunnel she was beginning to calm down. She had been living too much in her rational mind lately, she thought. Her little mind, prison of the self. Me, me, me. Popping with too many thoughts, too much chitchit. Between watching the kid and the commute to Brooklyn, she had not been able to meditate all day. She had not even used the MagRes, the Magnetic Resonance Adjuster, to bring her rhythms into harmony. No wonder she was feeling out of whack.

Rita let the lecture drone on and between the motion of the car, the calm of the voice, the placid face on the dash, and the dullness of the tunnel, she began to feel a temporary serenity. Later she would make an earth dinner of brown rice and root vegetables. Burdock to steady the breathing and some Chinese herbs for

balance. She would take some extra selenium. Then she would go to the mat and meditate. Then the MagRes. That would work. After that, she could prepare for her next job. It was a woman who was terrified that her brute of a husband would get out of prison and shoot her in the stomach with a ceragun. And she was probably right about it; Rita had seen his record. Bad boy. That promised to be a much more interesting assignment.

And who was that guy talking to Connie Bell? Was that Enterman?
He did not look like his picture.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Mama had been moved back here to your house?” Enterman demanded of Gaspara Nostromento the next day as they again sat in the blank library room. “That means she was here when I spoke to you yesterday.”

Enterman was annoyed with himself for not picking up on the deceit. And he was beginning to question why he was bothering with the whole dumb affair. Some guy was missing, some old lady was burglarized. No one knew anything. No one would tell him anything. What difference did it all make to him or anyone?

“But it completely slipped my mind, you see,” Nostromento said as he sucked in deeply on a hand-rolled cigarette and exhaled a smoky screen. “I’ve had much to think about since this business began. My thoughts are in a torment as it were.”

“And the break-in at the home?”

“Terrible.”

“You forgot to mention that too.”

“Forgive me.”

The chair the old man was sitting in was squeaking away like a bad violin. He was clearly lying up the wazoo, Enterman thought, or about to fall on his ass.

“Her room at the nursing home was ransacked,” Enterman said.

“So I heard.”

“Why?”

“Do you know?” Nostromento replied with a weak smile.

“No, not do *I* know. Do *you* know?” Enterman shot back.

“But that’s what you are here for, isn’t it? To find out all these things. Did you ask questions at the home?”

“I asked around. No one seems to have seen anything.”

“*Negara entiepo*,” Nostromento announced.

“Connie says she doesn’t know anything. You say you don’t know anything. Willis at the home knows nothing. Nobody else knows a thing. The only person who might know anything is Mama.”

“Ridiculous.”

Gaspara Nostromento’s response was punctuated by the ghostly moan that haunted the house. It now seemed to be coming from an upstairs room, not from outside. The wail went on much longer than before. In the interim Enterman recalled stories about tortured prisoners whose pain was so deep no scream could escape, only a rumbling moan. The thought did not soothe him.

“That’s no cat,” Enterman said.

Nostromento got up from his chair, picked up a leafy twig from a large pile that was lying on the desktop, and stood at the window fondling it.

“She suffers, she does. A terrible grave plight. Like her own mother before her. It’s in the blood, you see. Nothing can be done.”

“What blood?” Enterman asked sensibly.

But Nostromento seemed barely aware that Enterman was still in the room and he continued to ramble.

“She’s a foot in the grave and being pulled upon by all them souls that have long passed.”

“Willis said she was sick and needed medical care.”

“Willis,” he spat back. “A crook who wants my money.”

“He said she’s suffering from...”

“Dammit man, don’t I know? I know she suffers. There’s not a medicine on earth that can help her. She’s torn between two worlds.”

“Oh really? And which worlds might they be?” Enterman asked.

The wailing started again but this time Gaspara Nostromento spoke through it.

“This world and the one that surrounds it. Death, man, death. Don’t you see?”

“She’s dying?”

“No, she’s not dying. She’s a banshee dammit. Do you get my meaning? A banshee!”

“Not exactly.”

“Her mind. It is half in this life and half in the world of her ancestors. She is a gatekeeper. It is for her to mind the door to eternity.”

“Well why didn’t you say so,” Enterman said brightly. “The door to eternity. Now I understand.”

"She calls out for all those souls that pass through. That's the sound you hear. It is her cry. The cry of the banshee. Like her mother before her and hers before. She cries because someone has passed through."

Enterman fought to retain his composure. And he would have lost the battle if Nostromento had not calmed down and returned to his seat. He dropped the twig he had been holding back on the desk and stroked his beard before finishing his thought.

"Antonne," he said simply. "Tony Bell. He has been found."

"He's been found? Where?"

"Our people found him at the park. At Coney."

"What was he doing there?"

"Nothing. He was dead."

"From what?"

"A series of grotesque knife wounds."

"He was cut up?"

"Sliced through the face," Nostromento said, running his finger across his lips from ear to ear. "Why would anyone do such a thing?"

"Holy shit," Enterman said. He had not realized that he was so close to violence before. But to his surprise, the thought did not repel him. Instead, it actually excited him. "Who did it? Who do you think killed him?"

"That's what we are hoping *you* will find out for us."

"Now wait a minute," Enterman protested, "that's a little out of my line."

"Please, we need your help."

The wail, when it came, was modulated this time. It sounded now like the formal cries of an official griever that Enterman had once heard at an Orthodox funeral. That recollection clinched it for him. He was out of his seat in an instant and heading for the door. A whirl of dust accompanied him.

"Sorry," he said. "You need a detective or something. Look in the Yellow Pages under D. I'm under E for exit."

But his departure was blocked by the dour looking man who had let Enterman in. The door behind the man was closed. There were no other doors. Then the wailing started again, and a chill filled the air, and clouds blocked the sun, dimming the room even more than it was. It was the final conflict, Enterman thought, and he stood up straight to take the first blow from the forces of evil waiting.

"*Igo contederia*," Nostromento said and walked over to Enterman slowly. He looked burdened from a history that was too long and dark, too weighed down by duty. "Please sit down. Please."

When he did not, Nostromento took a stance directly in front of him and squinted into his eyes.

“You are a man with a trouble in your past. I see it.”

“Not in the past,” Enterman said. “Trouble right now. *You*.”

“No, a trouble in your past. Something happened to you. You have had a tragedy. A great and terrible loss. And you are still running from this. I know.”

“Is that so?”

“I can see it. There.” He was pointing directly at Enterman’s iris. Enterman watched the finger with its silver nail quiver in the air. The tip was filthy. “It is written on the back of the eyes.”

“Does it say astigmatism?” Enterman quipped.

But he was covering. His knees were shaking and a cold chill went up his neck. He tried to look back at Nostromento indifferently but his eyelid began to flutter. How could the old man possibly know about *the thing*, about the accident and Isabel? How could he know? Nostromento put his finger down but continued to examine Enterman closely.

“Your mouth is good. And your nostrils flair well.”

“Nice of you to notice.”

“But you have bad dreams. Nightmares. About what?”

“Bogeyman,” Enterman lied.

“No,” Nostromento said, moving even closer and peering deeply past Enterman’s pupils and into his imagination. “No, these are dreams of glass shattering. A dream of death.”

Holy shit, Enterman thought.

“If you help us, perhaps we can also help you.”

“What do you want?” Enterman asked. It was suddenly impossibly dry in the room.

“Help us to find out who murdered our Antonne,” Nostromento said. “Help us find this out and we will solve your trouble. We will cure you of your past.”

The theme song to *Ghost Walkers*, a popular FourD, whistled through Enterman’s head but was easily overcome by the moans from upstairs. Enterman could feel his own pulse throbbing as he stared back into the old man’s eyes. It was all a crock, that much he knew for sure. Nostromento was just acting and the dream gambit was just a good guess. All the theatrics just for show.

Tony Bell had been knifed. Mama was beyond the pale. What did it all mean to him? Less than nothing. He knew he should turn and walk away, leaving all the weirdos to their weirdness. Go back to Thoreau’s penthouse and wait.

Resume his studies of the random patterns of tossed beans. Or play with the nanowave and maybe cook his own goose.

But he did not move. Could not. The mere hint of a way to stop thinking about *the thing*, to cure his past and rid himself of ghosts, was enough to stick him. Enough to seduce him. Just barely enough to make Enterman take his seat again.

"I knew we could count on you," Nostromento said, sitting down again as well. "Thoreau said we could."

"All right," Enterman said, "I'll play along. For a while at least. Let's start by you telling me who you *think* might have killed Tony?"

"I cannot say. As I told you, I knew little of Tony's life. He worked now and again at the park, on some of the rides. As a handyman, a guard, and so on. But on the whole he was a—how do you call it?—a con man. He always looked for the easy way. He helped us out very little and he told us nothing about his own plans. I really do not know how he spent his time."

"Friends?"

"Constantina would know about that."

"Done that already. I'm out of options. I'll just have to talk to Mama," Enterman said.

"So be it. But I don't think it will help you."

"Can she talk at all?"

"Words come out, yes indeed. When she is awake. But they are words meant only for the long dead. No one but Uncle Tammy could make a devil's grunt of them. Now and then she joins us in this world. Now and then. Speaks of her husband, my pap, or of the weather and such and such. But mostly she is drifting. Drifting like a phantom through the vapor. Between what is life and what is not."

"But this Uncle Tammy can understand her?"

"I expect he can, better than anyone."

"Can I speak to him?"

Nostromento blew a single exhaust of a laugh through his lower teeth.

"I'm sure he'd love a nice little chatterdo. Talkative sort he was. A real true raconteur, Uncle Tammy."

"How do I find him?"

"Do you know a good channel?"

"He's in broadcasting?"

He laughed again, then stroked his beard while his lips formed the answer.

"You amuse me, Enterman. Take my mind off the troubles of the day. Broadcasting indeed."

Enterman raised both eyebrows hopefully.

“Dead,” Nostromento explained. “Tammy’s dead.”

Brows lowered, Enterman shifted in his seat.

“Are you getting any of my meaning on this matter?” Nostromento asked. “Mama speaks to the dead. Her mind is only half in this world and half in the nether. She’s a banshee! Can you see the burden of that? A life spent not here and not there. Midway between living, breathing daylight and the darkness what is death. It’s torn her mind. Ripped it like a matchbook.”

“Okay fine. This world and that world and the ancestors and all that. But I’d still like to talk to her,” Enterman insisted.

He could not have explained his conviction if asked to. He was simply sure that Mama Nostromento knew something important. No good reason. It was just a tale he was telling himself, a story about how things might unfold. A hunch. But hunches, after all, were his gift.

“*Essaditiendra Mama,*” Nostromento said. “Yes, all right, you can do that. No harm, I suppose. Hell, it might even be good for her to see a new face. But don’t go expecting a nice interview like on CNN. Most of what she says won’t made a piss-on-the-skittle bit of sense to you. It can’t. You’re still alive, dammit. Still alive!”

Mama Nostromento was awake when Enterman walked into her room on the third floor of the house. It was drab there, dull shadows casting shadows on faded ones. Like all the other rooms in the house, this one was mostly empty. There was a frayed rug in the middle of the wooden floor whose planks were beginning to warp. A dark chest of drawers against the wall partly hid a long crack in the plaster that ran from floor to ceiling behind it. The fireplace, once cozy, was filled with dust that had not been dusted in years. There was no clock in the room; the hours stood still there. No mirrors, no tapscreens, no hint of ordinary life. Another blind. Enterman had the impression of entering a black hole and finding at its center, not the secrets of the continuum, but an old hag in a run-down flea-bag hotel on Forty-third and Tenth, waiting for the soulmaker.

Mama was lying in an enormous bed against the far wall. The spidery shawl he had seen before was draped all around it. In the middle of the bed, surrounding her, were all the pillows from the home. Some kind of bag was tied to the foot of the frame. Next to her on a round table there was a lamp, a bunch of twigs, and a pitcher of water. On the other side of the bed was another woman wearing a black dress and a black scarf on her head. She was knitting and reading from a manual resting in her lap. Thinking that she was the nurse, Enterman asked her if

he might talk to Mama. But she paid no attention to him, so he approached the bed anyway.

When his foot hit something, he looked down to find that the entire bed was surrounded by large oval stones, the kind rivers make after eons of erosion. As he put his hand on the bed frame to steady himself, he found that the object dangling from the post was not a bag at all. It was a large dead bird, hanging by the feet. It had no head. Black spots dotted the rug beneath it.

This time Mama was awake. Her gray hair had been brushed out, imitating the look of a steely wig. She watched Enterman as he negotiated the stones, the bird, and the bedcovers, and even smiled as he came up next to her. There was nowhere to sit so he perched himself lightly at the foot of the bed. She turned her head accordingly and her massive necklaces and earrings rolled to new positions. Awake she somehow seemed older and more wrinkled than when she was asleep. The palsy on the left side was even more pronounced, the clenched fist held even closer to her breast.

Thinking that what she said might be important enough to review later, he said the words "record this" out loud, then touched the dot on his skin under the ear to make sure it was still in place. It was.

"Hello Mrs. Nostromento. My name is Enterman. Enterman?"

Mama nodded.

"Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"May I have a cigarette?" she asked.

Her voice was deep, like a man's voice. A man with a sore throat and her slight accent made it even coarser. He wanted very much to get on her good side, if there was one, but he did not smoke and there were no cigarettes around. Not even an ashtray.

"I don't smoke, I'm sorry," he said.

"He's such a good boy," she said. "He never fights and he always comes home for dinner."

"Who is?" Enterman asked, hoping for an early break.

"What's the trouble? You got trouble written all over you. You tell Mama. Mama fix."

"Is it Tony? Is that who you mean? Is Tony a good boy?"

"*Mia giocollero. Dandeske ke aqua forotella.*"

Enterman turned to the woman in black, whom he assumed was Mia. But she continued to read and knit.

"Tony," Enterman said clearly, "Tony Bell. Antonne Bellarosita. You know Tony, don't you Mama?"

“Tony,” she repeated. “Ah Tony, Tony. My Tony.”

“Do you remember when you last saw Tony?”

“He’s a good boy. Such a good boy. *Bolletto*. He never fight.”

“That’s good, I’m glad. But when did you last see him? When did you last see Tony?”

“When did I last see Tony? Last night.”

That, of course, was not true.

“You saw Tony last night?”

“May I have a cigarette? It’s no good for you. But it helps me breathe. *Peusan-dratta?*”

Cigarette again. Again, he looked around for cigarettes but found none. What a happy little circle, Enterman thought.

“Mrs. Nostromento, do you remember seeing Tony on Sunday? At the nursing home? He came to visit you. Do you remember seeing him there?”

“Where is she? She went in two hours ago. Did I do something?”

“Who?”

“She make a angry face. Like this. Then she just walk inside. I don’t say nothing. *Quendella mia desudro?*”

Enterman looked again at Mia, thinking that Mama Nostromento was talking about her. But the woman in the chair still did not look up.

“What about the nursing home, Mama? Somebody came to your room two nights ago. They were looking for something. Do you know what it was?”

“Today?”

“No, at the nursing home. Your room there.”

“My room. 213.”

“That’s right! Room 213. Do you know...”

“May I have a cigarette? It’s no good for you but it helps me breathe.”

Back again. And once again Enterman looked and apologized. The dementia was like a comic virus, he thought. You went through the same gags over and over. It was a contest to see who would crack up first. Enterman decided to break the habit and start over, but this time at the very beginning.

“Mama,” he said flatly.

“What is it? Is there something wrong?”

“Do you know what day it is?”

“Do I know? How would I know? Is it time for the news?”

He tried again.

“What day is it?”

“It’s Monday.”

It was Wednesday but at least she answered directly. The problem, he realized, was partly his fault. The questions had to be as simple as possible or she would get lost in the flow of words. He was encouraged.

“Do you know what year it is?”

“Yes.”

“What year is it, Mama?”

“It is nineteen hundred and ninety-eight. This year.”

Exactly fifty-two years ago.

“And do you know the season?”

“I know. It was summer. A beautiful summer. The beach was filled with people. I hated that.”

“No, I mean now. What season is it now, Mama?”

“Winter. A cold cold winter.”

End of November could be winter, he thought, but it was not really that cold yet. The other woman shifted in her seat but still paid no attention to him. And since Mama did not seem to mind the questions, Enterman pressed on, but carefully like an electrician probing for a lethal current.

“What’s the weather like today, Mama?”

“I like a nice breeze.”

“Have you looked outside today?”

“The window.”

“Yes, out the window. Did you look out the window today?”

“Would you please close the window. It’s getting a little cold here. My bones ache when it gets too cold. She told me that’s when the spirits come. When the bones ache. Then look out!”

The window *was* closed but the drape was pulled back slightly and you could see the house across the street through it.

“What’s the weather outside today? Look out the window.”

“Rain,” she said flatly.

But it was a sunny day. It seemed to Enterman that one thing Nostromento said about his mother was true. Mama was not entirely living in this world. At least not in the present moment. She seemed to be drifting through her own memories. Maybe fifty years ago when she was a younger woman. Her answers relied as much on past events as on current ones. It depended on what she was recalling at the moment he asked her or possibly on what other questions his question triggered.

“This is a nice room, Mama,” Enterman said. “Do you like this room?”

“My room is Room 213. That is Mama’s room. Come and visit any time you want.”

“No, that was at the nursing home. Room 213 was at the nursing home.”

“That’s right.”

“Did you like it at the nursing home?”

“Oh yes. Everyone was very kind to me. And Susie always bring me an extra pudding. She could get in trouble for that.”

“Did you see Tony at Room 213?”

“He’s a good boy. Such a good boy. *Bolletto*. He never fight, my boy Tony.”

“Did Tony come to room 213?”

“He come every day to see me.”

Enterman recalled Connie telling him that Tony only went to the home every Sunday but he let it pass to keep the momentum going.

“He did?”

“Sure. I tell him, you listen to you Mama or I give you the evil eye. Like this. I scare him.”

She puffed her right eye towards Enterman, managing to scare him too.

“Tony saw you last Sunday at the home in Room 213. Do you remember?”

“I remember.”

“What did Tony say the last time he saw you?”

She seemed to struggle with the thought for a moment before losing the match and going blank.

“What did Tony say?” Enterman repeated. And he touched her hand to emphasize the question.

“Don’t,” she said, “let go.”

Enterman pulled back his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be sorry, be sensible. People don’t know who you are or what you must do. So you must be careful who you talk to.”

“Did Tony tell you where he was going when he left?”

“He’s a good boy. *Tony amadellamia*. What else can he do?”

“Where was Tony going when he left?”

“Room 213.”

“Right, but after Room 213. He went somewhere else. Do you know where he went?”

“Here.”

“He came to the house?”

“Every day he came to the house. I say you a good boy, you don’t fight. Come and kiss Mama and give her your heart.”

The look on Mama’s face suggested that she was pleased to be of such help. Enterman smiled too, suggesting that he was pleased that she was pleased. He was. It was a jolly conversation. It was cordial. Pleasant. Except for the fact that it made absolutely no sense at all.

“Someone else came to your room.”

“Tony.”

“Not Tony. Someone else came and took you out of your bed.”

“Why he do that?”

“He? It was a man? One man?”

“*Mela patoshlina*. My Tony, he come. Every day.”

“That’s right, Mama, Tony came there. But then another man came there. To Room 213. He was looking for something. In the pillows, in the bed.”

“What did this man want?”

“That’s what I want to know. This man came to the room at night and he was looking for something. Do you know who he was?”

“The stars they sleep and dream at night.”

“Do you know what this man was looking for?”

“Excuse me but what are you doing? Who are you? Do I know you?”

She had paused before her last response and in that moment her expression suddenly became agitated. Her eyes filled with pain. The thick wrinkles on her face smoothed out, as though the tissue under her skin had sponged up tears from inside. With this tension, the loss of muscle tone on the left side of her face was even more pronounced, almost grotesque. She was licking the inside of her mouth with a gluey tongue.

“Do you want some water”? Enterman asked.

“What do you want?” she cried.

Her eyes were darting, searching the room frantically. The woman at the side of the bed put her book down and picked up a wet rag that had been draped over the bedpost. She put one hand on Mama’s clenched left fist and wiped her forehead with the other.

“Is she all right?” Enterman asked.

“Don’t, let go!” Mama shouted.

“You must go now,” the woman said to Enterman. “No more questions. You can come back later and maybe. But now you go.”

Enterman stood up and was about to say goodbye when Mama opened her mouth wide like a dry pit. From deep inside this cavern came a frightening

sound. The sound of something alive being torn to pieces. He backed up from the shock of it.

Mama raised her free hand and pointed a quaky finger directly at him, her eyes boggling, as the moan expanded and grew to an earsplitting shriek. The other woman tried to hold her and shouted at him to leave. He knew he should. The interview was over. But he could not and instead stood frozen to the spot, unable to budge, like a bug pinned through the heart by a bug needle. He was paralyzed. Because at that moment he knew that Mama Nostromento, this banshee, this gatekeeper for the dead, was crying for *him*.

By the time he managed to free himself from the spell and leave the house, the sound of her cry was still ringing in his ears like a knell.

Norton's Bar, where the gangster Carmine Tuccio was shot by his brother in 2011 as commemorated by an old newspaper clipping, was on the corner one block away from the Nostromento mansion. It was an alien place to Enterman who never went to bars at all. But on this, the occasion of his own death foretold by a banshee, he made an exception. He ordered a neutron rye and ginger, the only drink he could remember from college. This he drank quickly, hoping to dull the discomfort of being singled out for an early grave.

He was reading the article about the Tuccio murder that had been shellacked into the countertop when the two goons came in. He noticed them in spite of not paying attention because they happened to be walking in perfect step together, psychos on parade, and the odd rhythm alerted him. The tall one with the bad skin looked like a devout convict between terms. His hair was slicked back with a low-grade motor oil over gruff ears, and squeezed into a blunt brush of a tail at the back of his neck. The word *retropunk* came briefly to Enterman's mind.

The other man was older, in his early fifties. He was stocky and resembled a plumber's thumb. His head was a pale carbuncle growing on a meaty slab of shoulder. This one struck Enterman as a former teamster, now molesting elementary school girls as a hobby. The two of them stood for a while near the door watching Enterman as he paid for the drink and started to leave. He might even have smiled at them in passing but he never actually got past them. The tall one suddenly rammed him in the shoulder, grabbed his arm, and began talking. It took some time for Enterman to make sense of his speech. At first, he only noticed the mouth, a slit over which tiny pale mustache hairs bristled. The teeth below were serrated. Fermented breath cut Enterman's oxygen intake by half.

"Enema, right?" the fellow said. "And don't you try an bullshit me neither. I ain't in no mood for no bullshit."

Enterman said nothing. He was beginning to hate having to admit to being himself. No, that wasn't it. What he really hated was *being* himself.

"You're this guy Enema, right? Am I right?" he repeated.

"Uh..." Enterman managed.

"Lissen. You don't know me, so I gonna spell it out for you. And don't give me a hard time. You fuck wit me and I'll cut y'fuckin brain out. Unnerstand?"

Enterman did. At that moment, he wanted very much to be someone else, someone on a cruise somewhere, planning a strategy for winning at shuffleboard. But it was too late for that. His stammer had already convinced the brute that he had the right victim.

"Arighnt now. You lissen up, Enema. You lissen real careful to what it is me and Willy here got to say to you. Okay? Do I got your full attention? Hah?"

"Yes," Enterman said.

"We got a message for you from Mr. Targul. Now don't go sick on me here, y'shakin like a leaf. I want you should pay attention. Yes?"

"Yes."

"You're off d'case. This whole Tony Bell business. Drop the whole deal as of right now. Get it?"

He did not exactly get it. And this fact was picked up by Willy, the shorter of the two felons, who poked Enterman in the chest with all four fingers. The fingers were all the same length, and shaped like shotgun shells. The pounding resounded inside as Enterman's heart flinched.

"You unnerstand what I'm tellin you? Hah?" the tall one continued. "Because I really do want you should unnerstand me,"

"Okay."

"We don't wanna see you, we don't wanna hear you, we don't wanna smell your piss in the neighborhood. Get it? Go home and play in y'own backyard. You are officially all done here. Okay?"

Then Willy, the shorter one, still pummeling Enterman like a doorbell, spoke in a voice thickened by a life of wretched perversion.

"You stick y'nose into other people's affairs, you lookin for trouble. I see you again, I gonna punch true y'chest cavity, y'heart come out true d'back. Are we clear on this, fella?"

He folded his fingers into a fist the size of a pot roast and brandished it under Enterman's chin. Then he smiled a toothless smile. His nose looked like a collision on the Belt Parkway. Enterman could hear the air wheezing through the warped passage.

Sal, the tall one, prepared to hold Enterman up in case he fainted by clamping his hand tighter on Enterman's clavicle.

"You gotta watch out for my friend Willy here. I'm a tough guy but he's a killer, Willy is. A real killer. You recognize'm? Hah? Are you a fight fan, Mista Enema? You recognize this little monster?"

He put his other arm around Willy's thick shoulder, bringing the three of them into a happy little hug.

"You wouldn't know it to look at'm," Sal continued, "but Willy here is famous. Am I right, Willy?"

"In my day."

"When was it, Willy? Was it in '23? I tink so. I tink it was in 2023 that Willy here went fifteen rounds with Sugar Vin. Fifteen fuckin' rounds, could you believe it? A'course, he's beefed up some since then. Some 30 pounds from the looks of it."

"40," Willy corrected.

"But lemme tell y'somethin, Enema. You shoulda seen Willy in the ring in those days. He was somethin. He was like a fucking horny rhino. Am I right, Willy? A fucking goddamn horny rhino."

He squeezed Willy around his fuckin'hornyrhino neck, and pulled Enterman closer to the two of them. Enterman felt Willy's thick penis poke him in the thigh. He was able to hold back the urge to throw up only by counting the pocks on Sal's cheek.

Willy grinned and feigned a punch to the back of Enterman's skull. Enterman jumped. Willy grinned again. Sal smiled. It was all rather merry, save for Enterman's proximity to his own execution.

"Okay. All fun and games aside," Sal said. "I want you should pay attention to this and do what I tell you. I don't repeat myself. I'm not gonna tell you twice. Listenin?"

"All ears."

"You drop all this bullshit about Tony Bell. You fuckin' fget it? Go buy a condo in Jersey and send y'kids to collitch. Do whatever you want to do wit the rest of your life. But if I so much as see your fuckin face in the neighborhood one more time, I'm gonna give Willy a workout session on this puss of yours."

"Tanks, Sal," Willy said, sizing up Enterman's face for its mushability.

Sal clapped Enterman on the cheek with his callused mitt to make the point. "It's gonna look like pizza with anchovies somebody ran over it onna Parkway, he gets done with it."

They all laughed at the vividness of the picture, although exactly how the anchovies came into it was still a mystery Enterman chose not to pursue.

In general, life for Enterman had always been a bit too much. The constant scanning for details, the incessant stories, the obsessive rage at fate. The chronically high levels of cortisone. Too much. Above all he envied those guys that women said they hated, the ones who did not seem to feel anything. Not feel? he wondered. How terrific was that? Of course, there were plenty of drugs for each of his anguishes, but Enterman avoided them. He was precisely the kind of person who lived for the side effects rather than the cure.

On the other hand, every now and then something broke through the morass and struck him as pure and simple. Self-evident and not worth pranting about. There were only a few examples of this but the two cretins in the bar had now moved up to numbers one and two. Conclusion? He really did not care all that much about what had happened to Antonne Bellarosita. And although he owed Thoreau a favor for giving him refuge, he did not owe him his life. So after kicking a cathartic dent in a garbage pail outside the bar, Enterman went to Connie Bell's house to tell her that he was off the case for good, as so advised.

The front door was open and the house was quiet when he walked in. Connie was sitting in the living room, smoking a cigarette. The red dot of light floated slowly in limbo. He meant to simply say that he was dropping his investigation but the words did not come out right away. There was an air of sadness in the room that he could not bring himself to disturb. It was a mood he knew well. After the accident, he had spent a year—one whole year—within it. He sat alone, not leaving his apartment, not living, not dying. In a state of suspension. There was a cave in sorrow that you could vanish into. And stay there until the dark won.

Unless someone stumbled in and lit a fire.

He sat down across from her on a chair. It would be easy to slip back in, he thought. So easy to let *the thing* take him over again. To sit here in this place, some dinky house in Brooklyn, and to think of Isabel again and again, to hold himself in and hate the world and lose all hope for all time again. Yes, that much he could easily do. But Connie coughed and the sound abruptly stopped him. After all, it was her grief he was picking up on, her anguish not his. She was young and she had just lost her husband and she was alone thinking about it. Luckily, Enterman's sense of compassion still outweighed his vast self-pity. But only by a whisper.

"I'm sorry about Tony," he said softly.

“Yeah. Fuck.”

“I know how you feel.”

“Yeah?”

“I lost someone too. It was a while ago but I’m still not over it. It’s a very hard thing to get over.”

“Then I’m sorry too.”

“Do you want to talk about him? Sometimes that helps.”

“Yeah?”

“Sometimes it doesn’t.”

“I dunno what to do. I can’t see what it means to be alone.”

“It’s a very hard change.”

As she put out her cigarette, she looked directly at Enterman and breathed deeply before speaking.

“Lookit, Enterman. You’re nice. A real nice fella, I can see that. But lemme be honest whichew. Tony and me, we married too young, stayed together too long, and fought too much. He wasn’t no angel, if the truth be told. He stayed out till all hours, he hung out with creeps and wiseguys, he drank too much. He used to bash me. He was not my knight in shining armor.”

“Why did you marry him?”

“It was arranged. By my father and Tony’s father, when we were kids. That’s our way here. We marry for the clan, not for love. Only Tony had his own plans, he didn’t play by the rules. I feel bad for Tony, the way he died and all. And I miss him even though he was a louse. But don’t you go suffering for me since it ain’t worth it. Save it for something good.”

“I came to tell you...”

“The only thing I wish I had back was this ring I gave Tony. A silver snake with a diamond for an eye. It was mine in the first place. Tony got it as part of the dowry. It brings me good luck. If you come across it, you’ll return it okay? Coffee?”

“No thanks.”

“I should give it up too. Bad for the guts. Fucks up the lining of the stomach I read. Smoking too. But what would I do if I didn’t smoke and drink coffee...run for Congress? So talk to me, hon. Any news?”

“I came to tell you that I’m dropping the case.”

“No, you can’t do that.”

She clicked on a lamp near the couch where she was sitting. This time she wasn’t wearing any make-up or strange appliances and actually looked rather nor-

mal. There was even a pretty face there, behind the tough hide. Gentle, almost vulnerable.

"You can't do that to me, Enterman. I promised my father you'd help us. Now it's my word that you'll find out what happened. You said you would."

"My mind's been changed."

"By what?"

"By two convincers named Sal and Willy."

"Who the hell is Sal and Willy?"

"I think they might have been associates of Tony's."

"Sal Sal Sal," she said, chanting to the heavens for inspiration. "Oh yeah, I met this Sal once. Real nasty looking fella. He was a total prick this guy."

Exactly, Enterman thought. The description fit him like a condom.

"He obviously had some connection with Tony's murder," Enterman said. "I'm sure he knows all about it."

"Maybe you're right. He's the type."

"Well if you know him then you don't need me. Just go ask him about it."

"I don't know him. I only met him once at some party. And I can't go looking for him on account of he knows me. I'm afraid of these guys, Enterman, afraid they'll hurt Annie. That's why I axed Thoreau to help. What'd they do, Sal and Willy...they rough you up?"

"They promised to. And they look sincere. The kind of guys who keep their word."

"What'd they want from you?"

"They wanted me to forget about Tony and what happened to him. To drop the whole thing. A small favor to ask and I feel it's the least I can do."

"I think these two is friends of Tony's from the joint. He was always running down some scam or other. So maybe they all had a deal that went sour. Maybe they whacked him for it."

"What kind of deal?"

"I got no goddamn idea, I swear. Tony never told me nothin. Except when he wanted to get off on me. Then he used to spout like a goddamn poet."

"Well it doesn't matter anymore. I'm going home."

"Lookit, Enterman, I didn't love Tony. Not really. No one who knew him did. He was a real creep. A drunk, a punk and a bastard."

"Nobody's perfect."

"But he was still my husband and somebody murdered him. My father wants to know who done it. We all want to know. We got a right to know."

"What for? You won't call the police about it anyway, so what's the point?"

“That’s just our way, I can’t explain it. Don’t ask me more than that. We take care of our own. If this Sal and Willy done it, they got to pay for it. Are they from the neighborhood here? Do you know where they come from?”

“Born and raised on Riker’s Island is my guess.”

“I don’t know where that is. Maybe it’s down by Flatlands.”

She turned her head to the side and sneezed into the lamp. She actually looked sweet when you could not see her full face.

“Why don’t you do this,” she said, snuffling. “Just go and find out who they are. Like their last names or where they’re from or maybe who they work for. Et cetera. Then tell my father what you know about them. That’ll be the end of it and you done your part. Okay? You gotta do this one thing for me.”

“What will your father do if he finds out they *did* kill Tony?”

“Don’t worry about that. That’s not your problem. He’ll do whatever it is he got to do.”

“I don’t know.”

“I know.”

“Your father said that Mama Nostromento is a banshee.”

“So what else is new? Lookit...at least go and tell him what happened. Describe these two thugs to him. Maybe he knows something about them. Maybe Tony told him something.”

“Is he home tonight?”

“No. You can talk to him tomorrow.”

“I’ll call him from Manhattan.”

“He ain’t on the Grid. He don’t even carry a card. He don’t believe in them. You’ll have to talk to him in person tomorrow.”

“Are there any motels in the neighborhood?” he asked, yawning.

“What do you think this is, Miami Beach? Lissen to this guy. Whassa matter, you need a place to stay?”

“It’s a long ride home. I’m tired.”

“Hold on,” she said and left the room.

Enterman looked around and noticed for the first time the large bunches of leafy twigs that were hanging from all the door handles. They were the same greens that he had seen in Mama’s room at the nursing home and on the desk in Nostromento’s library. He inspected one of them closely. It had small red berries. Without knowing why, he ripped off a sample and put it in his pocket.

“Okay, hon, it’s all set up,” she said when she returned.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

"I fixed up the room in the back. You could stay here for the night. No funny business, though. I'm a grieving widow."

Enterman shuddered. The thought of crashing in Connie Bell's back room suddenly made the slog back to Manhattan seem like a jaunt.

"Thanks anyway, but I better get back home."

"Whatever. Just go see my father tomorrow and tell him what you wanna do. But think about it. I sure hope you don't give up on us."

"We'll see," Enterman said.

Although the terror had faded slightly, he was sure that this was due to fatigue and not courage. Either way, he decided not to decide until the morning.

"By the way," he added, "there was a woman here the other day. A blonde woman. She brought your daughter back?"

"Yeah?"

"Who is she?"

"Why?"

"I thought I knew her from somewhere. She looked familiar."

"Just a friend."

"What's her name?"

"I thought you knew her."

"I'm not sure. She looked like someone but I don't know if..."

"Rita. Her name's Rita."

"Does she come by every day?"

"Why?"

"I'll take a closer look."

"I'll bet you will," she said with a snort. Like any woman alone, she adored the idea of a romance. Anyone's romance. "She's a sharp lookin lady, ain't she?"

"Yes."

"Well I'll tell you Mister She-looks-familiar, Rita's here every day at three. And sometimes in the evening. She's looking out for Annie, my daughter. Takes her home from school."

"She's a babysitter?"

"Something like that. Just while I'm busy mourning the dear departed."

CHAPTER 3



LEGENDS OF CONEY ISLAND

The wailing was much steadier now like a siren in the middle of its whoop. Gaspara Nostromento closed his eyes and tried to study the blankness inside there, if only as a metaphor for silence. But it was no use. The sound was in there too. It was there and there and everywhere. There was no getting away from it. He took another shot of whiskey, felt the burn coat his insides, and shuddered.

Now it was all up to him. This was a job he never wanted, never asked for. As a boy, he was happy just to be the younger brother. He would hide in his Mama's skirts, steal apples from the grocer, play games with the girls. To be strong for the family, to be a leader of the clan, to become the High Mister, that was never his concern. All that was for his older brother Tontonnio, tall and tough.

Yet as the stars decreed, Tontonnio had passed on too soon. It was a shock to everyone. Mama's cries for him could be heard all the way to the razor thin edge of Brooklyn, out by the water. Then the elders had gathered. For days they sat in silence in the chamber. Finally Decienti emerged with a decision. He had proclaimed that Gaspara was to be the High Mister until Tontonnio's own son was old enough. This was the way it had to be. Everyone knew it. Gaspara himself knew it though he dreaded it. His life would change forever from that moment on. His own plans, his own desires, meant nothing. His carefree existence was gone in a wisp.

But the true test of his mettle was only now emerging, years later, in 2050, the treacherous time, the time of the dead birds. It was the turn of the millennium by their reckoning—the *Magroannimos*—the era of all souls. And he, Gaspara Nostromento, was the High Mister. Like it or not, he was. Now they would all look to him for hope and guidance during the transition. They were waiting for him to find an answer to their problems. Such was his fate.

Solunnia, he whispered.

But the word offered little solace.

In the quiet moments, as he searched within himself for courage, all he could find was that silly boy with the stolen apples, hiding in skirts like wind-filled sails billowing. But that boy would be of no help now. He would have to find some other source of strength. There was not much time left, he thought. Not much time at all. And this was no game. They had to find it. And soon. Or the world would end as surely as the day of judgment would come. Only much more quickly.

And with far greater anguish.

At the penthouse, Enterman ran a FourD documentary about Coney Island, just to pass the time until his return the next day. FourD was the ultimate in haptics; it meant touchable projection holograms that appeared all around you like normal life. FourDs were usually shown in large spaces so that crowds could attend and wander around in them and touch objects and be fooled into thinking they were in another place or time. But the truly rich could afford to have their own private FourD systems.

Thoreau's was installed in a large 20 by 40 foot room, completely empty except when the chimeras filled the space and made it seem that you were out in some world. Enterman could have watched the documentary on his card of course, or on one of the digiwalls. But that would have been flat and small and turned him into a mere eyeballer. In the FourD version, he was right there, in the midst of what he was seeing with full 360 and up and down, and directional sound, and all touchable like matter itself. Well, not quite like matter. The haptic part, the technology of artificial touch, still needed a little work and everything in a FourD felt slightly soft as though the world were made of tushy.

Still, as he ran the documentary and the history of Coney Island unfolded all around him, the illusion was complete. The room itself seemed to vanish and the images to stretch out to infinity in every whichway such that he instantly felt himself to be there, right there standing on a wild shoreline running along a 3-mile beach. There was the ocean heaving endlessly, the seagulls and clouds

above, the sand below, dunes rising to the left. He could even feel the pushback of an ancient wind. Enterman picked up a shell and gooshed it like a marshmallow. It was Coney Island back in time before people had even named it.

Then suddenly, the scene changed and he was standing on a slapdash boardwalk, just loosely laid planks of wood on top of the sand. Four massive hotels that stood like schooners on a sandy sea appeared. People dotted the landscape and there were now small buildings and a few carriages down a long wide rough street. One of the structures was in the shape of an elephant and the narrator, who appeared as an actual guide in a smartsuit standing right next to him, explained that this was a hotel with guest rooms in the butt. Overdressed men and women were strolling past them slowly. One of them snared him with a parasol and said something apologetic in a foreign language. It was June of 1885 and the appeal of the seashore had only recently been discovered.

In the blink of an eye it became the turn of the century. A sea of white straw hats and bonnets filled the street that had become Surf Avenue with its trolleys and electrical wires running parallel to the ocean. The beach was now filled with people dressed in black bathing suits and some adventurers standing in the water were holding onto ropes lest the sea take them. Ocean bathing, as the narrator explained, was new and risky. Enterman, who was suddenly standing ankle deep in the water lost his balance in a virtual wave, so powerful was the illusion. The narrator helped him get up; his hand was as squashy as an old peach.

By the early 1900s rides began to appear with names like the Double-dip Chute, the Aerial Slide, and the Dew Drop that made the ladies voluminous skirts flutter. The Wonder Wheel with cars that slid to the rim now loomed over the sea. Cotton candy was invented; the narrator handed Enterman a sample but it vanished on his lips. A series of massive amusement parks blossomed; the hundreds of towers covered in lights of Luna Park, then the massive buildings of Dreamland, and the vast pavilion of Steeplechase. Then devastation followed quickly by new buildings, new pavilions. Then the roller coasters...the Tornado, the Thunderbolt, and finally the Cyclone with 2.3 seconds of freefall. For a few moments, Enterman and the narrator were sitting on one, rolling and coasting like crazy. Even after the scene changed back to the beach, Enterman still felt dizzy and frazzled.

The Parachute Jump popped up and towered over everything including new sideshows, freakshows, girlie shows...the half-man half-fish, Jolly Trixy the 700 pound lady, midgets on parade, strippers, hawkers, barkers. Bowler hats replaced the straw ones, then fedoras came in, then baseball caps.

Soon it was the mid 20th century and bumper cars made the scene, sparks flying from the top of the poles. Enterman and the narrator were riding one, then back out on the street, then riding the Bobcat, the Shooting Star, the Comet, the Rocket. A carousel with prancing horses and staid goats and silver rings in a wooden chute flew by. There was yellow corn soaking for days in tepid water that Enterman could actually smell. Action Karts, Three Balls for a Buck, sandy cherrystone clams, sand on the boardwalk, sticky paper cups on the sand below. In an instant, Astroland rose in the distance. The beach in this era was so crowded that not a single grain of sand could be seen. Enterman bumped into a woman in a two-piece, rebounded off pointy breasts and admired them. Breasts worked very well, haptically speaking.

Late 20th, neo-Coney; some of the rides had been refurbished, lasers everywhere, sideshows with freaks with postmodern tattoos and hiphop patter. And then the Cyclone was back and the corn still soaking at Nathan's Famous. Then devastation again. Emptiness. Then it was 2020 and Star City rose like Oz floating above all that went before. New rides appeared using water, now tamed by holophonics, that was sculpted into an ever-changing liquid wetway that folks rode like leaves. Straw hats were back but they had chips that read your brain and pumped in fun via magnetic resonance. Skirts were loose again and flew up on the Cyclotron. Cotton candy was now regened for protein and you could have your skin infleshed while-you-wait. Then again decay and decline, rising and falling with the predictability of the moon, the waxing and waning of fun.

At the end, the entire scene diminished into a tiny diorama sitting on the floor like a toy theater and the narrator turned to Enterman and asked if he had any questions. He did not. His head was spinning, his mind reeling. 300 years of the history of Coney Island had just been squashed into a 30-minute FourD tumble through time and the only question in his mind was...where the hell am I and why?

Enterman returned to the Nostromento house the next morning to explain his final decision to quit once and for all. But as he approached the house, he sensed that something was different there. Nothing blatant, nothing the average bystander would have noticed. Only an Enterman, groping for big mysteries to explain minor hints, would have picked it up. He was bystanding across the street from the house trying to figure out what *it* was when his ear twanged. He jumped at first, thinking his cochlear implant had exploded...except that he did not have one.

In fact it was the audio dot for his card. Someone was calling him and the tone echoed directly into his skull. He tapped the dot and said hello.

“Enterman, are you there?” said the voice.

“Leon?” Enterman said. “Is that you?”

“No, it’s your local ear mite calling. Of course it’s me. Who the fuck else?”

“I didn’t know you could call me.”

“Stop being a yutz. Of course I can call you. As long as you’re carrying your card, you are in my domain which means that you are Borg and I am the head honcho neurohead. I could zap you out of existence from right here if I wanted to.”

“Is that why you’re calling?”

“No, I want to know what you want me to do with these conversations you keep recording.”

“Do you have to do anything with them? Can’t you just store them?”

“Yeah, I can store them. But what the fuck is the point of that? What are you doing, planning your memoirs?”

“What *can* you do with them?”

“Thoreau usually has me run some tests on the ones he records. Of course, that’s all for legal purposes. He didn’t leave any instructions about you and yours. What do you want to do?”

There was a man in front of the big house, pacing slowly up and down the sidewalk. He was wearing the standard dark suit and hat of the clan. Each time he turned to walk in the opposite direction, he put his hand to his waist and rubbed his hip. To Enterman, that little move seemed to mean something.

“What kind of tests?” Enterman asked.

“Any kind you can think of, I can do. Computer scans mostly. They help Thoreau with his depositions and testimony. But I don’t know what the hell *you’re* up to.”

“For example?”

“VPM, VSA, WRN, you know...that kind of stuff.”

“What does all that mean?”

“What do you *do* anyway? Thoreau said to let you use the service while he was away. So I guess that makes me your own private genie, at your fucking beck and call. But what for? You’re not a lawyer.”

“How do you know? Maybe I am.”

“Not. I scanned the membership. Besides, you don’t sound like you know what the fuck you are doing.”

When the man turned again Enterman could see that he was not actually rubbing his hip, he was adjusting the waistband of his pants as though they were slipping on the u-turns. Why did he not fit into his own pants?

"I'm a professional huncher," Enterman said.

"Okay, fine, whatever you say. VPM is a Vocal Pattern Match test. For identification. VSA is Voice Stress Analysis. It measures changes in pitch and frequency of the speaker's voice. Helps you figure out what the speaker is really feeling. WRN is Word Ratio Norm. And so on."

"What does that do?"

"WRN is a kind of lie detector. Word Ratio Norm determines how many different words a person normally uses in their speech. If the number suddenly goes up, they're probably lying because they have to use more words to be inventive. Must I go on?"

"Don't bother, Leon. I *know* this guy is lying."

"What the hell are you doing out in Brooklyn anyway?"

"How do you know where I am?"

"I told you, this is data central, pal. You're part of the matrix, the Grid, the Glob, the earthnet. And I am Globlord. I know everything! I can pinpoint you like a turd in the snow."

"I'm investigating a murder concerning a banshee."

"All right don't tell me. But you better make sure to check with Thoreau if you decide to use any of these services. They're *very* expensive."

"Don't worry, he's rich," Enterman said. Then he tapped the dot under his ear to disconnect.

As he studied it more closely, Enterman decided by the fifth turn that it was not the waistband the man was adjusting. It was something in it. A gun. The man was guarding the entrance to the house. Enterman could not actually see the gun but he was sure it was there. It was tugging the guy's pants into an odd pleat and as he pivoted on his heel, the gun shifted and slipped. That was the reason for adjusting it on each turn. Which suggested that he did not have a holster and was not used to wearing a gun. That was not good, Enterman thought, since amateurs probably shoot first then ask. Enterman walked past him slowly, to give the guard plenty of time to see him.

Things inside the house were different as well. Two more somber men stood stiff as hat racks on either side of the door, gazing into dead space. Enterman smiled at them for no good reason. One of them bowed his head formally in response. There was an awkward stillness as they stood there waiting for something to unfold.

“Mr. Enterman?” said a scrawny man coming towards him down the hall. “Can I help you?”

It was the funereal fellow who had escorted him into the library on his previous visits. He seemed friendlier this time and introduced himself as Tintinay Terandelius. Shaking his hand, Enterman noticed that it was completely covered with a tattoo of vines.

“So someone broke into the house here too,” Enterman said.

“How did you know that?” Tintinay asked.

“Just a guess,” Enterman said.

It *was* only a guess, but an elaborate one. Enterman had already told himself the entire story on the way in. There had been a burglary the night before. A man with a crowbar from Handy’s Hardware broke into the house through a window on the second floor. The neighbor across the street, unable to sleep due to his daughter’s fever, noticed the movement but decided not to report it. The burglar ransacked a few of the upper rooms, looking for whatever it was he was looking for. But then the sounds alerted Nostromento who turned on the light in his bedroom. The intruder ran downstairs, then fled through the basement, which accounted for the men standing around looking tense and tired; and so on and so on.

All this from a tug on a waistband.

Naturally, he was right.

“Was anything stolen?” Enterman asked.

“Some jewelry, a little money,” Tintinay said. “Nothing much. But it is a terrible thing to not even feel safe in your own home.”

“The burglar must have known the layout of the house pretty well to get in and out like that.”

“What do they call it? Case the joint?”

“You’re not calling the police, of course.”

“What can they do?” Tintinay said. “They can do nothing. Take some ridiculous biotrace samples. Make endless notes in their cards. Ask stupid questions. What good does it all do us?”

“I came to talk to Mr. Nostromento. Can I see him?”

“He’s not here.”

“Where then? I need to see him right away. It’s very important.”

“Come.”

Tintinay lead Enterman into the library again. Even though it was empty, Tintinay marched to the middle of the room and announced, seemingly to the thin air: “*Oondegesta Gespa?*”

A voice answered from nowhere, as though the house itself had an opinion about it.

“*Deparka,*” it said.

“He’s down at the park,” Tintinay said to Enterman. “He just left a little while ago. If you want him, go down to the end of this street, make a right, then go to the second entrance. Not the one near the Cyclone, the next one, near the bumper cars. Walk down the alley, then turn right at the Bobcat ride. On the left is the funhouse. He’s there. If you’ll excuse me.”

Tintinay walked out quickly, leaving Enterman alone in the library. Normally an empty room was a circus of information for Enterman. All those specifics leading to all those impressions that pointed, in turn, to all those tales. But this room was oddly blank, not just empty but barren of life. As though only echoes passed through there, never leaving a trace.

Enterman walked over to the desk and stood behind it in order to see what Nostromento saw. From this new angle, the room appeared even dingier than he first thought and more vacant. Enterman opened the drawers of the desk to find that they were as empty as the rest of the room. There were no details, no particulars. Apparently Nostromento paid no attention at all to comfort, to the little niceties; he lived in a world of fates and futures. To get a better sense of this, Enterman sat down in the chair and put his foot on the desktop just as Nostromento had done. No distractions. A patient man, he thought, waiting for something to happen. There was no time there, no flow of events. Things stood still and silent. A waiting room for eternity to drift in.

But something else was odd too. It felt almost like a weight in the air, a strange presence. Enterman turned quickly when he sensed it and knew instantly that he was being watched. Sure enough, in a narrow niche in the shelves there was a plain wooden chair. And on the chair was a wizened old man with a hook nose and round sunglasses. Like Nostromento, he was dressed simply in a dark ill-fitting suit and white shirt with no tie. He was sitting silently there, his hands in a small lap made by his pinched knees. His ancient skin and the tree leaves that were stuck behind his pointy ears, gave him the look of a hundred-year-old forest gnome. He squeezed out a toothless smile and tipped his fingers to Enterman, his Gnomeship giving a blessing.

Enterman realized that it was his voice that had answered Tintinay’s question. And he was the reason that Nostromento was always repeating things in his own language. He was not talking to himself or to the house, as Enterman originally thought. He was translating their conversation for the old man. This old man

who was always there in the chair, always listening. You just could not see him from the visitor's side of the desk.

Enterman waved back. He was obviously someone important, a constant presence in his hidden seat, answering questions, passing judgment. Perhaps he was the Silent One, the Elder of the Clan, or the Man with the Plan. Enterman had no idea. But just as he was about to find out through a long string of questions about everything that had happened from the very beginning, the old man's head flopped to the right, one of the leaves went fluttering to the floor, and he began snoring loudly.

Enterman left him dozing and went back to the foyer near the front door. The two men standing guard were gone. At the opposite end of the foyer, a wide stairway to the upper floors of Nostromento's house opened like jaws. The old ornate banister along with its shadow on the opposite wall, appeared as rows of teeth pointing the way to certain digestion. Drawn by curiosity, like an unwitting snack Enterman followed the route upstairs to the next landing.

In the hallway outside Mama's room there was a pile of sheets and pillowcases on the floor. Sure enough, Enterman examined them and found that they had been slashed. The door was wide open and Enterman walked into the room to find it in disarray. Some drawers in the chest were half open. The wood on the front of one of them was split. Twigs were strewn all around the floor. And the bed itself had been moved away from the wall where it was the last time. Stones that had been arranged in a neat circle on the floor were now scattered like Enterman's beans. The burglar was certainly looking for something but was it really just jewelry or money, Enterman wondered. He doubted it. But if not, then what?

"Are you all right, Mama?" Enterman asked, walking over to her in the bed.

She seemed scared and cringed when he spoke.

"Who are you? Do I know you?"

"Enterman, remember? I saw you yesterday. I talked to you for a while yesterday."

"I don't know."

"I'm a friend of Tony's, Mama. I came to talk to you yesterday about him."

"Tony? Who is this Tony?"

"Tony Bell. Antonne Bellarosita, your grandson-in-law. Connie's husband. Tony."

"I don't know. I'm very confused. Things are all out of place. Where is my pocketbook?"

"Mama, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Put a jacket on, it's cold out. You'll catch your death. I don't understand you. Every day it's the same thing."

"Mama, someone was here last night. Did you happen to see who it was?"

"Who it was?"

"The man who was here last night. He came in and started looking for something. In the dresser, in the pillows. Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"You did? You did see him?"

Her answer caught him off guard.

"What do I look like to you? I'm not blind. I saw. *Dondamedore!* I saw. I saw."

"What did he look like?"

"He's a good boy. A nice looking boy. He never cause no trouble. Not for nobody."

"He was a little boy?" Enterman asked, rubbing the head of a possible ten-year old crook.

"My feet are cold. I got the shivers. Where is the blanket? Did he take that too?"

There was already a heavy blanket over her feet, but Enterman adjusted it anyway. It was different from the one he had seen the day before.

"He was looking for something, wasn't he? This little boy?" Enterman asked.

"Where he go now? Is he still here? Tell him don't forget his jacket. So much excitement all the time."

"No, he's gone. He's not here any more."

"Can I have a cigarette?"

"Did he take anything?"

"Did he?" she repeated.

"The man who was here—the little boy—he came in and looked around. Maybe he asked you where it was. Then he found it. Did he find something and take it with him?"

"He found himself in the mirror."

There were no mirrors.

"Did you know him? Did you ever see him before?"

"You ever see him before?" she repeated. "Before?"

Too complicated, he said to himself. Keep it simple.

"You saw the man who was here last night," he stated flatly. "But did you know him? Do you know his name?"

"Last night, last night. The stars they sleep and dream at night."

She was singing that, not saying. It was a lyric from a song, half remembered. Memory, long and short, were all muddled together. Facts, tunes, recollections. Maybe the little boy was from another night, long ago. Or a song or a dream. There was just no way to tell. The part of the mind that kept time and place was all messed up. Enterman tried one more time.

“Was the man who came here last night the same man who went to Room 213?”

“Yes.”

“He was?”

“*Oondegesta Allexiana?*”

“She’ll be right back,” Enterman said, amazing himself.

Without thinking, he had intuitively understood her question. The nurse’s name was not Mia as he originally assumed. The word *mia* meant *me*. The woman’s name must have been Allexiana, and *oondegesta* meant something like *where is*. He was actually beginning to get some of their language. Intuition worked like that, without trying.

“The man who broke in last night was the same man who broke into Room 213. Is that right?”

“No, that left.”

“Did he have a ponytail?”

Enterman made a little twiddle at the back of his neck to indicate the kind of short ponytail Sal, the brute from the bar, wore.

“Ah yes.”

“He did!”

“He’s a good boy. I say to him when you grow up you gonna be the Mister. Everybody gonna listen to you. So you watch what you say and you watch what you do.”

“Tony’s a good boy? Tony Bell?” Enterman said, putting his hand on her clenched left fist to keep her on track.

“Tony say...don’t, let go.”

Enterman pulled his hand back as Mama’s companion in black entered the room. She frowned at Enterman for touching the old lady and shoved another pillow under Mama’s broad back. Then she took her seat again and opened her manual.

“Allexiana?” Enterman said to her.

She nodded.

“He slashed the pillows here too?”

She nodded again.

“Were you here? Did you see him?”

She shook her head from side to side.

“So he still hasn’t found it, has he?”

She shrugged.

“Do you know what it is? Do you know what they’re looking for? Do you know *where* it is?”

But she looked down and intently returned to her reading instead of responding.

Enterman knew that the moment had come. Not just for the final kiss-off to Nostromento, that was no big deal. It was time for the inevitable encounter with Coney Island itself. Approaching it in reality, in the sweat as they said, he stopped under the rickety sticks of the Cyclone roller coaster at Surf Avenue and West 10th Street. While not as vivid as the FourD—nothing in reality was as impressive as its image—the current Coney Island was certainly more real. It was old now once again, shoddy, and covered with yellow stains. Only faint memories of glory stretched back through the decades. And closed for the winter, it looked even drearier. Hookers walked the streets now, and Quark addicts filled the doorways. The crack of Serotubes underfoot. Bums lumbered. Punks hung out. Rusting hulks of dead rides filled vacant lots. The Snowball was a carcass but the *Danger* sign remained.

It was still in business, of course. There was always something in the works there, even in the worst of times. There was no ignoring the romance of the seaside with its unobstructed view of elsewhere. But on this turn, Coney had once again grown raw and mean, and cheap as pasteboard. The narrator in the FourD said that they were trying to revive it for the sixth time. They were going to rebuild the original 100-year old Steeplechase, add more microlumen paint, clean up the gutters. Refurbish Star City. There were even a couple of neo-neo-side-shows in the works. And rumors that the Disney company would take it over and turn it into a theme park...Coney Islandland.

But as he walked down Jones Walk past the booths with their rusty shutters and all those hokey, dirt-speckled signs with their blaring type and shouting colors—past Water Squirt and Free Throw and Balloon Dart, past RollerBowl corroding dimly—it seemed that it would take more than nostalgia to bring back the old Coney Island. More than money. A time bomb perhaps. Or a miracle.

The funhouse was at the far end of the lane. It was directly across from the skeletal remains of the Tornado. A huge stuffed clown in a red circus suit was poised in the front, but steel cables poked through the material like tendons.

Empty green chairs on wheels waited for victims, the seats filled with garbage. There was no sign of life, except for President Bush IV sitting on a stool in front reading a Stephen King novel on chameleonic paper.

“Nostromento?” Enterman said to him.

“Heh?” the man said. His voice was muffled by the rubber mask. “Wukkin I doofer ya? Ride’s closed. You can read.”

“I’m here to see Gaspara Nostromento.”

“Yeah? He’s inside,” he said indifferently and pointed to the front door of the ride behind him which was painted poorly to resemble a large rock. “Go in and turn right at the hangman. It’s a black door, you’ll see it. Go down the stairs.”

Making like Sisyphus, Enterman pushed against the bogus boulder. It was actually plywood covered with painted foam and it opened easily. But he took no encouragement from that as he ducked inside. He followed a ramp up through spidery strings, over a plexiglass bridge that disappeared underfoot, and across a maze of uneven tiles. When he came to a dangling hangman’s knot, he could not resist putting his head in the noose and hanging himself. The hangman—a wax dummy wearing a canvas hood—was unmoved.

A door to the right led to a flight of spiral stairs going down, where a subterranean light glowed from below as Enterman descended. The stairs led to an enormous basement room under the funhouse. It was a large storage area filled, not with balloons and warped mirrors, but with tapscreens, simsets, hologizmos, podbeds, velvet paintings. It looked like central receiving for the Wal-Mart of the Gods, but Enterman realized that it was just a warehouse for stolen merchandise.

Enterman wandered through the goods until he heard Gaspara Nostromento talking to someone else on the far side of a pile of boxes. He whispered the word “record” but almost jumped out of his skin when he heard a voice say “What was that?” in his ear. He swatted to defend himself against the invader, managing instead to punch himself in the head and knock the dot off. It bounced on the floor before Enterman could retrieve it and put it back on.

“Shhh!” Enterman shushed.

“Hey fuck you shhh,” Leon said. “The speech recognition software’s down. You’re lucky I was monitoring or you could have shoved *record* up your ass. And stop shouting. I told you it picks up everything. This ain’t Dick Tracy.”

Enterman lowered his arm and tried to do the same with his blood pressure.

“Can I still record something?” he asked nicely.

“Yeah but I’ll have to do it manually. I hope you appreciate the special effort I’m making here.”

“Very much,” Enterman said.

Nostromento had stopped talking when he thought he heard a strange voice, but it was hard to tell. There was a lot of noise all over the warehouse from people moving goods and boxes. He looked around, saw nothing unusual, and continued his conversation.

"Dueste ilo calladina drakima?"

"Igo noesta."

"Targul postrejena se?"

"Igo no omniserra."

"E no qwanna?"

"Nuo ekutatadero chee."

"Oonadegesta se?"

"Igo noesta."

"Ontonah enclavatadino se?"

"Say, say. Ma oonia?"

"Igo noesta."

"Avartiene. Avartiene. Nuo se calladinata."

Surrounded by a bevy of virtual displays all showing bright data from his various hookups, Leon Weyerhauser felt like a brain in a fishbowl from some campy sci-fi sim. A kind of cyber-oracle with a coffee addiction. It was a feeling that he loved. Juiced up on nuclear java that he sucked through a dermal patch, belted into a souped-up eggcup that rotated in any direction with the touch of a thought, and managing his data via a neuropointer, he was indeed the master of a vast domain of pure information. Financial reports from Singapore, 3000 TV channels, NATO updates via ComLink, every movie ever made in every country, websims running the world over, the entire Glob at his beck and call, and all streaming through his own private nexus. Within seconds—no, nanoseconds—he could dip into the stream at any point in the global sea of bits, analyze the patterns, buy and sell and trade and disclose and conceal, microwaves charging like nerve impulses from all over the electric earthweb, seeking him out like a god.

Leon had no use of his legs or arms but what did he need them for? He was patched in via a neural explant that allowed his thoughts to manage, manipulate, modify the data. Just by willing it, he could move freely in sims space, and that was the only space that mattered. In fact mere humans like Enterman with their pathetic 20/20 and clumsy thumbs, needed *him* to function. No, relied on him! All those corporate dweebs, legal beagles, medical morons who subscribed to his service...what would they do without him? How would they slug through out there in the mud? It was not just a matter of facts and figures. Not just informa-

tion they came to him for. No, that was available to any clod with a card. What he, Leon Weyerhauser, Globmeister Manificat, offered was more than that. It was knowledge. Understanding. Wisdom, even. Because he alone could see the big picture, the GodSpirit inside the equations, the pattern in the pixels, the flow of the planetary whizamabob throughout the man/machine supermatrix.

Whew!

Really good coffee!

This was a far cry from the days at MIT when they used to feel sorry for him because he was “disabled.” But that was then, a long dead then. Now, he was in charge. He was the one all the big shots came to in order to make sense of it all. And someday he would dispense with them altogether. All these little Entermans with their pathetic little needs. After all, wasn’t he—Leon Weyerhauser—the next evolution of consciousness on earth? Pure mind, disembodied data, beyond the sweaty limits of physicality? The simspace avatar? Another long porous suck of pure Andean mix convinced him that this was the case, as he rotated within the circular ring of consoles all around him just by thinking it so and imagined himself a sun at the center of a solar system making heat from cold dead nothing.

Their conversation over, the other man walked away and left Nostromento standing alone. Enterman stopped recording and stepped out from behind the boxes, walking over to where Nostromento was sitting on a small digiscreen, sipping tea from a thick glass. He had a cube of sugar wedged between his teeth on one side of his mouth and a slice of lemon between his toothless gums on the other. He did not seem to be the least bit surprised to see Enterman appear in his netherworld.

“Nice screen,” Enterman said, “whose was it?”

“You like it? It’s a Sony Fifthgen. I’ll give it to you for a thousand dollars.”

“No thanks. Nowhere to put it.”

“It is quite big but most people put them in the living room.”

“I don’t have one.”

“All right, so you put it in any room. Doesn’t matter. It has haptic controls.”

“Don’t have *any* room either.”

“How about a fine Matsui simset then? This one has nanodef and deep focus. Put it on and you’ll think you’re really there.”

“I’m already really there. And anyway, I’m not interested in felony. But I am interested in two felons named Sal and Willy.”

“Sal and Willy? Are they friends of yours?”

“No, of yours.”

"That cannot be so, Enterman."

"Think. Maybe you shared a prison cell once."

"Prison? I have never been in prison. I would never shame my family in such a way. Why would I go to prison?"

"Let's see," Enterman said, tallying up three of the items near him, "how about grand larceny, medium larceny and petty larceny?"

"Everyone steals, Enterman. This country is built on theft. From the teenager who pirates music, to the salesman who claims the trip to Bermuda on his taxes, all the way up to the politicians who give themselves raises. Stealing, you might say, is America's greatest liberty."

"I don't say. You say. I came to say goodbye."

"You have found Antonne's murderer then?"

"I think I have. But they've convinced me to keep that information to myself."

"It is this Sal and Willy you mention? Are they the ones who did it? Do you know how to find them?"

"That's easy. I just look over my shoulder."

"Ah, I see," Nostromento said. "This Sal and Willy sound like a pair of hoods. Just the type of boys Tony would have befriended. These two have threatened you, no?"

"Not no."

"So then they must be connected with our Antonne's murder. It makes perfect sense. They have found out you are helping us and have tried to influence you."

"These *boys* could have killed me," Enterman shouted. "And nothing so far has convinced me that you and your clan are worth getting killed for. You haven't told me the truth yet about what's going on."

Nostromento looked wounded by the stab.

"I must be so very careful, you see."

"I like my life too," Enterman said.

"Not careful for me," Nostromento added, "for the family. I must be careful for the clan. There is a great deal at stake here."

"Sal and Willy work for somebody named Mr. Targul," Enterman said. "My guess is that he's a local wiseguy. A crook. Tony must have been involved with the three of them in some kind of deal."

"That would be very much like Tony."

"Stealing something, let's say."

"Yes."

“Maybe he double-crossed them. Tried to run off with it. So they killed him trying to get it back. They thought Mama had it, so they searched her room at the home and at your house.”

“This all makes perfect sense, Enterman.”

“Now let’s say, for the sake of argument, that they still haven’t found it. That they are still looking for it and they won’t stop until they get it. It’s all very clear, don’t you think?”

“Now it is.”

“Which leaves just one simple question.”

“Yes?”

“What the hell *is* it?”

“What is what?”

“This thing they’re looking high and low for. What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

Nostromento was standing up now and swaying slowly from one foot to the other. This was his usual perjuring twitch. The chair behind his desk at the house, had he been seated at it, would have been chirping like a canary.

“Sure you know, Nostromento. You know what it is. Because that’s what is at stake here. This thing—whatever it is—is what all this nonsense is about.”

“This thing?”

“This object they’re looking for. You know what it is. You know, and Targul knows, and Sal and Willy know. Mama probably knows. Everybody knows but me. Why do I feel so left out? Come to think of it, maybe you even hired the *boys* to get it from Tony.”

“That is absurd. Tony was my son-in-law; I would never hurt him. I was hoping that *you* would find out what these hoods are looking for.”

“Then you knew all along that Tony was murdered,” Enterman said.

“No, I did not know that. It was a terrible shock to me.”

“When did you find out? Yesterday when you told me? Or on Sunday when it happened?”

“It is quite difficult to explain all this.”

“I’ll make it simple. Forget all the details. Forget all the lies. Just tell me what everyone is after. What do they want?”

“I tell you I don’t know. Maybe something of value. Something here in the warehouse. Tony was an evil boy. Perhaps he told them about something that was brought in. There are strongboxes here. We haven’t opened them all yet. Maybe that is what they want.”

Nostromento was gesturing to a small safe on the floor to illustrate his point.

"No," Enterman said. "It's smaller than that."

"How do you come to this conclusion?"

"You told me that Tony's mouth was cut from ear to ear," Enterman said. "And Connie said that his pockets were turned out and he wasn't wearing any shoes when he was found."

"What does all that have to do with this matter?"

"It means that they were looking for something small. Something he could have hidden in his pockets or in his shoes. Or in his mouth."

"His mouth?"

"Don't you get it? They cut open his mouth thinking he was hiding it there. But he wasn't."

"How gruesome!"

"On the other hand it wasn't so small that he could have swallowed it or they would have sliced open his stomach and bowels too."

"Please!" Nostromento said, holding his eyes to block the image.

"That's why they keep searching Mama's room. In the drawers and the pillows and sheets. Since he did not have it on him, they must think that Tony hid it somewhere before he left the nursing home on Sunday. And maybe that Mama took it home with her."

Nostromento rubbed the bridge of his nose and tried to pull himself together.

"You see, Enterman? This is why we need your help. You notice these little things and put together a...how do you call it?...a theory."

"You can take the theory and shove it. I'm going home."

"I hope I can prevail on you to think twice," Nostromento said, his palm up like a traffic cop.

"I already have," Enterman said, "once, twice, and thrice. Adios!"

And he walked back outside into Coney Island with complete and total conviction that it was the last time.

By three o'clock Enterman was already late for his appointment. Not with banshees, or murder suspects, or even his own destiny. Nothing quite that exotic. He had simply promised Etta Travers, the 140-year old former circus star who shot her father from a cannon, that he would visit. When he arrived at the nursing home, Etta was sitting in her glidechair next to the bed waiting for him. It was the highlight of her day. A seasoned performer, she had a talent for appearance, a delicate sense of the ambient light such that she could tilt her head in a way that hid wrinkles and age spots and made her, by the artful use of shadow and luminance, seem three or four years younger than she was.

“Nonny!” she said, waiting for her kiss.

“Hello Etta.”

This time Enterman bent down and kissed her. The skin on her cheek was cool and loose, like a shower curtain.

“You’re a little bit late, dear. But so what? I never trust anyone who lives by a watch. The beat of the heart is better. I think I wrote that in some book.”

“How are you today?” Enterman asked.

“Everything that should feel good hurts. But that’s the way it is. I don’t complain. I was just sitting here looking through my scrapbook. Would you like to see?”

On the bed was an enormous loose-leaf book with pages filled to the breaking point with old photographs, amusement ride tickets, train tokens, postcards, handwritten notes. A life in scraps; the story of Coney Island in tidbits. Palimpsest of a place and time. Enterman sat on the bed next to the book as Etta leafed through it and pointed to one of the photos in it. This was a picture of an immense building at the edge of the shore. A wooden slat fence separated it from a boardwalk half covered by sand. It was a grand hotel in the grand tradition, a fancy congestion of terraces and turrets topped by banners and flags. A kind of wedding confection on a sandy plate. In the foreground there was a girl wearing a white dress. She had a high waist, long arms, and a bow in her hair. She was squinting into the camera. Behind her, men in lumpy suits and straw hats and ladies in voluminous dresses walked along a promenade between the hotel and the sea. They looked stiff there, out of place. Like coal miners on holiday in the sun.

“That’s my mother when she was a girl,” Etta said. “This picture dates back to the 1880’s, I think. It must be a copy of an old collodion wet-plate.”

“Where was it taken?”

“Here in Coney Island, of course.”

“That’s right,” he said, recalling his virtual tour. “There were hotels here back then.”

“Coney goes back further than that even. Henry Hudson landed here the day before he discovered Manhattan. When would that have been? In 1609 or thereabouts?”

“I don’t know history.”

“At that time the whole island was overrun with rabbits. That’s where the name comes from. Conies are rabbits, you know. The Algonkian Indians lived here and they welcomed Hudson with open arms. The fools.”

“You know a lot about the area.”

“I’ve lived here all my life. My mother too. Poppa came over from Europe where he was an acrobat. We joined Coney as a circus family. My mother was a sad clown. I helped my father and I was a contortionist too. I could fold myself up into a tiny little valise. It’s all in my books. That’s what I write about. This scrapbook is a kind of journal.”

As Enterman turned the pages, he was taken on a different kind of tour. A slow, flat, still, illustrated history of old Coney Island way back in the 19th century. And for a while he was lost there. Happily so. In the age of digiwalls on every surface and FourDs that let you poke around in the Glob and holo-ads that seemed as thick as life itself, this dinky book of old faded photos pasted onto black pages somehow struck Enterman as the most enchanting of all illusions. And Etta’s fingers on them like those of a conjurer casting a spell.

“There was a famous pier here in 1847. On the West end of the island,” Etta said, narrating another photo. “It was very notorious in those days, full of prostitutes, pickpockets, and swindlers. Just like the Wild West. Then in 1876 an observation tower from the Philadelphia Exposition was moved here as an attraction. It was 300 feet, the tallest structure in the country. It had steam elevators and it brought in more visitors and tourists. Then someone built a Switchback Railway, I don’t recall who. And that was the start of Coney Island as an amusement park.”

“A switchback railway?”

“You know...a ride that went to and fro,” she said swinging her hand back and forth like a pendulum. “Later on there were a series of hotels on the Eastern end. The Oriental, The Manhattan Beach, and The Brighton Beach. And there was one called The Prospect where the very first motion picture was shown. But that was in the 1930’s.”

“What about this one?” Enterman asked.

The photograph he was pointing to showed three girls standing in a row, lined up along the sandy shore. The words *Summer 1915* were written on the corner in perfect copperplate script. Behind the girls, the ocean was frozen into an amber fringe, and further back there was a pier filled with well-hatted onlookers. The girls were all bending over in the same direction. It was a pose, racy once. They had round faces with naughty smiles, round bosoms under the cotton frill, bulging behinds. Early cheesecake. Sex before the Great War, Enterman thought, when black tights on thick legs, bathing suits like knickers, and loose dark hair meant wild abandon. Most tantalizing but only if your name was Max and you waxed your mustache and delivered milk for a living.

“You?” Enterman asked, pointing to the one in the middle.

“And Marie and Katie,” she said. “Weren’t we something then? Marie was a contortionist too. She could bend her whole body in half and scratch her own back from underneath. Katie, if I remember, was one of the shees.”

“How’s that?”

“You know, the shees.”

Enterman went dim.

“Shees,” Etta repeated. “They’re all over the place here. Always have been.”

“Shees as in...banshees?”

“Sure. They’ve been here in Coney from the start. I’ve known plenty of them.”

“You’re saying there really is such a thing as a banshee?”

“Of course. This is Coney Island, darling.”

“Do you know Mama Nostromento?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well she’s supposed to be a banshee. What about her son Gaspara Nostromento? Lives in a big house on Lincoln?”

“No, is he one of them?”

“He’s the leader.”

“The High Mister!” she said dramatically. “I knew his father Grygor, I think. Is he a friend of yours?”

“I’m working for him.”

“Oh, be careful, Nonny. There are stranger things in this world than they tell us on the six o’clock news.”

“What do you mean?”

“Shees, for example.”

“What about them?”

“The shees are a different species of being, you know.”

“Hungarian?”

“Don’t you know what shees are, my dear?”

“Not really.”

“Shees are fairies, Nonny.”

Fairies! Enterman blubbered, but only to himself. The Methuselah Implant must have been going a little sparky. He looked directly at Etta who was looking back at him through glasses that were undulating like tidepools to keep him in focus. But she herself was not wavering.

“What exactly do you mean when you say that?” Enterman asked dumbly.

“You know...fairies. Enchanted pixies.”

He did not budge.

“Like elves, for heaven’s sake. Don’t look so surprised.”

“Fairies from Fairyland,” Enterman said, not as a question but as a challenge.

“Like Puck. Robin Goodfellow.”

There was in Enterman’s fey smile more than a hint of skepticism, which Etta saw and addressed.

“I know how it sounds but this is what they claim. They always have. And, frankly I’m not so sure they’re wrong. I’ve known quite a few of them. They know things no one else knows. Secrets and rituals and so on. It’s really quite amazing.”

“Connie Bell?” Enterman said out loud, somehow without hysterics.

“I don’t know her. Is she part of their clan?”

“That’s what she says.”

“Then, like all the others, she is a direct descendant of the ancient shees. I once knew an old man named something Decienti. He was the family elder, the one they consulted on rules and laws. You wouldn’t believe the things that he knew. Details about forest rites throughout the centuries. He could perform hands-on cures. He once cured my father’s broken leg with secret herbs. He didn’t even speak English. Someone had to translate for us.”

“Let me get this straight, Etta. What you’re saying...if I get your meaning here...is that this Gaspara Nostromento is a *fairy*,” Enterman summed up, his cheek full of tongue.

“If he is who you say he is,” Etta said, “then that is exactly what he claims to be. A shee.”

“But he looks like a cigar maker from Belgrade.”

“What did you expect a shee to look like? Tights and pointy shoes with bells? That’s movies, dear, not real life. You know how that kind of look would go over in modern day Brooklyn?”

Etta’s frizz of white hair stood up in an invisible draft. She scratched her hand. A cloud dimmed the sunlight coming in. Enterman, for his part, thought briefly about tying her sleeves together and calling in the nut squad. But he forced himself to remain calm. After all, she seemed perfectly lucid. Besides, she was a writer, a storyteller. Like him in some ways except that she got published. And, like him, she was a lonely one. The eagerness in her eyes said so. And Enterman knew that a lonely storyteller was the loneliest person in the world. Desperate to testify, to tell the tale.

Let her talk, he thought. It was pure babble but perhaps there would be something helpful in the story. Not about the social habits of the modern condo-dwelling banshee, but something about a bunch of wiseguys slashing each

other. Something about Tony, or Nostromento, or Sal and Willy. In other words, something real.

“So what else do you know about them?” Enterman asked.

“I know a little bit about their history. You can’t study the story of Coney Island and not come across the legend of the shees. They’re tied up together.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

Etta had been searching through the scrapbook. In a sleeve in the back cover she found a bunch of loose pages and took them out. She touched the frame of her eyeglasses and the lenses fattened up to adjust for reading. A white bead formed as the room light reflected off the lenses and danced around the words like a bouncing ball.

“Here it is,” she said scanning the pages. “It all began with the Celts. You know who they were, don’t you? Now there’s a tragic history for you, just waiting to be told. I wonder if I have time? Cultures are like people, Nonny. They’re born, they thrive and adapt, they die. History for us is always the story of individual white men. But it really should be the biography of cultures. Don’t you think? The whole story?”

“Sure, Etta. And you’re the one to do it. But what about the Celts?”

“Oh yes,” she said, going back to the notes. “The Celts were a great tribe of people who lived throughout Europe. They were noble and proud. Great craftsmen in metal and pottery, and brave warriors and explorers too. This was long long ago. Long before the Romans took over all of Central Europe. Before Christ even.”

Etta drifted back in her fantasy to the valleys and the lakes, the bronze tools, the potatoes, the goats, the skinned furs. It was a rich time, full of sensual truths. A time of visions. She tried to think of ways to trap all that with tame and skimpy words. The quest seemed hopeless.

“Go on,” Enterman said, trying to work his way up towards the current century sometime soon. “What happened to the Celts?”

“They lived mostly in an area called Gaul. That’s where France is now. But in their time they spread out and conquered other lands. Around the Alps, for instance, and even Russia and the British Isles. For centuries they were the most powerful tribe in Europe. Like most early woodland dwellers, their religion was natural. They believed in earth gods, rock spirits, and so on. The forests were alive to them, filled with magic. Each leaf was godly, each ant a bridge to the great powers. Are you with me so far, Nonny?”

“Like a fungus.”

“Part of their mythology involved a race of beings called the shees. Not human, not animal. A separate order of creatures. These shees lived in the forests and went about their business, hardly interacting with humans. They were similar to what are called fairies in other cultures.”

“Like goblins,” Enterman said squinting and still hoping, for the sake of his own sanity, that she meant the word differently.

“Exactly. Like pixies, sprites, leprechauns. Most cultures refer to such creatures. A completely separate race of individuals.”

Damn, he thought. They *were* using the word in the same way. He said nothing out loud, but he was smirking at the top of his lungs.

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Etta said, looking at him sadly. “This is the age of technology. We have our own magic to believe in. Biotanic toilet paper, smart socks, and all. But you know what the Greeks said...credo quia absurdum. Believe *because* it is foolish.”

“Aren’t fairies supposed to be tiny little people?” Enterman said, holding an imaginary one in a pinch of air.

“Who knows?” she said. “Who can say what is supposed to be? Maybe that part of their story is pure fiction. On the other hand, who can say that they haven’t evolved over the eons. Just as we have. We are not short, thick, and hairy anymore and we don’t carry fire embers. Perhaps they’ve adapted and changed too. Have you read your Darwin, Nonny?”

Sure, Enterman thought. It all makes perfect sense. The world is a complex place, full of oddities. Most of which we cannot explain anyway. Darwin, evolution, culture, myth. Sure. *And I’m Napoleon and this is my talking horse Trigger!*

“Okay,” he said, tackling the topic head on. “So there is a separate race of creatures called shees that once lived in Europe. How do you think these shees ended up in Coney Island?”

“I guess the way everyone did,” Etta said. “By boat.”

“But why? Why Coney Island? Why Brooklyn? Why New York?”

“Why not? Everybody has to end up somewhere. Take you, for example, Nonny. What are you?”

“Skeptical.”

“Your people I mean.”

“Jewish.”

“Well there you are. Two hundred years ago your tribe was running around Poland in fur hats and beards. Now they’re selling explants on 47th Street. It’s a strange world.”

“Yes but enchanted pixies running the rides in Coney Island? That’s not strange, that’s crazy.”

“They only run the rides some of the time. That’s not their real job. The rest of the time they steal.”

“Steal what?”

“Whatever it is thieves steal. Cards, simsets, nofur coats.”

“I thought these people were enchanted,” Enterman said, making fairydust with his fingers.

“True, but times are tough. You’ve got to make money somehow.”

“A band of *supernatural thieves*,” Enterman murmured. He examined the thought with difficulty, the way one might peer into muck to see and end up not.

“Face it, my dear,” Etta said kindly, “we’re human. We only trust what we can touch, what makes us thin, what saves us money. All the myths of the past seem worthless to us. Frivolous and out of touch. Like fairies in New York. It’s absolutely crazy, I admit.”

“Good,” Enterman said.

“But look at it this way,” Etta went on. “The world is a strange and difficult place. Full of danger and mystery. Anything can happen. But the greatest danger of all is unseen by us. Do you know why? Because the greatest danger *is* us. Given enough time, we humans will control everything. All the tides and fortunes of life on earth. Genes, atoms, microwaves. We will become as gods. And we’re quite dangerous! Petty, paranoid, murderous.”

“That much I agree with.”

“Well these myths tell of devious creatures who foul up our plans, who battle our control, who cause disturbances. They remind us that there is a world out there with its own destiny. Before and after human beings. They remind us that we are not really as in control as we think we are. They help us keep our humanity.”

“By stealing digiscreens?”

“According to Decienti the shees perform another function, a very important function. He told my mother about it once but I never understood it. I’m older now, so I can grasp it. Just as it is our destiny to control the world, they have a destiny too.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t tell anyone I told you this. I wasn’t supposed to say. It is a secret they have guarded for ten thousand years.”

“I can keep a secret,” Enterman said.

“They foretell the past.”

“What?”

“They foretell the past.”

“I see,” Enterman said.

He did not, of course.

His shining insight was in total solar eclipse.

Enterman sensed trouble the moment he walked outside the nursing home. Of course, he always sensed trouble walking outside because that’s where the world was, but this time there was another reason...an instant sensation that his personal space was being invaded. There was a sudden shadow too close, a smell too impending, blur of motion. But before he could react, he was grabbed under each arm, airborne, and being carried down a ramp at the side of the building.

As luck would not have it, it was his old pals Sal and Willy. They carried him swiftly to a door at the end of the ramp and into an empty room in the basement of the building. It was a lunchroom filled with tables and chairs and a counter for serving. But no one else was there. They slammed the door closed and positioned Enterman like a side of beef against the counter.

“That’s it, fuckface,” Sal said. His absence had not improved his manner. “Yer in dreamland, pal. Now I did warn you off, did I not? I mean, are you stupid or somethin? Did I not tell you last time or what?”

“You did.”

“Okay so you’re a shitface fuckup. You don’t wanna listen? Now you have no choice but to die for it.”

Enterman was about to beg to differ but Sal’s first punch was interrupted by the sound of someone opening the door. All three men turned around to see who it was. Enterman, for his part, was hoping for the cavalry and was disappointed to find that it was just a woman walking in on them. Even so, she made a fabulous silhouette against the door frame. Slim and athletic but soft and shapely at the same time. They all gawked at her. And in a condemned man’s long last moment, Enterman thought how nice it was that they could share this brief bit of male bonding together.

As the woman stepped forward into the room, the glare of an overhead lit her face like the cover of the French *Vogue*. Enterman thought at first that he recognized her from the Perfection commercials. But he quickly realized that she was not a supermodel but rather the perfectly beautiful woman who had escorted Connie Bell’s daughter home the day before.

“Hey you! Babe! Get the fuck lost, aright?” Sal suggested.

She was carrying a large tan bag, the exact kind models used for changes of clothing. But instead of taking Sal's advice, she put the bag down on the floor and stood her ground.

"Out!" Sal said, walking over to her. "We got business to attend to here. Are you deaf?"

"I'm sorry but it's my business too," she said politely.

"Oh is that so? And who, may I ask, the *fuck* are you?" he said, his mug menacing a few inches from her lovely face.

They made a jarring contrast...the high-paid beauty in loose trench coat, tights, and sneakers, and the aboriginal Brooklyn street fighter in shitkicker boots and scummy jeans. Yet in spite of the mismatch she did not back down or wince or even waiver. That, Enterman thought, was quite admirable.

"Enterman is my partner," she said calmly, to the surprise of no one more than Enterman himself.

The idea caught Sal off guard as well. He stepped back for an overview, fell in love with what he saw, then walked slowly up to her again, ushering as much charm as he could squeeze from a lifetime of petty crime. He smiled. The middle tooth was gold but of low purity.

"Listen babe," he said, turning seductive and articulate. "You look like a nice chick and I would be happy to buy youze a beer some day. But this is not the day. Unnerstand? Now would you mind excusing us? This ain't your business."

"I told you," she said without budging an inch, "Enterman and I are partners, so this is my business too. Now why don't we all calm down and talk about this whole thing and what to do about it. I'm sure we can work something out."

Her friendly tone was so incongruous with the situation that no one knew quite what to do for a few long moments. In the interim, she took off her coat and folded it over a chair. She was wearing a short workout suit which she straightened out, then adjusted the long hair at the back of her head where it had been pulled and twisted into a magnificent *challah*.

"Lady, I'm gonna say dis once," Sal said, losing tact fast. "Get...the fuck...out of here. Go home. Do you unnerstand me?"

Sal was a bit taller than she was and so the jut of his chin was practically denting her own fine nose but still she did not move back at all. She simply took a deep breath and said again, "Let's all sit down and discuss this."

She moved over next to Enterman and leaned against the counter. Sal looked at Willy in disbelief but his partner was ginning moronically as he admired the woman's body and bravado. Enterman, relieved to have a break in the tension, grinned too but thinking that Sal might actually strike her, he went to stand

between them. Unfortunately at that moment Willy clamped him with thick arms like cables and he could not budge.

The woman had not moved at all and showed absolutely no fear. That alone caused Sal's fury to blossom. He was precisely the kind of guy who confused terror with pleasure. And the sheer joy of his own psychotic rage replaced, for the moment, the tedium of killing a nobody like Enterman.

"Look doll, I don't wanna hurt you," he said maniacally, lying through his teeth.

"The feeling's mutual," she said.

"So don't give me a hard time then. Just scram, okay? Go home, make a pie, watch the Sims. And fuck the fuck off."

He reached out to her face in an attempt to grab her jaw, like an overbearing uncle, and lead her aside by the chin. But he never made it. As he extended his left hand, she twisted slightly, grabbed his thick wrist with her right hand, and pulled him forward. Then, stepping to her left, she seemed to nudge his elbow, twist a bit more, then bend at the waist. The whole maneuver took three seconds and was so smooth she seemed to be no more than shuffling her feet. But in the end, Sal went clattering down on the floor.

Sal immediately jumped to his feet and glanced back to the floor to see what was there. Clearly he had tripped or slipped on something. Everyone followed his gaze, including the woman. For a few seconds it seemed as though someone had lost a contact lens. There was even a moment of hope in finding it. They did not, of course, since there was nothing there to find. Contact lenses had long ago been replaced by new eyeballs and in any case Sal had not actually slipped on anything.

That clumsiness sent him over the edge. He instinctively threw a punch but missed as she moved one millimeter beyond his reach. He bruised the air, hated the feeling, and threw another punch. Once again she pulled back, studying his fist like a hovering wasp.

In an effort to end the episode once and for all, Sal nailed her by the shoulder and tried to throw her down. But this turned out to be an even bigger mistake. She let him get a good solid grip then as he pulled, she stepped forward towards him, put her left foot in between his two feet, bent, pushed and twisted. All quite fluidly...a modern dance movement. Lovely to watch. This time he went flying into a table, hit his jaw on the edge, and bit his own tongue.

"That hurts," she winced. "I've done that. I'm so sorry."

"Fuh," he groaned.

"I have some Arnica lotion in my bag if you want. It'll help with the pain."

“You let a girl do your fighting for ya?” Willy said to Enterman still in his clutch.

“Not for me,” Enterman said. “She’s doing it for herself.”

Sal was crouched next to the overturned table. He touched his tongue and glared at the blood. It looked for a moment as though he might go mouth-foaming berserk, but she stopped him in his tracks with a sweet tone in her voice:

“Please don’t make me help you down again. It’s exhausting.”

And she really seemed to mean it.

Sal looked up at Willy who was thoroughly enjoying the spectacle. A nod of his head suggested that they should both surround her, but Willy declined with a nod of his.

“I don’t fight babes,” Willy announced.

“Hey...this is fucked up,” Sal implored.

“I don’t fight babes,” Willy reiterated.

Enterman used the lapse to break free of Willy’s grip. He jumped to the woman’s side and got ready to intervene, hoping his FourD wrestling experience would work with someone who did not follow the rules. Luckily, it was not at all necessary.

“Fuck you,” Sal said and lunged.

There was a flash of metal in the midst of the blur as he raced towards her. Enterman stepped forward to stop him but he was too far away and Sal got past, with the knife drawn. The woman braced herself for the impact. But when it came, she seemed to relax. At that instant, she merely turned a bit, the way one might twist to speak to someone in a small group, and threw her arms around him. They were not quite dancing when she wheeled around, her right arm describing a perfect circle in the air. She bent in half, then straightened up. There was a moment of grace, of pure ballet. When she let go, Sal went sailing into the air and landed spine first against the edge of the counter. He went down like a sack.

“God,” she said spying the knife spinning on the floor, “he really could have hurt me.”

“I doubt that,” Enterman said as they both turned to Willy to see what move he would make.

Willy walked over to his fellow thug and stood over him, legs spread. From the rear it looked like he might urinate on Sal as a penalty for embarrassing himself. But instead he simply jerked his thumb towards the door.

“Enough fun and games,” he said. “Mr. Targul wants we should meet him.”

“Alright,” Sal said, standing up poorly. “This is good. I don’t wanna get difficult here. We’ll continue this discussion at a later date.”

He moaned as he picked up his knife, then limped out the door. Willy grinned at the woman one last time and followed him.

“Good, I’m glad that’s over with. That other one looks like trouble,” the woman said.

“Fifteen rounds with Sugar Vin in ’23,” Enterman concurred.

“I was afraid of that,” she said poking a stray strand of hair back into the knot. “Luckily for us he was smarter than he looks.”

“Do I know you?” Enterman asked.

“Rita St. John,” she said, offering her hand.

Enterman took it. The grip was firm but the skin was soft, the fingers smooth as soap. Pale polish on the tips. A hand worth holding. He held.

“Have you had dinner?” she asked. “There happens to be a good restaurant a few blocks from here. In the Russian sector.”

She took her coat, grabbed her bag, and skipped lightly over the threshold as Enterman, feeling squat and slow, held the door.

A nice thick oily slice of pizza smushed with sausage was all Enterman could think about as he perused the menu. But the restaurant Rita had taken them to had nothing like that. This was a First Food establishment, part of the movement reacting to regened vegetables and cloned meat. First Food meant simple, basic, untreated, raw. Like the uncooked soygrain and sprout burger Enterman was considering, not for lunch but as a patch for his wounded ego. He settled on a salad.

“What is that stuff you do?” Enterman asked, spinning his hands in the air uselessly.

“It’s called *Dokido*. It’s a form of martial art. It’s spiritual though.”

“I practice a spiritual martial art too. I pray that my enemies drop dead.”

“Dokido has no kicks, no punches. It’s pure self-defense. You use the other person’s intention, their momentum, to bring them to a state of completion. Fulfillment of their action.”

“All the way to landing on their ass.”

“Sometimes.”

“You sure fulfilled Sal.”

“Yes but that was an accident. I was nervous so my timing was off. I really should not have hurt him like that. My will interfered with my energy. My *sensei* would be mad at me if he found out.”

“Hurt *him*? He could have killed you.”

“By accident maybe. But still, I should have been detached. Once your passions enter into your decisions, you lose control. See, he was pissed off and that’s why his balance was thrown off. I was only scared, which is better. Less negative. But I should have been loving.”

“Loving? Sal, in case you didn’t notice, is a sociopath.”

“Maybe. But like all men he is first and foremost a man. Most men relate physical aggression with anger. It’s an impulse, they can’t help it. This is a terrible limitation during a confrontation which is why women make much better fighters. If they’re trained, I mean. Anger makes you too willful, too desperate for an outcome. The trick in a fight is to wait for the right moment, the last best second, before making your move. You can’t do that if you are all...upset.”

Enterman listened to her explanation with a sense of acute dislocation. Even this close, she was perfectly beautiful and it was hard to match her face with the words she was saying, like an angel discussing auto body repair.

“It’s easier to overcome someone like that,” she went on. “The anger he feels twists his whole body out of whack. His chakras are working against each other. Like a badly stacked pile of lumber. That makes him easy to throw. Gravity overcomes rage. It’s one of the five principles of right balance.”

“Right balance,” Enterman echoed knowingly, although he had absolutely no idea what that might feel like.

When her bowl of raw vegetables arrived, Rita aligned it carefully before her on the table, directly in front of the prime meridian, the central plane. She waited for the aura of the food to align with her axis of intention. She sat up cross-legged on the chair, her back straight, her shoulder blades flat, her neck long and sleek. She closed her eyes over the food briefly, breathed deeply, then began eating slowly and ceremonially.

That clinched it, Enterman thought as he hunched sloppily over his salad and gobbled it like a rabbit. She was a 21ster. No doubt about it. He did not even need to ask. The mere mention of the word spiritual in connection with beating the bejesus out of someone was proof. And then the raw food, the yoga postures, and any talk of right balance. 21sters were the descendents of the mystics, the seekers, the Age of Aquarians, the Flower Children. They believed that a new era of peace and understanding and justice and hope was dawning. That the power of Gaia would heal the mind and that the power of the mind would heal the world. That people were good and that life was precious and music was calming. Planets decided destinies.

Pure claptrap to Enterman who believed that the universe might very possibly have been created for the sole purpose of aggravating him. And he normally would have dismissed someone like this out of hand but there was that other problem. The unmistakable other issue that kept him focused. Namely, that this particular 21ster was an off-the-charts piece of ass and that for some reason she seemed interested in *him*.

“What made you come into that room anyway?” Enterman asked.

“I was outside on the street and I saw them grab you and take you down there. I thought there might be trouble.”

“What were you doing at the nursing home? Visiting someone?”

“No.”

“You just so happened to be there on the street? Picking up bad vibes?”

“Actually I was following you.”

“Really?” Enterman said, flattered but for no good reason. “Why were you following me?”

“I was asked to.”

“Someone asked you to follow me?”

“Yes, a mutual friend,” Rita said.

“Connie Bell? I saw you bringing her daughter home. She told me you worked for her. Why would she ask you to follow me?”

“No. The one who asked me was Thoreau.”

“Dave Thoreau?”

“Yes. He asked me to watch out for you before he went on vacation. He knew that I was coming out to this neighborhood to look after Annie Bell. So he asked me to keep an eye on you too.”

“Watch out for me?” he laughed, his eyebrows forming parentheses that bracketed the phrase in worry. “What for?”

“He thought there might be trouble. He was worried about you. That was a very caring thing to do. You and he are...”

“Son of a bitch,” Enterman reflected. “He lied to me. Thoreau said this little favor wouldn’t be any trouble at all.”

“Well, you know Thoreau. He’ll kind of say anything. That’s why he’s such a good Glob lawyer.”

“No ethics.”

“I meant that he can be convincing.”

“Connie Bell said that you were her daughter Annie’s babysitter.”

“Guardian really.”

“Spiritual or legal?”

“Physical. That’s what I do. I protect people. I’m a bodyguard.”

“You?” Enterman jumped.

His angel had just whipped out an Uzi.

“Don’t be so surprised. People in business these days don’t want to be seen with beefy bodyguards. They stand out too much. I fit into social situations much better because I can look like a colleague or a date. Besides, I’m better than any musclehead because I can talk my way out of situations. CEO’s like that.”

“I’ll bet they do. But Connie Bell is no CEO.”

“I usually work for corporate types. But whenever I can, I also do work for women in trouble. Connie’s family was afraid that Annie might be kidnapped or threatened by the same people who killed her husband Tony. So they hired me to walk the girl home from school. Thoreau set it up. He was their lawyer a few years ago. That’s why he knew we would both be out here. So I told him I would also check up on you while I was around the neighborhood.”

“How do you know Thoreau? He never mentioned you.”

“He hired me to protect him when he was working for the Weber Foundation, the environmental group. He was being threatened by hired guns from some of the multinationals. So I went to all the fundraisers with him. He passed me off as his new girlfriend.”

“Were you?”

“Which worked out fine because I only work for just causes. Or people I trust and believe in.”

“Like Thoreau? How well do you know him?”

“I mean I get calls all the time from corporate execs who want me but some of their companies are harming Gaia and I just won’t do it.”

“Were you and Thoreau...”

“We agreed on a lot of those issues. I know he can be a pain sometimes, but his Ahura Mazda, his core energy, is centered and positive.”

“How deep into his core did you...”

Other than the speck of lettuce stuck on his tooth, Rita thought, Enterman seemed nice. He was even attractive in a casual sort of way. He had soft eyes and a nice presence. He was intelligent and funny. His hands were strong but relaxed, with square nails that she took to be a sign of vitality. The baldness was just the result of robust hormones and the fact that he had not had a Hairloom proved his lack of ego. Even the modest height she saw as a sign of gentility. But above all, he seemed to listen. This was very unusual in men, who usually listened only long enough to get back in charge of the conversation. But Enterman actually seemed

interested in her, not just in how she made him feel. That was nice. Maybe Dave Thoreau was thinking something else by getting us together, she thought.

On the other hand, Enterman's back, in fact his entire spine, was way off kilter. Gnarly. His chakras were being crunched like soda cans. His skin was coarse, crying out for sea salts and vitamin B. Low protein level too, as proven by a pinched smile that looked like he had to squeeze to get it out. Magnesium deficiency. Seesawing serotonin. Hidden rage. He did not meditate, had negative thoughts, was not in touch with his cosmic breath. But that could all be fixed, she thought, ever the 21ster optimist.

"You do know that Tony Bell was murdered don't you?" she asked.

"By those two thugs, Sal and Willy."

"And you know who they work for."

"Not the Salvation Army."

"They work for Sylvo Targul."

Rita paused to let the name sink in. It did. In fact, it sank so low that Enterman missed it as it dropped out of sight.

"The car company?" Enterman asked, taking a stab.

"This isn't funny," Rita warned.

"I'm not being. They mentioned him but I don't know who he is."

"Sylvo Targul is dangerous. He's a *haiduk*, the head of a Romanian crime gang."

"Romanian? As in Romania? You mean where all the Glob programmers come from?"

"All the Balkan countries have enclaves here in Coney. Hungarians, Bulgarians, Serbians, Bosnians, Romanians. And they all have gangs and wiseguys. But Targul is in a class by himself. Everybody is afraid of him."

"Why?"

"A few years ago, some stranger on a bus made the mistake of sneezing on him. Instead of just saying *gesundheit* like a normal person, Targul very calmly and deftly sliced off the guy's nose and handed it back to him just before the man passed out in a gush of blood."

"I see," Enterman said. "A kind of Vlad the Impaler with a sense of humor. I admire that."

"You think Sal is a bad guy? Targul is the psycho poster boy. He was in prison for a while with Tony Bell. When they got out, Tony went to work for him. Everyone who meets him eventually ends up working for him because of his employment policy."

"Equal opportunity?"

“You might say that. He maims people then he hires them out of pity because they’re disabled. Targul is dangerous. People who aren’t scared of him wind up dead. That’s why Gaspara Nostromento and the clan were upset that Tony got involved with him.”

“But they’re crooks too. I saw their warehouse of stolen merchandise. It’s underneath the funhouse at Coney Island.”

“No, that’s different. The clan does some stealing to make money. But Targul is a true crime czar. He has no scruples about slicing people up. We have to get to the bottom of this. And soon.”

“Sorry, Rita, but I’ve got nothing to do with this any more. I’m history. Finito.”

“You can’t give up on them.”

“Sure I can. All I have to do is go home and not come back. It’s actually rather easy.”

“Not any more it isn’t. I’m in danger too now that they know I’m involved with you.”

“I’ll treat you to the subway ride. It’s only ten bucks.”

“You’re listening but you’re not hearing me, Enterman. Now that Sal and Willy know that I’m involved, Targul will know too. That changes everything. I couldn’t quit even if I wanted to because I won’t abandon Annie. I don’t even want to think about what he is capable of doing to her to get what he wants.”

“What *does* he want?”

“That’s what we have to find out. So I *have* to stick around and see this through to the end and *you* have to help me. We have to help each other.”

“Swell,” he said with epic sarcasm.

But somewhere in the portion of his brain that was still rational, he knew she was right. There was a fatal logic to it all. Which only proved his theory about the true purpose of the universe. The fact that everything was connected, that all the stories intersected just as you came into the target area. Get involved in anything and you were stuck. It was no longer just what you wanted for yourself anymore. Now every move, every step, led to another and another and soon you were responsible for someone else, and their life was in your hands, and there was nowhere to hide. The mad web of circumstance.

“Do you have any idea why they killed Tony?” Rita asked.

“They’re looking for something,” Enterman said. “They killed Tony to get it but he didn’t have it. Sal broke into the nursing home and searched Mama’s room but he couldn’t find it. Then he broke into Nostromento’s house but he

couldn't find it there either. They must think that Tony gave it to Mama or told her where he put it."

"And they're trying to threaten you so that you won't find it first."

"Trying?"

"What are they looking for?"

"I have no idea."

"We'd better get an early start tomorrow. Come down to my place in the morning," she said, taking out her card and zapping the details to his. "It's in the Village. I'll make breakfast."

"I'll just grab a donut and coffee and be there at ten."

"Be there at nine and I'll make us raw root soup. Much better for your basal energy level."

Right balance, basal energy. Okay, fine, he thought. But raw root soup in the morning? It was worse than he originally sensed. She was not just a 21ster. She was from California, land of eternal sun and shine. And did they even have sex out there any more, Enterman wondered, or had they evolved beyond that. But then Rita St. John took a deep breath and stretched and arched her back, expanding her torso into a movable Venus. And that was all the convincing Enterman needed. Suddenly raw root soup at nine sounded perfect.

CHAPTER 4

THE SIGN OF THE RIGHT

Who are you? What do you want here? You who do not have the death within you. You do not belong here. Go away, return to your family! Go, go, before it is too late.

It is beautiful there where the sunlight tickles the curtains. But where are the children? Where is my little Tontonnio? Not here? What day is today? Is today Sunday. *Aus Venrittio*. I don't know, it is all such a confusion. The meal is not ready. It is so cold here. Allexiana! I am freezing. Put on socks or the world will shrivel. And watch out for the cars, you devils.

Such a good boy. I know, Mama know. Come to me and Mama will protect you. I promise. Yes, yes, I no let go. I no let go, never.

But who is this coming towards me now? Is this Tontonnio? No it cannot be. But who are you? Come to me, poor soul. *Apovorte c'misio*. Yes, this way, my poor wanderer. Come, come, it is all right. You have found the pathway and I will lead you on. *Solunnia*. Take my hand.

The stars they sleep and dream at night.

Is that you Allamundro? Yes, my fine cousin, don't be frightened. *E detetiondo tonno calus*. Take my hand and I will lead you there. *Overa da portamundo!* Open the gates old spirits, hear me, for comes this way another soul. He led a good life. A father and a son, without shame. *Aburista!* Another comes this way. Open your hearts, old ones, for yet another worthy friend. *Askantanda!* Make way! You see it there before you, the gate of gold and oak? Be not afraid, Allamundro. Pass

through, my cherished cousin. *Danam e endanama!* Yes, pass through, pass through. The secret of all time awaits you there. *Oyah!* You see how he comes without pity? How he leaves his sorrows behind with the world? *Oyah oyah oyah!* He tears himself from this harsh life and comes to join you in eternity. Accept him, spirits! *Oyahooo...*

Rita St. John lived in a loft near the West Side Highway, in an old meat-packing building on West 13th Street. The elevator was a bare wooden platform surrounded by a wire cage. It smelled like a carcass and therefore, to Enterman, of a Russian immigrant named Grenovsky who had arrived there after the third Diaspora with rheumatic fever, married his second cousin against the wishes of his parents, shortened his name to Green, then joined Local 10 of the meat-worker's union with approval to handle Grade A beef and blah blah blah.

Enterman tugged on the thick steel cable that ran through holes in the ceiling and floor of the elevator, felt the ache of the meatman's arthritis in his own knuckles, and looked down into the shaft as the elevator slowly edged its way up. This was not one of the modern smart buildings with articulated elevators that sorted passengers like mail. This was a throwback to the days of oil and rust. Soon the cage came to rest in front of a pair of old wooden doors with peeling paint that opened onto Rita's living area.

The loft itself was a wide open space surrounded by windows running around the three sides of the building that faced the street. There were no inner walls at all except for a bathroom enclosure in one corner. Instead the space was divided by furniture—the back of a couch, a digiscreen, a banner with kabbalistic characters hanging from one of the huge ducts that snaked along the ceiling—into living, eating, sleeping, and meditating areas. Crystals in all colors had been carefully placed in every corner of the loft to modulate the feng shui energies.

Rita appeared, looking magnificent in a black leotard and loose red shirt. She continued to make breakfast while Enterman studied the books on an industrial shelf that ran the entire length of one wall: *Invisible Weapons of the Modern Guardian*; *Gaia Magic*; *How To Fool Iris Scanners*; *Macrobotics*; *Hand to Hand Combat Techniques*; *Taoist Secrets of Love*.

"Work books mostly," she explained. "I never seem to have time to read the important stuff. Probably haven't sat down with a good novel since college."

"How did you get into all this?"

"Which...bodyguarding or right living?"

"Guarding."

“I’ve always studied martial arts. I was thinking of joining the police in Hawaii where I lived for a while. But I realized there was a more righteous living to be made by guarding people. The right people of course.”

The Tonfa Police Baton; Ayurvedic Healing; Fashioning a Ceramic 9MM Automatic, Part I; Six Lessons in The Dokido; Creative Visualization; Brazilian Judo for the Army; On the Path of Mastery.

“Like this woman I’m going to start protecting next week. She’s the president of a feminist bank. Very centered lady, highly evolved.”

“What does she need protection from...depositors?”

“From her ex. He loves her so much he wants to kill her.”

“Nice guy.”

“It’s pretty common actually. She has an order of protection against him but the cops can’t enforce it. She does not want a goon with a gun around because she thinks that would only piss him off. She’s probably right about that. So I’ll be her companion for a while.”

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth; Improvised CIA Sonic Devices; The Yoga of Nutrition: The Twelve Zones of Vulnerability.

“So you do banks too.”

“I do people. When I was small the bullies picked on my little brother because he had a thigh explant. He died in the third wave of The Tragedy. I used to walk him home from school to protect him. But the thing is, he never knew I was doing it. He thought I just happened to leave school at the same time. I loved that feeling.”

“So you’re not actually in it to kick butt. I would be.”

“No. I like the feeling of protecting the good people from the bad ones. Good ones channel Gaia, so in a way, I’m protecting mother earth. It’s like being a guardian angel.”

The Philosophy of the 21ster Ninja.

“So what do you do...move in with the bank president?”

“No, I’ll just accompany her to public functions. Stay out of sight at her house sometimes.”

“Couldn’t her husband get to her anytime?”

“He could but he won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve already studied his habits. That’s a big part of the job. In the past, it seems like he mostly got mad after she made public appearances. He probably didn’t like the idea that she had more power than he did. So I’ll be there when she goes home. He also tended to get upset after dinner which is pretty

common with this type of male aggression. Sugar surge most likely, plus anger about being nourished by a woman. Are you hungry?"

"Yes but don't worry. Food makes me docile."

"It's too bad she has to deal with this now. She has a good chance of falling in love again soon."

"Why is that?"

"We've been doing some bodywork and I think her aural spheres are finally aligned. Rise in lunar energy, surge in hormones, attract men. Simple."

Uh-oh, Enterman thought. What we had here was a case of MRFP...massive raw food poisoning. Meat globules in the core of the cortex—essential to clear thinking—shrink to the size of gnats. The thought of running out to get an emergency charbroiled steak crossed his mind. Passed away.

"Ready," Rita said, setting two bowls of thick muddy soup out on the counter along with a third one filled with a wedge of fake grass.

"That's oshitashi," she explained. "It's a Japanese green. Lots of protein and calcium. You need it."

"I was thinking of eggs and ham just now."

"Trust me."

He sat down across from her as she went through her centering ritual. Spine, muscles, chakras, aura. In repose, forcing all tension out of her body, she looked like a marble bust of the woman he would dream about if he ever had normal dreams about women again.

"What do you do when you're not out solving murders," she asked, coming out of her trance and beginning to eat slowly and perfectly.

"I don't solve murders," Enterman said, stirring the goop and pretending to think about eating it.

"You are now. But what did you do before this?"

"Same as everyone," he bluffed.

"For a living I mean."

"I'm kind of retired."

"Yes, Thoreau said you were out of work. Have been for a few years."

"Retired," he insisted. "Thoreau told you that?"

"Retired from what?"

"From answering that question."

Noticing that he was not eating, Rita leaned over and aligned the bowl before him, then gestured to take a sip. He did and, to be polite, did not also gag. The taste only reminded him of why cooking had been invented in the first place.

"Thoreau said you were a professor," she tried again.

“Yeah but I got over it.”

“He said you taught up at Columbia.”

“He told you an awful lot about me.”

“What did you teach? He didn’t tell me that.”

What he taught and why was all part of that other life, the dead one. Enterman never spoke of it, fearing that it would plunge him right back into the memories of the accident and the sea of despair and all the rest. On the other hand, the choice at the moment was easy. Talk about it or eat the soup. He put the spoon down.

“All right. I was a Professor in the Psychology Department. Cognitive Psychology. I taught courses in Intuition.”

“Woman’s?”

“Anyone’s.”

“If it’s intuition, how do you teach it?”

“The same way you teach anything. You mix together two parts information, one part bullcrap, stir it with some readings and a test and voila...you have a course.”

“I thought intuition was natural. Like snoring.”

“It is. But you can practice it,” Enterman said. “Everyone thinks that intuition is just whatever is left over after logic. But it is more than that.”

“Try the greens. Mix them in with the soup. Like this...”

Rita dumped some of the dark green shreds into the bowl and mixed them in the same direction as the Milky Way was turning. The colloid looked like someone’s idea of a witches’ brew. Enterman pretended to take a sip and thought of a chocolate milk shake to control a twang.

“So if it’s not the opposite of logic, what is it then?”

“Intuition is another mode of thought that takes place in the realm of the imagination. The land of hunches and guesses. Stories, concoctions, reverie. We all do it all the time. It’s just as complex as logic but it has not been formalized the way logic has. No one’s worked out the rules for intuition the way Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Bertrand Russell did for logic.”

“Because it’s a female thing,” Rita suggested.

“It isn’t really but maybe it has been seen that way because logic is neater, easier to approach. All putzes wear robes, Socrates wore a robe, therefore Socrates was a putz. Like that. Logic is great for nitpickers, so all its nits have been picked. But we use intuition much more than pure rationality and we still don’t fully understand it.”

“You were working out the rules for intuition?”

“I don’t know what I was doing. I was trying to get tenure and keep my sanity.”

“Thoreau said your doctoral dissertation was brilliant. That it won some kind of award.”

“Some other hunch-mavens liked it. Most of the social scientists didn’t. They did not think it was explicative enough. But intuition is odd, a different kind of system much more like music. There are no rules in music exactly, there are just patterns and guidelines. Resonances, relationships. Practices. Music is expressive, not analytic. That’s similar to intuition. You could even think about intuition as the music of feeling. You can become more attuned to it. At least, that’s what I used to teach.”

“Sounds like you were very into this. So why did you stop?”

Stop? he thought. Why did I stop? I stopped because my life stopped. I stopped because *the thing* happened and after that nothing else mattered anymore. Stopped because intuition and tenure and a pension plan all came to mean nothing—absolute zero—after that. Why did I stop? I stopped because the cosmos had nothing better to do one fine day than to throw an eighteen-wheel truck at my wife who was alone in the car minding her own fucking business and smash her into shards and destroy everything, everything we had together, and I took that as a sign of bad faith and refused to play along anymore and instead to tell the world and its God and all its pointless crap to go fuck itself! That’s why.

But he mentioned none of this and after a long wait said simply:

“Things changed.”

His response was cold, a dead end that Rita chose, intuitively and wisely, not to follow. The soup was untouched before him.

“Listen, I’ve got to meditate for a little while before we go,” she said. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll wait.”

“Make yourself at home.”

Rita disappeared behind a translucent divider to change her clothes. When she came out again she had removed the shirt and was wearing only the skin-tight black body stocking with only her bare feet, hands, and head exposed. At the back of her head a silver band, like a faucet, held a gush of blonde hair that reached all the way down to her waist. She crept onto a raised mat at the corner of the loft and sat straight. She was equally trim and voluptuous, without a single extra flab or fold anywhere, except where it counted. And Enterman, a leering accountant, counted.

“You could join me if you want,” she offered, pointing to a space next to her on the mat.

“Thanks but I meditated already today.”

“You did? When?” she asked, folding her legs into a pretzel.

“I had a shot of SeroTone before I came over. Oh, did you say meditate? I thought you said medicate.”

But she had already closed her eyes, already begun to focus on a state of *wu-sin*, no mind, and was light years beyond his wisecracks.

Rita began to breathe. Slowly and evenly. It took a few rounds to find the depth of her lungs and to force the air in and out of it. All the while, she fought her thoughts, trying to keep in mind only the breath cycling in sync with the universe heaving. This was difficult. Images kept intruding. Little Annie Bell coming up to her in the schoolyard outside P.S. 11, the taxis hitting the potholes outside the building, Thoreau making a pass at her at that New Year’s Eve party. And him, Enterman, standing in her loft near the books, slightly hunched, waiting.

He was not making any noise but she knew he was there. She could sense his aura and that was distracting too. It was ragged. He seemed so bitter on the outside, like a man who wanted to kick things. Yet there was something else about him, a tenderness in there somewhere. The sarcasm hinted that there was also a hurt within, a damage deep inside. Heart, spirit, dream? What had happened to him? Would he ever let her in to find out? And is that even what she wanted? Questions, questions...

Stop that, she scolded, and tried to focus herself again.

After a few more false starts, she was able to get into the zone, to shut him from her consciousness, then everything else out there, and finally all her random skitters. She concentrated instead on the steady breathing, in and out and in. Her thoughts grew frail, the inner fidgeting stopped, and all ideas imploded into the velvet core of her being. Soon her awareness narrowed to the dark star at the center of impression, the source of all mental energy. Absolute nothing.

In, out, in, out.

Ommmmmm.

Old man Decienti clapped his hands together to fight off the fatigue. He had been up for days, denying the right of his bones to rest. But too much was at stake to lower his guard. The time was near and he had to be ready. They all had to be.

Tintinay Terrandeliu—son of Ascanti who braved the ocean and whose great-grandfather Ollofallio of the Bear's Cave had once brought light to the vale—was performing his dance in the middle of the room. Inside a ring of stones and mud broken at the four points of the compass by elm leaves and mushrooms, he danced. Up he jumped, then down low, and around touching the ground, breaking the ring, leaping back in, then around the other way. The dance was good, the rhythm correct. But Decienti was tired after so many seasons and his head dropped to his chest.

When Decienti clapped his hands again to wake himself up, Tintinay stopped his motion, taking the clap to be a reprimand. Had he done something wrong? Had he made a misstep? That would be unforgivable. The Dance of the Loam had to be done just right. But Decienti wiggled his hand in the air, signaling for him to continue. His hand was like the twisted root of an oak tree.

He closed his old eyes and tried to find the spirit of the underearth in his silence. It was so difficult there, amid the concrete and brick of Brooklyn. But he turned his sensations inward and tried anyway. For as he well knew, below the wooden planks of the floor were the unpaved streets, and below them were the electrical lines and the sewer pipes and the drains and the gas lines. And beneath all that, way below any point where men could dig and meddle, there was the breathing soil with its worms and rocks and weeds. He could almost hear the sound of it, bristling with power, and feel the tingle of its crisp touch. Down where the core burned and the blood of the earth bubbled.

Ohalla!

Soon he knew this force would surge and groan. The great change had come again. It would undulate and shift to its new position as it balanced the unfolding of time. And he knew that when that moment came, he and all his cousins would have to be there, ready with their rites and their chants, to help it find its new condition. This was the moment for which they lived.

It was the black month of November. The time of the clouds was coming soon. The period between Witches Day and the Day of Reverberations, when the souls of the dead return and become visible. When the shees were called once more, as they had been throughout the ages, to make things right. Yet there was still so much preparation to be done, so many explanations to give.

And this time, so much at stake.

He had to be ready. They all had to be ready. Such was their destiny, as the seasons rotated, as the winds hummed, as the planetary spheres came into their latest trepidation. And Decienti began to clap his hands again, but this time firmly and rhythmically, in perfect tempo with the dancer's dance.

It was a kind of prayer of the body in motion for the courage to do what must be done.

“Do you mind if I ask what you’re doing?” Rita said.

She had pulled a long loose skirt with a flower print over her black body stocking and put on sandals. The skirt hung full, like a drape, from her tiny waist. Her breasts above were ideal. Her feet below were as neat as kittens as she stood there folding her hair into an elaborate knot that must have come from some kind of Oriental art form.

What Enterman was doing was sitting on the floor of the loft, slowly taking his handful of beans, tossing them down, then staring into the jumble with wide eyes.

“It’s hard to explain,” he said.

“Kidney beans, aren’t they? I could put them in a soup. Assuming they’re not regenerated.”

“They’re not. They’re just ordinary old beans. They have to be plain and raw or they won’t spill well,” he said, tossing again.

“Are you foretelling the future?”

“No,” he said, “I’m trying to see how many there are.”

“Have you ever thought of counting them?” she said brightly. “That’s probably the best way.”

“Counting them is easy. I’m trying to *see* how many there are. All at once. To intuit them.”

“How’s it going?”

“Lousy,” he said, sweeping them back into their little bag. “Let’s try something else.”

Enterman took out his card, put the audio dot from behind his ear back on it, then placed the card ceremoniously on the plank of wood she had balanced over two flower pots to serve as a low table.

“Leon” he said and waited for the card to answer.

Rita looked puzzled.

“It’s a special service that Thoreau subscribes to. It’s called a Leon.”

“What does it do?”

“Data management and it is not really an *it*. It’s a *he*. Leon is a person at an information nexus. A kind of a human avatar. Leon!”

“What the hell do you want?” Leon barked. “I’ve got other calls.”

“Could you take a look at something and find out what it is?” Enterman asked.

“Get a shot of it and I’ll see what I can do,” Leon said, sharply.

From his coat pocket Enterman retrieved the leafy twig with berries that he had stolen from Connie Bell’s house. He placed it over the card so the vidcam could pick it up but just then Rita leaned over to take a closer look at it herself and appeared in the frame on one of Leon’s screens.

“Whoa...who the hell is that!” Leon said, suddenly interested in Enterman’s account.

“Never mind that,” Enterman said. “What about the twig.”

“Not as interesting,” Leon replied, studying the image as he brought it front and center just by thinking. “Looks like a twig. I’ll see what I can find out. That all?”

“No, I also want to get a copy of a conversation I recorded yesterday at around noon.”

Leon located the recording and ran it through Enterman’s card, checked on deliberations at the offices of attorneys Hellman & Price to make sure all the participant’s voices were being picked up, including the ones who were screaming, noticed that his stock in Tecknomirai Industries on the Japanese board had just jumped two points and put in an order to sell, and watched the swirling shape of a tornado forming over grid .3415 in Elko County, Nevada. All this without moving a muscle and long before his next question to Enterman had even taken shape in his mind.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Can you give me some information on the word banshee?” Enterman asked.

One of the monitors two stations away was already set up with a virtual keypad so Leon focused his gaze at the letters to spell out the word banshee. A holo-wave on his eyeframes tapped the keypad and in an instant the data was up and hovering.

“A banshee is a witch,” Leon said, summing up. “I’ll zap you a file.”

“Could you just give me the upshot?”

Lazy bastard, Leon thought, wants me to do all the work. That was another reason humans were going down, extinct by the next Ice Age. They refused to read, would not absorb, could no longer reason. In 70 years of life the average brain processed 50 terabytes of memory...most of it gossip. So much for having a big fat cerebrum. So much for evolution. IQ was plummeting. DNA flatlining. They wanted things hand fed. Pathetic.

“All right,” he said, with attitude as he scanned the entry, “Let’s see...it’s all part of Celtic myth. The Celts were a tribe living in Europe thousands of years ago. Their culture is called *La Tene* by historians. They believed in witches.”

“The Celts believed in witches,” Rita repeated.

“That’s right, witches,” Leon said, reading from a new window he had opened. “Witch. Person, usually female, who can contact the spirit world. It says here that men are the practical leaders in society but women are the moral code bearers. So although men make the rules, it’s the women who know the laws. That’s why most witches are women.”

“Men make the rules but women make the laws,” Rita said. “This is really good stuff.”

Yeah, sure, right, Leon thought. Men, women, both obsolete. Brains on gliders, that was next. Neuroplasma osmosing pure data. Bionic neural nets in ceramic lattices that slip around like air hockey pucks. Should he ask the babe if she had ever been datafucked cybernetically? No, this was business, he concluded. Time for that later. He continued reciting:

“It’s common for the women in many societies to consult the gods, contact demons, cry for the dead, etc. etc. That’s the way it was in Druid culture.”

“Druids?” Enterman asked.

There was a call coming in from the president of Nueva Alba, a big corporate account that usually involved some kind of industrial spying. Code-breaking and all that. A real pain in the ass now that everyone was using z-band encryption, Leon thought. And the president was a ballbuster who expected everything done right away. But by now Leon had seven different virtual screens open on religion, myth, banshees, Celtic society. Small, huge, flat, dimensional, opaque, translucent...the words and pictures filled the room and danced in a watery shimmer on the surface of his eyeballs. Nueva Alba could shove it, he decided. Besides, the guy was in Santiago and wouldn’t know what was taking so long anyway; so Leon routed the call through the Rim to his partner Mishnia in Budapest. Let him deal with it.

“The Druids were the ones who built Stonehenge,” Leon continued, still skimming through the array of texts. “They were Celtic priests and teachers. They taught about the cycles of nature and natural mysteries. All that Golden Bough stuff, the usual mumbo. Halloween rituals and summer solstices. Sacred oak trees. Goat sacrifices and all that.”

“Sacred oak trees,” Enterman said aloud, looking to Rita for support that this was all garbage.

“Finally something that makes sense. These are my kind of people,” she said.

“The Druids told about a race of mythical creatures living in the forests called shees. Some people thought the Druids themselves were part human, part shee.”

“Shees!” Enterman said, “at last. Now we’re getting somewhere. Everybody says Mama Nostromento is supposed to be a banshee.”

“I thought banshees were Irish,” Rita said.

“Yeah,” Leon responded. “The Celts went to Ireland but they traveled all over Europe too. Let’s see, what else do you need to know? They spoke Gaelic. *Bansith* in Gaelic means woman of the fairies...that’s the origin of the word banshee. Hey, what the hell are you two up to anyway?”

“Idle curiosity,” Enterman said.

Damn! Budapest was all jammed up, heavy traffic on the Rim subnet, and Mishnia had bounced the relay right back to Leon. Nueva Alba was back on line and pissed.

“I’ve got another call,” Leon said. “I’m sending you all this info. And that conversation you recorded. Back in a few minutes.”

Tiny letters appeared on the front surface of the card, indicating a text download. To see it more clearly, Enterman touched the corner of the card and the image suddenly expanded forward and appeared as a virtual screen, 20 inches wide, floating in the air above the surface of the card. Enterman tapped the top of it and tilted it so they could read it sitting on the couch. There was a virtual keyboard at the bottom that he placed his fingers on. It was gooey, like diddling gelatin.

“This is a mess, Leon. Leon?”

“What is that?” Rita asked, sitting down next to him and studying the words on view.

“It’s a conversation I recorded that Nostromento had with some guy at their warehouse,” Enterman explained.

“He let you do that?”

“He didn’t know I was there.”

“You record conversations?”

“I thought they might say something interesting. Leon?”

“Did they?”

“I don’t know. It was a foreign language. *Leon!*”

“What! Jesus, you’re a pain in the fucking ass.”

“What’s with this transcript?”

“That’s what got recorded,” Leon said.

“It doesn’t make any sense. Can’t you fix it?”

“Already did. The noise filter removed all background sound and echoes. The pitch filter separated it into the two speaking voices. The formatter set it up like a script. What else do you want from me?”

“It’s a foreign language. I thought it would be translated.”

“No can do. It isn’t any language in my data bank. And I’ve got three thousand languages. Not Gaelic, nothing. Now go away. I’ve got more important things to do than *you*.”

With Leon gone, the words remained on the screen, floating in space like a ghostly playscript only the deceased might read. Enterman and Rita studied it. The words said:

—*Dueste ilo calladina drakima.*

—*Igo noesta.*

—*Targul postrejena se.*

—*Igo no omniserra.*

—*E no qwanna.*

—*Nuo ekutatadero chee.*

—*Oonadegesta se.*

—*Igo noesta.*

—*Ontonah se enclavatadino.*

—*Say say. Ma oona.*

—*Igo noesta.*

—*Avartiene. Avartiene. Nuo se calladinata.*

Enterman pronounced the words aloud, trying to get a feel for the language, a sense of the rhythm and intonation. He tried to say it the way he had heard it in the warehouse, with its melodramatic surges and slurs. But it was not working. The words just sat there, unknown, unknowable.

“Do you speak languages?” Rita asked.

“No, but maybe we can figure out what they’re saying intuitively, by following the pattern of the conversation.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Well, I think the word *oonadegesta* means ‘where is’. I heard Mama say it when she was asking for her nurse. Line 7 here says *Oonadegesta se*. That could be a question, like ‘where is...something or someone?’ Let’s just call it ‘it’ for the moment and assume that Line 7 says ‘where is it?’”

He deleted the foreign words and typed in ‘where is it?’ in their place.

“Okay,” he said confidently. “So the other man asks Nostromento ‘where is it?’”

“How do we know who asked what?”

“We don’t,” Enterman said. “So we make an assumption. A guess. Nostromento’s the boss, so maybe it makes sense for people to ask him things. Anyway, if it’s wrong we can change it later. So if the other guy asked ‘where is it?’ then he was the one who spoke first. Let’s call him George.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

Enterman went through the transcript and wrote G for George and N for Nostromento, alternatively, on each line.

“Back and forth, back and forth and then, Line 7, George asks ‘where is it?’ What would Nostromento answer?”

“How should I know?”

“Good,” Enterman said. “He might very well say ‘how should I know?’ Or ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I wish I knew.’ Whatever it is, his answer would probably have the word ‘I’ in it. So maybe *Igo* means ‘I.’”

He typed that word into the transcript everywhere it appeared.

“But then what does the other word in Line 8 mean? *Igo noesta*. I have it?”

“I found it? I kept it?”

Enterman rubbed his lip as he considered this, then noticed another clue.

“You see how the word ‘no’ appears a lot in the conversation. Five different times. How does the computer know whether to write it as *noesta* or *no esta*?”

“I give up. How?”

“It doesn’t. So maybe it’s made a mistake. Maybe it should be written as *no esta*, two separate words. So maybe *no* means ‘no’. Like it does in many languages.”

He inserted the word ‘no’ throughout the transcript.

“Maybe Nostromento’s answer,” Rita said, “to the question is ‘I no...something.’ Like ‘I no have it.’”

“Right. Or ‘I no want it.’ Or maybe just ‘I don’t know.’”

“He says it two more times.”

“Then it’s a good guess because it’s a general answer to fit three different questions.”

Enterman typed the new information into the file and studied it again. The secrets of the lost tongue were beginning to disclose themselves.

The page now read:

G—*Dueste ilo calladina drakima.*

N—I don’t know.

G—*Targul postrejena it.*

N—*I no omniserra.*

G—*E no qwanna.*

N—*Nuo ekutatadero chee.*

G—Where is it?

N—I don't know.

G—*Ontonah it enclavatadino.*

N—*Say say. Ma oona.*

G—I don't know.

N—*Avartiene. Avartiene. Nuo se calladinata.*

At the nursing home, with no one else available, it fell to Carlson Willis himself to escort some of the women down the hall to lunch. After depositing Mrs. Bruce at her table, he went back and grabbed the chrome handle of Etta Travers' glidechair. Glidechairs were based on the fact, well known to floor polishers everywhere, that a spinning disk could move easily over a floor. The chairs at the home all had such disks, filled with low friction marbles, below the seats. The slightest force could slide them in any direction. This made them easy to steer, but thinking of trout fishing in the northern Adirondacks and cooking the catch over an open wood fire, a distracted Willis almost slid Etta into the wall.

But she did not mind. Etta, for her part, was distracted too. She was back in the Coney of her youth more than a century ago. Nonny had stirred up so many memories, she could hardly contain them all.

"Did I ever tell you that I could have saved Topsy's life?" she said to no one in particular.

"Who?" Willis said, from the distant shores of a mountain stream.

"Topsy, the elephant."

"That's nice, Mrs. Travers."

"She was so big. Six tons, they said, and very strong. She helped build Dreamland. Carrying timbers and heavy equipment."

"You don't say."

"But then she killed three men. Three men in three days, the newspapers said. That wasn't true at all. It was five days, I remember. And it wasn't her fault. They were cruel to her. You know the way men can be. One of them fed her whiskey, the idiot. Elephants can't digest that. She got so sick and drunk."

"Uh-huh. That's terrible."

"It was. It was quite terrible. All of us who worked at Coney knew what happened. And we were willing to let it go. But the authorities decided that she was no more than a common murderer. So they made the decision to execute her. A poor elephant, can you imagine?"

"I sure can," he said, wondering if he should use mesquite chips on the fire. That always gave the fish a nice roasty taste.

"At first, they gave her two carrots filled with potassium cyanide. Poor Topsy. She was so trusting that she just ate them up. But it didn't work. They could not hold enough of the poison you see?"

"No."

"Then some genius decided to make a spectacle out of it. That was what Dreamland was all about anyway. Turn it into a show, an extravaganza! People will pay to come. They planned to hang her, but the ASPCA protested. They said it was inhumane to do that."

"Hello Mrs. Kaye, how are you this morning?"

"So one day Edison's men came out to Coney. And they set up an electric platform. You should have seen all the fuss. To kill this lovely elephant. It broke my heart. The electricians offered Topsy's handler \$25 to throw the switch. But he refused. He talked to Poppa all night about it. And you know what Poppa said?"

"Sure, Mrs. Travers. Pull your foot in a little, we're coming to a corner."

"Poppa told him that he *should* do it. Because it would be done anyway but by a stranger Topsy didn't know. He agreed but still he could not do it, the poor man. He refused the money and became a drunk instead."

"You don't say. Arlene, make sure they clean that floor this morning. Someone's going to slip on it."

"I was upset about the whole thing, terribly upset. I couldn't sleep that night. So I walked over to where they had her chained up. There was a man sitting in a chair with a rifle. A guard. But he was fast asleep. You know, it seems to me that I could have opened the chain on her foot and let her go."

"Really, Mrs. Travers. That's so nice."

"But where would she have run to? Canarsie? Or Bay Ridge? It's ridiculous. Where would she have gone? An elephant on the lam in Brooklyn. Ridiculous. Well, I didn't do it anyway. I was too scared."

"Whoops, watch your hand!"

"She was so big that I was afraid she would trample me if I let her go. So I just went back to our trailer. Later that morning, they marched her out to the platform. I remember it so well. They hooked an electrode to her right forefoot and

then one to her left rear. She never budged. She probably thought she was going to be fed. She even looked around to find her handler. But he wasn't there. No one was there for her. No one. Not me either."

"Okay, here we go. Your favorite spot. Just let me set the brake."

"There was a huge crowd. Photographers too. And newsreels I think. Topsy stood there on that platform waiting. We all waited. Then someone threw a switch. There was no noise except for a terrible hissing sound. Topsy stood stiff as a statue while smoke billowed from her feet. Then she keeled over. The whole thing took 10 seconds. And I burst into tears."

"Let's see, I think we're having the chicken today. Chicken today, Maggie?"

"And then, I remember, the crowd applauded. And the men from the Edison Company shook hands. It made the news all around the world. An early test of electrocution. In the end, it was just another show at Dreamland."

"Okay Mrs. Travers. You're all set. Chicken today. I'll see you later."

"People are a lot stranger than elephants, don't you think?"

"Sure they are."

"I think we're onto something here," Rita suggested. "Look at the last six lines. George asks 'where is it?' Nostromento answers 'I don't know.' Then George says 'Ontonah' something. Maybe that's the way they pronounce Antonne. Antonne Bellarosita."

"Right, it's Tony! That is what they called him. George is saying that Tony did something with it or to it."

"Or maybe its another question. 'Did Tony steal it or take it or sell it?'"

"Say say Nostromento answers."

"Yes yes."

As Enterman put in all the new guesses he thought to himself: this is amazing. This woman is beautiful, with lips the same shape and color as an Amati violin. She is strong enough to beat the heck out of street hoods. And now, as it turns out, she seems to have great intuition. Fantastic. But will she go out with me?

Rita watched him typing and thinking his thoughts and thought to herself: I'll think about it.

"Look at that," she said. "In Line 10 Nostromento says *oona*. That's like *oonadegesta*. And you said *oonadegesta* means 'where is'."

"So maybe *oona* by itself just means 'where.' Nostro's answering 'yes, yes...where?'"

"Question...did Tony take it? Did Tony steal it?"

"Did Tony hide it?"

“Answer...Yes, yes. But where?”

“*Ma* must mean ‘but’.”

Enterman added those translations as well but now they led to an impasse. The two of them stared at the transcript for a long time but no new insights came.

“Looks like we’re stuck,” Rita said.

“Then we follow Intuition Rule #4.”

“Namely...”

“The Bullcrap Rule. When in doubt, make it up. Invent. Fabricate. Good bullcrap is what prediction is all about.”

“So?”

“So this is all a question and answer session right? George wants to know what’s going on and Nostro is filling him in.”

Enterman went through the list one more time, adding question marks to every other line. Now the transcript read:

G—*Dueste ilo calladina drakima?*

N—I don’t know.

G—*Targul postrejena it?*

N—I no omniserra.

G—*E no qwanna?*

N—*Nuo ekutatadero chee.*

G—Where is it?

N—I don’t know.

G—Did Tony hide it?

N—Yes yes. But where.

G—I don’t know.

N—*Avartiene. Avartiene. Nuo se calladinata.*

“I’ve got an idea,” Enterman said, studying the first few lines. “Maybe *Dueste* is someone’s name. Maybe they’re wondering if *Dueste* has it. Does *Dueste* have the damn thing? I don’t know. Did Targul give it to him? I no think so. Like that.”

“Maybe it isn’t *Dueste*,” Rita said.

“No?”

“Maybe it’s *du este*. Not a name, a phrase.”

“Sure, that’s perfect. Because if *no esta* means ‘I don’t know’ then maybe *du este* means ‘do you know?’ Do you know if it’s in my pointy green shoes? I don’t know.”

“Did Targul put it there? I don’t think so.”

“*Calla*, in the first line, could be part of a verb. It’s in the last line too with a different ending. Change in subject maybe, or change in tense.”

“Or both.”

“Right. George could ask ‘do you know where he put it?’ And later Nostro says ‘we will put it there’.”

“Or ‘do you know if he found it?’ And ‘we will find it’.”

“Or ‘do you think they found it?’ And ‘we must find it’.”

“*Nuo* must mean ‘we’.”

“And Nostro repeats *avartiene* twice. Could be ‘go go’ or ‘look look.’ In other words, ‘Look, look, we must find it’.”

More changes.

G—Do you know if *ilo* found *drakima*?

N—I don’t know.

G—Does Targul *postrejena* it?

N—I *no omniserra*.

G—*E no qwanna*?

N—We *ekutatadero chee*.

G—Where is it?

N—I don’t know.

G—Did Tony hide it?

N—Yes yes. But where.

G—I don’t know.

N—Look. Look. We must find it.

“Couldn’t the word ‘no’ be any negative,” Rita asked. “Like not or never?”

“I guess it could. Why not.”

“Then maybe Line 3 says something like ‘does Targul intend to keep it?’ And Nostromento answers ‘I don’t think so’.”

“Okay,” Enterman said, “but by the end of the conversation they are still looking for the thing. So they must have concluded that Targul doesn’t have it yet. So maybe Line 3 says ‘does Targul have it?’ And the answer is ‘I don’t think so’.”

“Then George asks him another question...*E no qwanna?*”

“Like ‘why do you say that?’”

“Answer: because Targul is an idiot.”

“Because Targul lives in Poughkeepsie.”

“Because we would have heard something.”

“I like that. Let’s try it,” Enterman concluded and added the translations to the dialogue. “George says ‘do you think *Drakima* found it?’”

“And Nostromento answers ‘I don’t know.’”

“But there’s no ‘it’ in Line 1.”

“Maybe *ilo* means it.”

“We said *se* means it.”

“Maybe *ilo* is someone’s name. In other words...do you think *Drakima* found Mr. Ilo?”

“Or the other way around,” Enterman suggested. “Do you think Mr. Ilo found Mr. *Drakima*?”

“Unless, *drakima* is what they’re looking for. The name of it, I mean. Do you think Mr. Ilo found the *Drakima*?”

“Wait a minute,” Enterman said. “What if they’re talking about more than one person. What if the word *ilo* means ‘they?’”

Enterman quickly sketched in the latest ideas and a few more guesses, then read the conversation out loud.

“Do you think they found the *Drakima*?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does Targul have it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And why not?”

“We would have heard something.”

“So where is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did Tony hide it?”

“Yes yes. But where.”

“I don’t know.”

“Look. Look. We must find it.”

They shook hands, looked deeply into each other’s eyes, and thought their thoughts. Enterman thought: let’s run off together to some tropical island way off the Grid with a year’s supply of Sunday acrostics and mega-Rum coladas. Rita thought: let’s get that biorhythm in shape and adjust that spine and see what we have here. And each of them, thinking their thoughts were reflected in the other’s

gaze, continued to shake the other one's hand well beyond the need for self-congratulations.

The car they took back to Brooklyn was not Rita's Capsule which was only designed to hold a single passenger and park upright. Instead it was a classic 1940 4-liter pea green Bentley. Not an original of course, but one of the composite hydrogen replicas that Detroit was pumping out, having run out of design ideas by the turn of the century. In the new virtual world, nostalgia for excessive design was in. Products that preened and flaunted such as too much hat, jangling jewelry, and big boned cars with details. The Bentley looked like the kind of car bootleggers used in Technicolor back road shoot-outs but it handled like a shark. The hood even had gills on the side and a grin of chrome teeth in front. Enterman raced it onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway with all the control of Ahab lashed to its side.

"This belongs to Thoreau," Enterman shouted above the noise. The top was down and the engine was roaring. "We're borrowing it."

"I know," she said and put her foot up on the dashboard with what he judged to be a bit too much familiarity. "Where are we going...assuming that we get there in one piece?"

"To confront Nostro. He hasn't told me the truth yet. I think he knew all along that Tony was murdered. And I think he knew who did it."

"So why did he get you involved?"

"Because he hopes that I'll lead him to this Drakima thing."

"Why wouldn't he just explain it all to you in the first place?"

"I don't know. Maybe because I'm expendable. If Targul happened to kill me first, no big deal. After all, Nostromento is just another crook. What does he care about anybody?"

Rita was struggling to tuck her hair into the collar of her overcoat, but the wind was overcoming her effort. And although the sun was shining, the chill November air made her feel like a duck that had flown north by mistake. Enterman brushed some of her hair away from his face so he could see through the low windshield.

"Maybe you should slow down. You're not used to driving this. Thoreau doesn't mind you taking the car?"

"He's in the Caribbean, he doesn't need it. Besides, he doesn't know. You have a perfect skull. Do all the St. John's have such nice bones?"

"Hereditry runs in my family. Can't we put the top up on this damn thing?"

"I don't know how."

Cars honked as they sped by the roadster and Enterman honked back. The horn made a *whonk* sound as though the shark had a catarrh.

"Nostromento is not just any old crook," Rita shouted. "I mean he is a shee after all."

"That's a lot of crap."

"I've never worked for mythical creatures before," she mused. "It's very exciting."

"It's very bullshit," Enterman suggested.

"Don't be so craven. Anything's possible," Rita said.

"Except bullshit. Bullshit's not possible."

"It is pretty fantastic, I admit that."

"Fantastic bullshit."

"I thought bullshit was a rule of intuition."

"No, that's bullcrap, meaning fiction. Creative invention, stories to fill in the gaps. That's what bullcrap is. Making up stuff that might be true. *Bullshit* is useless."

"How do you know what's bullshit and what's just fantastic?"

"I use the ham sandwich test."

"Which is?"

"Ordinary reality. The actual day-to-day running of the world. Taxicabs with tape on the seat, toothbrushes that go dead, mussed hair, ham sandwiches with too much mayo."

"Don't be so narrow-minded. There's magic in the world too."

"Sure. Toothbrushes that still work, hair that stays *put*."

"You mean to tell me that you don't believe in anything that you can't see?"

"It isn't a matter of seeing. It's a matter of what I *need* to believe in order to live my life."

"I don't get you. Life is so magical. There are wonders all around. How can you not see that?"

"Just because two guys named Orville were out fishing in the middle of Lake Juniper in Doobie Bend at three in the morning and *claim* to have been abducted by aliens with hypodermics doesn't mean I have to bend my beliefs out of shape."

"What about giving people the benefit of the doubt?"

"I do. That's exactly what I give them. I give them the benefit of *my* doubt. It makes life so much simpler. I never believe more than I need to in order to take a piss in peace."

"That's very cynical."

“Not cynical, skeptical. Cynics distrust; skeptics doubt. When they actually find Orville’s buddies from Planet X, I’ll be happy to change my mind. Until then, why bother?”

“Because there are wonderful things to believe that aren’t scientifically proven. Things you sense in your gut. You’re the intuition expert, you must think the same thing.”

“Sure, there *are* wonderful things. And intuition relies a lot on feelings. But a load of bullshit is still a load of bullshit.”

Rita was silent for the remainder of the Belt Parkway. Disappointed actually. Wasn’t it better to begin by believing and then be dissuaded when necessary rather than the other way around? Of course it was. You had to be open to possibility first, protective as a last resort. Call it what he may, this negativity of his was just another sign of imbalance. Or too much fat from meat and milk. It insulated him from the natural forces of equilibrium and trust, leading to cynical doubt. That was it, she thought. Enterman was going to have to get on a serious macrobiotic healing diet if he ever wanted to get in *her* pants.

The Bentley looked as out of place in Brooklyn as a 1940 Bentley in 2050 Brooklyn, so they left the car in a lot and walked over to the nursing home where Enterman intended to ask Carlson Willis a few more questions. As they were walking down the street—a true dead end street with dead end signs at each end—Enterman seemed to drift into a kind of ambling stupor. Rita had noticed this before. It was a habit he had of losing focus, drifting off into his private thoughts. She assumed it was low blood sugar.

“You’re not listening are you?” she said.

“Sorry, I’m kind of allergic to the world. I find the street a little annoying.”

“I have some Rescue Remedy. It’s a flower extract. It’ll calm you.”

“I don’t think it will help.”

“What is it that is so irritating?”

“Everything that’s going on.”

“Like what?” she asked, looking around and noticing nothing out of the ordinary. “Nothing’s going on.”

“Like what?” Enterman said sharply. “Like that girl sitting on the car over there. The one with the fat legs? Her name’s probably Dolores. Dolores Rodriguez, let’s say, who keeps trying but just can’t seem to give up smoking because her father never cuddled her and she feels lonely inside and needs the rush and might gain weight if she did and already feels fat and unwanted. But the doctor—Dr. Bennet who argues with his own daughter about the exact same thing and is

having an affair with his nurse—told her she has to stop because she just got pregnant. But she doesn't know that Bobby is about to leave her for her best friend Dianne and she'll be stuck with Little Elvis all by herself and never be able to stop smoking even though Elvis has a hearing problem and..."

"Holy shit! What on earth are you talking about?"

"Dolores."

By this time, they had passed the girl on the car and Rita stopped in her tracks. She frowned at Enterman, then turned around and walked back to the girl.

"Excuse me, is your name Dolores?" she asked.

"No," the girl said.

Rita nodded and started walking again but Enterman could not leave it at that.

"Do you have a cigarette?" he asked.

"No."

"Because you're trying to give it up, right?"

"The doc says I gotta."

"Because he just told you that you are pregnant, right?"

"Who the fuck are you mister? How the hell could you know that?"

Rita started to ask him the exact same question and, anticipating her, he started to answer but the sound of screeching brakes interrupted them. Two blocks away a car was careening around the corner and struck a man crossing the street. There was an immediate commotion around him that Rita and Enterman ran to join. As they approached, the car backed up and lunged forward, trying to hit the man again. But onlookers began to shout and the car sped off.

When they got to the scene of the accident, they discovered that the victim was Carlson Willis himself. He was not badly hurt but his ankle was twisted and his nerves jarred. Attendants from the home carried him back to his office where a nurse worked on him for ten minutes. Willis wound up lame and taped, with a fat brown slab for a foot resting on a blanket of ice from the cafeteria.

"So much for lunch," he said. "You were coming to see me?"

"I had some questions," Enterman said. "But they can wait."

"Go ahead. I'm not going anywhere."

"Did you know Tony Bell? He visited Mama on Sundays."

"The boy who was murdered last week? I met him a few times. He used to visit her, stay for about twenty minutes. Every Sunday."

"He and Mama talked?"

"He talked. Seemed very concerned about the old lady. I doubt that she ever said much back to him though. Not that made sense anyway."

“Was anybody with Tony last Sunday when he came?”

“No, but he met someone outside when he left.”

“How do you know that?”

“I saw him get into a car.”

“Voluntarily?”

“Couldn’t say. Why do you ask?”

“Maybe he was kidnapped,” Enterman said.

Willis turned slightly gray at that notion and he knocked back an entire glass of water to bring the color back. It didn’t work. He ended up ashen.

“What kind of car was it?”

“Just an old car,” Willis said. “I just happened to be watering the plant on the window there. Somebody got out, took his arm, and led him into it. Why do you ask all this. Do you have some idea about who murdered him?”

“Is there a chance anyone overheard what he said to Mama while he was here last week?”

“Probably not. It’s busy on Sundays.”

“There’s no InSens systems in these rooms?”

“There is, but it only monitors vitals. It’s a privacy issue. Do you have any idea why someone would kill Tony Bell?”

“They’re looking for something,” Enterman said.

“Oh,” Willis said.

“And I think that maybe they think that *you* have it.”

“Me?” Willis shouted as he bleached a full tint. “Eileen, can I get some more water! Why me?”

“Do you?” Enterman asked.

“Do I what?”

“Have it.”

“No, of course not.”

Rita studied Willis for a moment and concluded that he seemed to know what Enterman was getting at, which was more than she knew.

“What is it, Mr. Willis?” Enterman asked. “What are these people after?”

“I have no idea,” Willis said.

“But someone came to talk to you about it. Didn’t they?”

“Yes. I’m afraid that’s true.”

“Who?”

“A man named Sylvo Targul and some others. Very scary fellows.”

“Oh boy,” Rita said. “Did they threaten you?”

“No, they were frighteningly polite as a matter of fact. Brutally quiet.”

“What did they say?”

“They thought Tony had given something to Mama and that she had given it to me to keep for her.”

“Did she?”

“No she most certainly did not or, believe me, I would have turned it over to this Targul fellow. We do have a safe here where some of our clients keep things. But Mama did not and I showed him the contents of the safe to prove it. I had no idea know what the object was they were talking about. Do you?”

“They didn’t tell you what it was they were looking for?” Rita asked.

“No. They seemed to think I *knew* what it was. They said that I should think about it and see if I could jog my memory.”

“The car was meant to help the process,” Rita said, suddenly seeing the connection.

“What car?” Willis said.

She pointed at his ankle. Willis too saw the link, rasped out a corrosive gasp, and went full blown albino. Quite a display for someone with brown skin.

“Oh god! You mean that was Targul? Trying to run me over? Eileen, water!”

“Relax, it was just a warning,” Rita said. “If he wanted to kill you, he would have.”

“I’m feeling ill,” Willis said. “Water!”

“Don’t worry,” Rita said. “Just stay indoors for a little while. Work late. We’ll let you know when it’s safe.”

“Are you sure Mama didn’t leave anything here?” Enterman asked.

But there was no blood left anywhere in Willis’ head to help him formulate an answer.

A few more interviews with silent shees, a few more look-sees around the neighborhood, and once again clueless, it was time to call it a day in Brooklyn.

“I have to get back to the city,” Rita said.

“Take the car,” Enterman said. “I can’t head back yet. I have a date.”

“Oh really? A date? Here in Coney Island?”

“Yes. At the nursing home in fact.”

“You’re dating one of the nurses?”

“One of the nursed.”

“Okay,” she said, holding her hands up to stop the explanation. “Just tell me one thing, Enterman. How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“How did you know all about that girl. The one on the street. You have ESP?”

“ESP?” he intoned with grand opera. “Yes it is ESP, if you mean Everyday Sensory Perception. Which accounts, by the way, for every single ESP incident I’ve ever read about.”

“This was beyond everyday. You knew her whole story. Almost. That’s *extra*.”

“No it isn’t. It’s just intuition, plain and simple. I told you, I notice things. Not just things but the patterns things make. Awareness of patterns is one of the basic elements of intuition. Social patterns, physical ones. The way she was sitting, the shape of her body, what she was wearing. Everybody notices patterns, it’s a natural part of cognition. Most of the time we’re not aware that we notice. But I have this condition...I tell stories to fit the patterns. I do it all the time. So I’m used to seeing things most people don’t know they have seen and explaining them. I’m right a lot. Also, I practice.”

“Practice seeing patterns?”

“Yes. Like the beans.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“I saw a demonstration once when I was in school in which a small boy could instantly count the number of dots in a random pattern. Hundred of dots. They would show him card after card with different random dot patterns on them and he could tell them the precise number. He didn’t count them. He saw them whole. It’s called iconic memory.”

“How did he do it?”

“He just had an ability to see complex patterns whole. Like seeing the Big Dipper and knowing that it is made of seven stars but on a much much higher level. The idea is that all children have it but they lose the ability as soon as they start reading. Reading forces us to think linear and local. I didn’t really believe in it at first, so I started to practice it. Now I can see how it might be possible, if you had the natural talent.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Or at least not any more. Maybe you have to be extremely relaxed or focused. I’m not either. Or maybe literacy just uses up those neural connections, I don’t know. But even without the natural talent, I’m getting better at it. I’m up to thirteen beans now.”

“You’re memorizing all the possible patterns thirteen beans can make?”

“Not memorizing. I’m trying to grasp them intuitively. Trying to imprint a *sense* of the patterns on my brain, a sense of what a random pattern of thirteen beans *feels* like.”

“Suppose it works. Then what?”

“Fourteen beans.”

“What do beans have to do with some girl smoking?”

Enterman closed his eyes and drifted back, back to that moment when he first walked up that block.

“I was looking ahead,” he explained, “not concentrating on anything in particular. Just taking in the scene. Everything at once. All around. But there are details everywhere, outcomes of circumstance. I was getting dizzy from it, so I tried to focus on one thing. Anything. And I saw her sitting there. And I noticed that she looked vaguely Hispanic and thought of her name. Maybe it’s a common name that I’ve heard a lot.”

“But it wasn’t her name.”

“I’m not always right. Then I noticed that she held her two fingers together the way people do when they smoke but she had no cigarette. Maybe she was trying to give it up. But why? For her health? Did a doctor tell her too? Was she sick? She was a young woman so maybe she was pregnant. And she was trying to look sexy, a tight skirt and sweater. But she had thick thighs so maybe a weight problem.”

“You thought all this through in the time that it took for us to walk past her?”

“No. I didn’t think anything through. That’s the whole point. I’m putting it all together now. At the time I just made up a story. A plausible one based on details. That’s one way intuition works.”

“Unbelievable.”

Enterman opened his eyes and returned to the present moment. The effort had given him a slight headache.

“And how did you know that it was Targul trying to scare Willis? Don’t tell me,” Rita said, launching into an excellent Enterman imitation. “You maybe noticed that the car that hit him was maybe the exact same make and model of a car that you maybe saw parked in front of the house two days ago maybe.”

“Maybe,” Enterman said, rubbing his forehead.

“And that Targul had visited Willis and asked him about the thing everyone is searching for? How did you intuit that?”

“Didn’t,” he said. “Stab in the dark, pure and simple.”

“Let’s see...is that bullshit or bullcrap?”

“Do you have an aspirin inhalant by any chance?”

Etta Travers sitting on the bed was speaking slowly and with careful diction, like a third grade teacher. Enterman, on a lower chair, had to crane his neck to see the pages of photographs lying in her lap like a storybook. One showed a woman standing on a walkway with her skirt up over her face, ruffled bloomers

showing below. A midget in striped pants and carrying a bat was grinning into the camera.

“At its height, Coney Island was really three separate amusement parks,” she explained. “Steeplechase, Luna Park, and Dreamland.”

“When was this photo taken?” Enterman asked.

“Around the time of Steeplechase which was built in about 1897 I think. By George C. Tilyou. He was a great impresario and the inventor of the blowhole. That’s what this photograph shows. The blowhole was a spot when you came off the ride where a jet of air blew the women’s dresses up.”

“Quite the genius,” Enterman said.

“Oh he really was. He knew something all showmen know. That people will pay to watch other people in predicaments. It’s more fun than the ride itself.”

“Just like a lot of the websims,” Enterman offered.

“I suppose it is,” Etta said. “I don’t plug in much. It doesn’t interest me. I’d much rather spend time with my photographs.”

“Don’t be a gloomster, be a Steeplechaser,” Enterman announced, reading from another image on the page.

“Yes, that was the motto. Steeplechase, the funny place. It had 31 different rides and attractions. The usual things. Shooting galleries and so on. But it was really world famous for its racetrack. Brooklyn was the horseracing capital of the world then. There were tracks at Sheepshead Bay, at Gravesend, and at Brighton Beach. But the one at Steeplechase was unique. I have a picture here somewhere...”

Her veiny hand skittered quickly across the pages until it came to rest on a picture of some gentlemen and ladies astride mechanical horses. The horses were frozen into mad grins and stiff canters as they followed thick sinewy metal tracks up a rise. The riders held the reins and laughed. Behind them were the endless rows of windows on a great pavilion.

“Here it is. You see? The Steeplechase racetrack. It was mechanical. They were carousel horses but they went down the track like a roller coaster. Oh it was great fun. And without any plugs or computers, just gravity. Half a mile in half a minute and fun all the time,” she chanted.

Her voice trailed off as she lost herself in some lost moment from her youth. A boy had tried to kiss her on the Steeplechase ride. He said it would be more thrilling because of the speed. He wore knickers and cotton suspenders. His hair was slicked back with Bandoline. What was his name?

Enterman studied the photo. Old pictures were funny things, he thought. Intriguing and tragic at the same time. A window to a lost world you could peek

into. It was the peek that was enticing. All those men with mustaches turned up in expectation, women glancing coyly into the camera. But these people, all of them, so swank and alive once, were all gone now, gone for generations. Relics pressed like dead flowers between two black leaves of time. Would he too be so pressed one day?

“To tell you truthfully, Nonny, all the rides were just an excuse. To hug the girls and get hugged. As far as that goes, nothing changes.”

“What happened to Steeplechase?”

“It burned to the ground in 1907. I remember the date—July 28—because it was my birthday. The height of the summer season. What a sight that was. It burned for 18 hours straight. So many fire trucks. And we helped too, with buckets. But it was no use. The police said someone might have set the fire but they never found out. Nine months later, Mr. Tilyou completely rebuilt it. But this time he covered it with a glass and steel shed and called it The Pavilion of Fun. You see this face here? This face was the trademark.”

She was pointing to the grinning puss of the Steeplechase man. Enterman had seen it before in the FourD about Coney Island he had run. A keyboard of teeth from ear to ear, the eyes of a simp, and that mustache of hair at the top of the head. A ridiculous face. A loony face. Yet of all the ghosts in Etta Travers’ scrapbook, it was that face, the Steeplechase man, that haunted him the most. With its gay idiocy, plastered toupee, maniacal guffaw, it said more to him than any fine portrait. It told of the brute effort to laugh in spite of all that happened, to grin and bear it. Mankind anguishing to have fun.

“There’s something sad about that face,” he said.

“Why do you say that, Nonny?”

“It’s so...forgotten.”

“It will all come back,” she said. “Don’t worry. Nothing is lost. It’s irresistible, you see? Water and summer and food and light. This was a place where life was lived. Where everything was. Like Paris in the twenties, or New York in the forties. Even Las Vegas in the tens. And it will be again too, you can be sure of that. The ocean is here. No one can resist it. Do you like the ocean?”

“I don’t like jumping in.”

“You see all these people playing together,” she said over another photo. “They are just ordinary people, Nonny. Anybodies. And yet here they are all together, arm in arm, splashing in the surf. Someone once called the Atlantic Ocean the American Jordan. Holy water. In those days we went electric bathing at night.”

Enterman stood up and stretched. It was time to leave the old photos and bathing beauties and return to the real world. But Etta Travers had other plans.

“My feet begin to hurt so much in the evenings, Nonny. Would you stay for a while and rub them? It would feel so much better.”

“I’m sorry, Etta. But I really have to go.”

Rubbing dry old feet, really old ones, were not at the top of any list.

“I’ll tell you more stories. I remember everything.”

“Maybe some other time,” he said, putting on his coat.

“There are so many lives here,” she said, drawing her hand across the book like an emcee. “It was a separate world. With deaths and births and weddings. The hot dog was invented here, did you know that? It was more than an amusement park, Nonny. Much more than the rides and the spectacles. Coney Island is within us. It is all that is good about us. All that we wish and wonder. Won’t you stay?”

She was right. There was hope there. There in that book on her lap. Not hope for a better world, that was pointless. But hope for a better hope. For renewal. Promise. The eternal quest for new possibilities. That was something even Enterman, with the faith of a Hun, could believe in. Besides, all that waited for him at home was the wrenching ceremony of a dark, lonely night.

So in the end it did not seem like too much to ask for him to linger there and listen. To go through those old moments like a catalog of everything that once was, could have been, might be. Not too much to ask at all. Enterman took off his coat. He sat on the floor next to the bed. Then he oozed some mineral oil from a nuplastic bottle onto his hands and rubbed Etta’s chilly feet, and asked questions deep into the night, the answers to which mattered not in the least.

Coney Island on a wintry Sunday was a study in gray. All the shades and tints seemed caught in a dull ink made of soot with a hint of sludge. The pavement, sidewalk, building stones, facades, the wood on the boardwalk, the sand at the shore, were all reduced to their lowest tones. Even the trash was drab. Only a few dribbles of color—a pink stain on a metal door, old mustard on a napkin on a bench, splash in the gutter—broke the monotone. At the edge of Coney Island, even the majestic Atlantic Ocean at that time of year was known for its great grayness. And in November the dun clouds in a neutral sky gave it all an extra pall, the look of a silent film no one went to see.

Far from feeling oppressed by it, though, Enterman saw the monochrome as an advantage. He thought it made him invisible which was oddly comforting. He was on his way to talk to Nostromento and had, by chance, borrowed Thoreau’s

expensive gray overcoat. As he pulled up the collar and turtled his head into it, he walked through the streets and up to the mansion convinced that he was shrouded. A dash of ash in a pile of ash.

He was not, of course.

He was being watched. Sal and Willy were sitting in their car across the street from the house. They were eating knishes and playing the stealth game. Watching every move he made and managing to not be particularly clever about it. But like a chubby clod standing behind a too thin tree, Enterman felt safe and unseen and did not notice them as he went into the house.

"Enterman!" Nostromento said, as though he were indeed happy to see him.

But Enterman refused to be taken in.

"Don't give me that crap," Enterman said bluntly. "Just tell me about the Drakima."

They were in their usual standoff in the library on opposite sides of the empty desk. The word Drakima seemed to catch Nostromento off guard, just as Enterman hoped it would. Nostromento looked to his right, where Enterman knew the old man named Decienti was sitting, got a signal and looked back.

"What's that you say?" Nostromento asked.

"Drakima," he repeated.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Never mind where I heard it. I heard it. What is it?"

"I don't know what it is," he answered, sitting down behind the desk.

But it was a different chair this time, stiff-backed and wooden. No metal joints. No squeak.

"What happened to the other chair?" Enterman demanded, as though he were being scammed.

"It squeaked too much," Nostromento said.

"Stop lying, Nostromento. You didn't want me to find Tony Bell in the first place. You already knew he had been murdered. And you knew all along who did it!"

"That is false, Enterman."

"And you don't want me to find out why Tony was killed. You know that he was killed for the thing, for the Drakima."

The lines that formed across Nostromento's face turned him into a recently pruned plum.

"My guess," Enterman said, "is that you don't really give a damn about Tony or about Targul. You just want this Drakima thing back. And you need some dope to lead you to it."

Gaspara Nostromento said nothing for a long time, silently gazing at the ceiling instead. There was no word from the old man in the niche. Enterman took this to mean that he was on the right track. So far. If it isn't wrong yet then it is still right, he thought, quoting himself.

"The fate of our family for centuries rests on finding it," Nostromento finally intoned.

"So does mine," Enterman said. "If they kill me, there'll be no family. So why don't you do us both a favor and tell me what the hell it is?"

"I cannot say. It is a family secret. It would be a great wrong to discuss it."

"Then you leave me no choice but to go to the police," Enterman said.

"They are useless," Nostromento replied.

"I'm sure they will be very interested in what I have to report. Let's see...I've got one murder, two break-ins, a missing Drakima, and a stolen goods warehouse under the funhouse at Coney Island. Let them add it all up."

"*Ile se s'este*," Nostromento said hoarsely.

And the old voice answered "*Dombenne*."

Getting up from the desk like a man with a great weight on his shoulders, Nostromento went to the window where the light sliced through the blinds and gave him prison stripes. He poured a cupful of milky liquid from the bottle there.

"*Solunnia!*" he said, downing it in one gulp. Then his voice went solemn. "All right. Since you seem to know about it already, I suppose I can confide in you."

"There's a new idea!"

"What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with the guys who murdered Tony Bell."

"I presume it was this Mr. Targul and his friends."

"You knew that all along."

"No. We did not know Tony was involved with them. That has come as a result of your investigation."

"Since they're now trying to kill me, you mean."

"Yes."

"And they're looking for this thing?"

"Apparently so."

"Did they steal it from you?"

Nostromento closed his eyes, as though the next sentence came with some difficulty.

"Tony stole it. From us. From his own family. Can you fathom that kind of deceit? I cannot. He betrayed us! His own clan!"

"Why?"

“The young fool did not know what kind of harm this could do.”

“What did he do with it?”

“No one knows. No one knows where it is or what Tony did with it. That is why we are all searching for it. For these criminals it is merely an item of value to be turned into cash. They are just crooks. But for us, Enterman, it is a religious icon with great power. And until we get it back, we are doomed. And so are you and your kind.”

“It’s called a Drakima?”

“It is called the *Drakima du Roya*,” Nostromento said carefully, clicking out each syllable in the hollow of his mouth so that the sounds echoed mournfully. “It is known as the Sign of the Right. It is the sign given to our ancestors in ancient times.”

“Ancient times?”

Nostromento paused to wait for a signal from the old man and continued when he got it.

“I wonder if you are a man who is capable of belief, Enterman?”

Enterman thought: Sure, I believe that Beckett was right...all life is a disease. But instead he said: “Sure, on a good day I can believe a thing or two. Sometimes.”

“Things that may not seem plain and simple?”

That was an easy one too. Calamity, accidents, brutality, and the stock market all came to mind.

“Sure,” he said.

“Then perhaps you will be able to accept what I am about to tell you. Accept it on faith. Even if it makes no rational sense. And understand why you must never speak of it outside of this room.”

“Ears are open, mouth is zipped,” Enterman answered.

To his own surprise, Enterman was actually enjoying the whole air of mystery. The hidden old man, Nostromento scratching his beard, the slight echo in the dusty room, all of it. He even stretched out in the chair and grinned like a chimp waiting for a treat.

“We are an ancient people, Enterman. Older than you can possibly imagine. Here in America the memory goes back ten, twenty years. Perhaps even a whole generation. But what do the children here know of their parent’s parents? They can barely recall the lessons of an earlier decade. One decade, Enterman.”

“Media revolution,” Enterman offered. “Globlife. Everything that is happening is happening right now.”

“Life in America is instant. All is easily forgotten. Here only the present moment matters. People have no sense of or need for history. But we are different. For us, the past is a constant burden. Always with us.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Enterman said.

“Do you?”

“Yup,” Enterman said. He meant the burden of his own past but was not about to open himself up about it to this lunatic. “My people are still pissed off at Ramses the Second for throwing us out of Egypt.”

“Yes. I suppose all peoples have their anguish. But we have a unique history, my friend, different from everyone else. You might even say we are a separate—how shall I put it?—a separate *race*.”

Nostromento waited to weigh the effect of that word. But when Enterman failed to collapse from it, he continued.

“Once our ancestors lived and thrived in Europe and Asia. We were a great tribe. But times change. Now, as you see, we are only a handful of outsiders, imprisoned in our own ghetto, forced to steal in order to survive. Hardly the great people we once were.”

“I know,” Enterman said, trying to cut to the chase. “You’re shees.”

“How do you know this?”

“Word gets around.”

“Yes, we are shees,” Nostromento admitted with relief. “And down to us through the eons has come a dreadful responsibility. The fate, perhaps, of life on earth.”

“Ahah!” Enterman said, this being his favorite euphemism for *total bullshit*.

“You see, we are the sole guardians of history,” Nostromento went on. “Without us, there would be no future.”

“You’re guardians of the future?”

“Not of the future, Enterman. Of the past.”

“How could you be guardians of the past? The past has already happened.”

“Yes, but which past?”

“I give up. Which past?”

“The one we choose to remember. The one that makes sense and gives us a future to believe in. The past we can live with.”

“I’m a little vague on all this, Nostromento. You’re saying that the shees are guardians of the past so the rest of humanity can have a future. Is that the deal?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“That’s okay, I can live with that,” Enterman said jauntily.

Better to humor the whacko, he thought, than challenge the logic of his delusions and upset him. But Nostromento picked up on his sarcasm and tried again with more profundity.

“History is only a memory,” Nostromento explained. “The events themselves have passed into illusion. The moment they are over, it does not matter in the least how they unfolded. Only how we remember them. Our memory of them is real and alive. The memory...that is the key! It is the way we remember the past that enables us to go on. We may forget the details, forget the events themselves, but we cannot forget the thread. We cannot forget the storytale that ties all the past moments together. Do you see?”

“Dimly.”

“History is like a dream, Enterman. A series of separate instances that only become meaningful when we weave a tale to tell them. Without such a tale, all is chaos. Without such a tale we would have no faith in the continuity of life. As we say...without the tale, the world is untold.”

“And this Drakima helps you do that? Neat.”

But Nostromento was finished answering questions. He was not sure his point was getting through. And it had to. So he tried one last time to make an impression on his caustic guest. He looked directly into Enterman’s eyes as he tried to burn his message into the retina, the optic nerve, the visual cortex, the reptilian brain. He said:

“To face the future you must foretell the past!”

CHAPTER 5

A SYMPHONY OF FEELING

Changeling.

The word was floating in space before him like a message taped to a window into another dimension. Leon liked the look of it. A changeling was a fairy child, usually an ugly elf baby, left in place of a stolen human infant. Some saw this as sheer mischievousness on the part of the fairies. Others saw it as malicious. Either way, it served one important function...it was the fairy way of upsetting human society, shaking it out of its complacency, and thus forcing it to examine itself and evolve.

Peering through the word to the window on the far side of the room, Leon Weyerhauser caught a glimpse of himself in reflection. The word then seemed to be drifting in front of him like a label. Spooky. He did not often look at his mirror image. In fact he avoided it because he could never, even to this day, get used to what he saw there. It was always a shock. That crushed lump of a man with useless limbs and warped DNA sitting in a rotating eggcup surrounded all around by the highest of high-tech equipment.

But that was just an image, he told himself for the umpteenth time, one more image in the array. If he did not happen to notice his own reflection, he was free of all that. Swinging to and fro, focused on his screens and the mixed-up jittergub of information there, using only his thoughts and the direction of his gaze to manage the flow, he was free of all earthly constraints. Weightless, disembodied, a mind voyaging. Then it was easy to forget how out of place he was in real life, in

fatworld were bodies mattered, how different and strange. The way people looked at him with that stupid combination of pity and kindness. And the fact that no place—no room, no door, no seat—in the whole rotten land was set up for people who were anything other than super-average.

But safe in his domain, under the full gush of the bitstream, with sparks from all around the Glob converging on his plugged-in brainstem, he was above and beyond all that. Outside the pull of gravity, distance, ignorance. Free of all that his own image in the window implied. With his neuropointer and flying platform and all planetary knowledge at his fingertips, he was not a misfit any more. On the contrary, he was a god. The systems geek as hyperbeing. The lord of the mindweb. And first born of the new iteration of hominids...the species he liked to think of as *Homo globus*.

Enterman had asked for any information Leon could find about shees and myths and forest legends. The shithead. Wouldn't know a forest if it bit him in the grass, Leon thought. And what that putz was up to out there in Coney Island was anyone's guess. Still, he found what he could, pared it down, zapped him the upshot. But he left the word changeling hanging there in 3space. Maybe that's just what I am, Leon mused. A 21st century changeling. Oh yeah, big bad changeling of the neuroweb. He liked that. Sounded a lot fucking better than quadriplegic.

Nice little giftypoo to humanity in its death throes, from the Big Pixie in the sky.

"Has the word *meshuggener* ever been used in your presence?" Enterman asked.

They were still in their standoff in the library room, trying to reach some kind of understanding across the divide of culture and purpose. Nostromento did not know the word, which was Yiddish for crazy, but he certainly understood the tone.

"You mock me, sir."

"No no," Enterman said. "I merely characterize."

"And yet if you explore your own feelings, Enterman, I know that you will understand me exactly. Because you yourself are suffering from your own past. Is that not true?"

"Is it?" Enterman said defiantly.

But he suddenly had an uncomfortable sensation that Nostromento was probing into the wound.

"I told you, I can see it. I can see the past as clearly as you might watch a FourD. I can see you for example, the whole of you. And I can see that you have lost someone. Someone close to you was taken away. Abruptly and without warning. So tragic. An accident, perhaps. Automobile?"

"Okay, that's it! How the hell would you know that?"

"And I can see that you have not been able to continue with your life because of it. You are filled with rage. Against the world, against the spirit of life. You no longer trust. You have lost your faith in the future."

"You can say that again."

Enterman was standing close enough to Nostromento to punch him in the head, which he considered doing for the crime of trespassing, but he held back for fear of actually connecting.

"Yes, lost your faith in the future because you have not healed this memory. You have remembered the past in a chaotic way and it is still a great pain to you. I am sorry for you."

The wound began to throb as Nostromento's words drilled into him. He did not have to go very deep. Thoughts of Isabel were already and always too close to the surface. Punch or bolt, that seemed to be the choice. Then Nostromento turned to face him and his eyes were filled with sorrow not scorn. Enterman stood still.

"You must understand this, my friend. All of history is precisely like this memory of yours. Life is filled with misery. That is the fact of existence. But we cannot live with this misery and so must learn to live through it, beyond it. You as a man must overcome it within yourself. And there is only one way to do that. You must tell yourself a new storytale. Understand the past in a new way. One that brings this disturbance into the light of hope. You must foretell your own past. That is the only way you can face the future. This is the healing art of consciousness. Each man must do this for himself. Do you understand?"

"No," Enterman said just to be contrary.

But in fact he knew just what Nostromento meant. He had been trying to do that for four years. Yet no matter how earnestly he tried, he did not know how to accomplish it.

"I think you do understand," Nostromento said. "And this is precisely what we shees must do for all of humanity. That is our destiny."

"You tell a new storytale about humanity's past?" Enterman asked, scrambling as fast and far from his own private agony as he could. "Exactly how do you do that?"

“It is better if you do not know the answer to that question. It is a ritual we perform and have been performing for centuries. When the ritual is done, the past is foretold. It is remembered in a new way. All the unforgettable tragedy of the past is understood in a new way. You see? And with this cleansing, mankind can go on.”

“That’s fine and dandy for humanity, but what do *you* get out of the deal?”

“What does anyone get from one’s own destiny? One has no choice about it. Not mankind in its struggle to become fully human. Nor the shees in our struggle to foretell the past. It must be so.”

And the voice of the old man in the corner said: “*Solunnia!*”

“That’s a really nice story, Nostromento,” Enterman said.

He meant this. It was at least as good as a Grade B horror flick. Better even since it was free.

“You still do not believe me?” Nostromento asked. “Have you never wondered how the world can go on despite death and disaster and cruelty? What have you thought gives humans the courage to continue in the face of all that they have done and seen?”

“Chocolate. Works for me,” Enterman offered, using the joke as a shield.

Nostromento shook his head slowly. It was impossible to convince a modern human being about the hidden truths. Their view was so narrow, so pinpointed on today’s achievements, on brittle pleasures. The next ball game, the newest car, the latest technotoy. How could he expect anyone alive now to understand the cons. There was no point in continuing.

Yet Enterman for his part, and despite his jibes, *did* understand. He knew that Nostromento was right. At least in one way. He knew that the truth was never in the events themselves that made up the past. It was not the facts. It was the way they were remembered, the patterns of thinking that gave them meaning, the mythology one created around them. That part he knew to be true. The past was a story you told yourself about what had happened. That was one of the principles of intuition too.

But regarding a band of mythic thieves with secret rituals and fateful powers—who could save humanity from its own history no less—about that Enterman could barely compress his horselaugh into a snicker.

“I thought you were a man who might believe,” Nostromento said sadly.

“I’ll tell you what I believe. I believe that something of value, which you probably stole in the first place, was stolen from you. And you want it back. That I believe.”

“That much is correct.”

“I’ll help you get it back. But why don’t you just tell me what the Drakima is, without all the hoopdedo?”

“I *have* told you. It is our sign. It is the Sign of Shees.”

“Like a billboard? That kind of sign?”

Nostromento smiled slightly and repeated the word under his breath.

“Sign. A *sacred* sign.”

“Oooh,” Enterman said with derision.

“Every one thousand years the shees obtain a new sign and return the old one to the world. So it has been for millennia. In the time of the gold mountain it was a simple gem taken from the temple of Tarxien on Malta. In the age of metals it was a bronze goblet stolen from the tent of King Melchizedek. In the millennium before Rome, it was a mistletoe root hidden in the pouch of a wandering doctor on the road to Chou Cha. At the time of the Christ, it was a polished stone from the handle of a sword belonging to a consul in the court of Caligula. Then, one thousand years ago, during the Holy Roman Empire, a new sign came to us. This was the *Drakima du Roya*. It was stolen from one of the chiefs of the armies of Sicily.”

Nostromento looked up from his tale to see if Enterman was still conscious. He was awake all right, and standing straight up like someone inflated with gas. Or maybe just flabbergast. Inspired by this, Nostromento continued.

“This sign—the Drakima—has passed down through the generations, father to son, for a thousand years. A thousand years, Enterman! That is the scale of this tragedy. From Rudaimon the Elder to Brian Capnoc. Then to Mithritek, who was High Mister of the clan during what you call the Renaissance. Father to son, Enterman, for generations. Do you understand that? From Sean O’Dell, to Elwood the Fourth, to the Melutian of the bog, to King Harfasia, to the Cardinal Prince, to Liam Kosmoski, to Dick Randoll, to Selgic the Bosporan, to the Abdoban, to Tirradeu Simplestimosso, to Daliander Bellarosita, to Harry Belarosita Primi, to Selman Nostromento to Grygor Nostromento. And then to Tontonnio Nostromento.”

“Tontonnio Nostromento? This was your father?” Enterman asked, jolting his host out of the recitation like a slap on the back.

“No. Gryor was my father. He passed the Drakima down to Tontonnio, my older brother. He should have dealt with all this as the leader of our clan, the High Mister. But he died unexpectedly six years ago. Such things happen. The sign should have been passed on to his son, my nephew. But the boy is not old enough yet for the responsibility. Tontonnio sired him late in life. I was to hold it for him until his eighteenth birthday. Another six years.”

“Okay. But the millennium is past so now what happens?”

“No, the human calendar is incorrect. It has been altered many times. The millennium, the true millennium accounted by the cycles of the earth and the sun and the planets and the stars, is not until the end of this year.”

“At which point, you dump this sign and rip off a new one. Right?”

“I’m sorry?”

“When your millennium changes next month, don’t you change signs and get a new one?”

“Yes, that is correct. But we have not found a new one yet.”

“You’ve got a lot of hot merchandise down at the warehouse. Maybe this time it’s a Sony MagRes with Tranquillum Pack.”

Nostromento picked up Enterman’s irreverence but chose not to address it.

“No,” he responded.

“How will you know which one is the new sign?”

“We will know. It has not come to us yet. We need the Drakima back.”

“So what happens if you don’t get it back? Why not just wait for the new one to show up.”

“We cannot.”

“Oh yes, because you can’t foretell the future without it.”

“The past, Enterman. Gypsies foretell the future, which is impossible. A scam. We are shees. We foretell the past, which is essential.”

“Right, the past.”

“I cannot explain too much to you. I can only say this...without the *Drakima du Roya* we cannot continue to perform the *Mentia du Alavarus*, our ritual of remembering. The healing of the world’s storytale. We need this sign to perform the ceremony.”

“How often do you perform this ritual?”

“Once each year in the season of renewal.”

“You’ve been doing this once a year for thousands of years?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus. And I have trouble remembering to floss every day!”

“It is a burden we must bear. We shees have a toast in which we say *Solunnia*. Do you know what it means? Sol is the sun and luna is the moon. *Solunnia*. It means first the sun and then the moon. The natural order. Everything happens as it is supposed to. That is the way we live.”

“So why not just forget this Drakima thing since it didn’t even belong to you in the first place. You stole it from someone else, now someone stole it from you. That’s a natural order too. Just go on without it. *Solunnia*.”

Nostromento turned ashen.

"The theft of the Drakima was *not* supposed to happen," he scolded. "I can assure you. Without our sign, there is no power. And without our power there will be no healing of the dreadful past. Without the healing, there is no hope. And without hope, Enterman, there is no future. No reason to live on. Do you understand?"

"Okay, okay," Enterman said, backing off. "It was just a thought."

He was actually beginning to feel quite comfortable there in the nether realm. Like a shrink in a psychiatric ward who stops doubting that there are voices in the toilet. Assumes there are. Even begins consulting them herself.

"So apparently good old Tony really threw a wrench into the works by stealing the Drakima," Enterman suggested.

"We must restore the order he disturbed."

"All right. What does the Drakima look like?"

"I don't know."

"Oh I see, it's an *invisible* sign."

"A secret sign. Do you understand a secret? An ancient secret. No one may see the Sign of the Shees. Only the true High Mister sees it in passing it on to his son. I myself have never seen it and will never see it. My nephew only will see it when his time comes."

"If you haven't seen it, how do you know it's missing?"

"It was kept in a wooden box inside a vault. The vault was opened and the empty box left inside. The Drakima was gone. We did not know who took it at first. Now it seems that Tony did."

"How did he find out about it?"

"All men in the clan know of its existence. But no one would have believed that one of us would steal it. Such a disgrace! Perhaps Tony arranged with these others to steal and sell our Drakima. It is an antique, after all. At least a thousand years old and possibly more. It is no doubt worth a fortune of money."

"Was he killed right after he stole it?"

"Perhaps."

"Because he wouldn't turn it over to Targul?"

"Perhaps."

"Why wouldn't he? Maybe to sell it himself?"

"Perhaps."

"Per-fucking-definitely-haps!"

"We do not know what happened after he took it. Perhaps he double crossed them. Or they him. One thing is certain. These criminals still search for it. And

so do we. But if they get it first, they will surely sell it and it will vanish. Without it we cannot do what we must do. Then the world is doomed and nothing can save it. There will be a thousand years of darkness and upheaval. You must help us get the Drakima back. You must!”

All will pass.

That was Chaucer.

Enterman had not thought of it since Intro to Western Lit in that auditorium that smelled like bleach back at NYU. But it occurred to him now over a hot dog as he stood next to Rita at the counter of Nathan’s Famous, home of the frankfurter. A newspaper article from 1926, pressed and framed on the wall, commemorated Nathan’s opening ten years before that. Back then Brooklyn was called the Nickel Empire because everything from a subway ride to a hot dog, a milk shake, a glass of beer, even a roast beef sandwich, was five cents.

Enterman’s dog was twelve dollars and considered a bargain.

The photo that accompanied the article was dotted with men in light straw hats and women wearing dark, tight bell-shaped caps. Above them the signs read: Stop Here! This is the only Original Nathan’s Famous Frankfurters. All The Food Fresh Daily. Another photo showed Nathan Handwerker, the hotdog genius who founded it. And another showed a sailor and his girl in a dress covered with ferns eating towards each other from the opposite ends of a bun.

Enterman bit into the frank and felt the franky juice spurt out the corners of his mouth. It was hot and oily. The yellow mustard oozed down his finger like lava that had lost its heat. A string of sauerkraut tickled his knuckle. The bun crumbled.

Maybe Chaucer was wrong, he thought. Maybe all did not pass. The hot dog for example, which was still a frank and had now lasted 134 years. And Nathan’s was still there at the corner of Stillwell Avenue. Coney Island still there. The Drakima was still the Drakima. Everything changes but everything still pretty much stays the same, he concluded. Not Chaucer, pure Enterman.

“Enterman!” Rita said with a shove.

“Huh?”

“What are we obsessing about now? The life story of the counterman over there whose sister ran off with a cowboy in April? You’re not listening.”

“Sorry,” he said, “what were you saying?”

“I asked you what Nostromento told you,” she said, watching Enterman drip oil onto his shirt as he gobbled the dog. It was disgusting.

“A fairy tale,” he said.

“Anything about the Drakima?”

“Let me tell you something,” Enterman said between bites. “There are five types of mysteries. There are Unusual mysteries like who built Stonehenge. There are Impossible mysteries like what happens to time in a black hole. There are Ordinary mysteries like why people in elevators face the front. And there are Stupid mysteries like who put the bop in the bop-she-bop-she-bop.”

“That’s only four.”

“Right! Which brings us to Unsolvable mysteries. Like whether Gaspara Nostromento is completely nutsy-fagen or just stark raving mad.”

“What about Revolting mysteries, like why on earth you would put something like that into your stomach. Do you have any idea what that crud is doing to your core spirit?”

“Okay, six types.

“So what *did* he tell you?”

“He said the Drakima is some kind of religious artifact. They’ve had it for a thousand years he says. Tony stole it from a box that was kept inside a vault. But Nostro doesn’t know what it is because he’s never actually seen it.”

“It’s a religious artifact?”

“Some kind of family heirloom that’s worth a lot of money. But they only keep it to use in their rituals.”

“What kind of rituals?”

“I don’t know...family rituals. Very common in some families. In my family it was who could make the other person feel guiltier by saying less. That’s an age-old Jewish ritual.”

“Did he tell you anything else about Tony Bell?”

“He thinks Tony may have had some deal with Targul about stealing the Drakima, but then double crossed him and tried to get the money for himself. But everybody seems to think that Tony hid it somewhere before he died. That’s why Targul and his boys are out looking for it. And why Nostro wants us to keep looking.”

“Does this Drakima have magic properties?”

Enterman huffed at the idea although he knew that Rita was serious about it.

“You mean real magic?” Enterman asked, meaning stage magic.

“Yes, real magic,” she said, meaning magical magic.

“This is getting way too abracadabral for me. The only magic in this case is good old hocus-pocus. Sleight of hand. Hep, hep, hep...where’s the Drakima?”

“Don’t be so literal. Maybe it has aural energy. Or earth energy.”

“What we’re dealing with here is a bunch of con artists and thieves, that’s all.”

"You still don't believe any of this, do you? About the shees. The Drakima. Do you ever stop to think that while you're running around being so critical of everything, you might miss the simple truth."

"I don't believe in what's true. I have no idea what's true. I believe in what's believable. That's all. And fairies in a word...*ain't*."

"You believe in other things you can't see and touch. Like gravity."

"I don't have to see things to believe in them. But I do have to be convinced of them. Gravity is very persuasive. I'm convinced of it every time I drop something on my foot."

"I think that's the fat talking."

"I'm not fat."

"Too much fat in the blood. Because of the garbage you eat. It slows down circadian renewal and makes you negative."

"I'm not negative. I just think that for every question there is always one right answer...and it is always wrong."

"Have you ever had your psychelipids tested? I'll bet they're way off the scale."

He offered her a ripply French fry soaked in oil but could see from her wince that the gift was unappealing. So he ate it.

"Let me ask you a question," he said. "I can never understand this. You think the world is this benign place, right? You look out there and you see all kinds of harmonies and balances. Gaia consciousness and how this is going to be the century of rebirth and healing. It all seems right to you and full of positive energy."

"Of course. Not day to day maybe but if you take the long view. You have to be positive. Positive thoughts alter the universe."

"See, here's where the whole 21ster thing is a tad fucked up. I mean, look at this world. How can you see what's going on here and be positive about it?"

"By having faith that things will get better if we try."

"They haven't so far. Like for the past few million years."

"Yes, but that is still only *so far*."

"See, faith to me is a kind of plague. Not black, not bubonic, much worse than that. Faith in governments, religions, institutions, gurus, theories. Everybody has faith in their own beliefs and is willing to kill everyone who doesn't. That's why we're in the mess we're in."

"There are things that even you accept on faith. I don't think you're as distrustful as you pretend to be."

"The only thing I truly believe is that everything is fucked up and going to get worse. There is no god, the universe has no purpose, and life is short and brutish and whatever the hell else Hobbes said it was."

“You know, if you think about it, not trusting in anything or anyone is a kind of belief system of its own. It takes a leap of faith not to believe in *anything*.”

“Doubt...that’s what I believe in. Doubt is a protection against blind faith. Lose your doubt and you lose your choices. The scariest people on earth to me are the ones who know the answers.”

“All right then, tell me this. And you have some mustard on your chin there. If you don’t believe in the shees then why are you helping them?”

That was easy, Enterman thought. Plain as day and clear as a bell. I’m helping them because of one simple thing. And it has nothing to do with foretelling the past or any of that crap. I’m helping the shees because of *you*. And I’ll keep looking for the Drakima because it keeps *you* in the picture. You, you, you. Of course, he did not say that. Instead he said:

“Because of Thoreau.”

“I see,” she said, consulting the schedule on her card. “Well I have a different theory about it.”

“You do?”

She did. Vulnerability exposed by tragedy leading to anger leading to a need for shutting off from any more pain. Fatty foods and industrial poisons filling the body with lipids as a kind of armor and sedative. Then the crushing and warping of chakra energy through psychosomatic tension. Cycles of rage and numbness managed with SeroTone. But somehow, despite all of this, she liked him anyway and did not want to offend him. So instead, she said:

“I have to go check on a few things and make some calls. I’ll meet you back at the car at around 4 o’clock. You do believe in time, don’t you?”

I have my doubts about that too, he thought, but did not go into it. Quantum arrows and the limits of relativity and all that. Instead he wondered, and quite reasonably, why on earth he was arguing with a woman who, more than anything else in the world, he simply wanted to boff with all his might.

On the beach at Coney, Enterman stared across the ocean and thought about taking a long cruise to nowhere. It was a crisp cracker of a day and the chilly breeze was ping-ponging his ears. The shoreline was empty except for Enterman shuffling through the cold sand and some seagulls fighting over the scattered trash. To the left, the boardwalk was thin and desolate, which did not help his mood. The metal remains of a ride called the Whiptopus jangled there and long shadows from benches and lampposts splattered across the boards. On the right, the tide turned glossy where it slipped into the icy Atlantic.

The original idea, the one about getting involved in all this intrigue in order to distract himself, was not really working. Not now, not at this moment. Because *they* had walked along a beach in the winter together years ago, watched the birds, kicked sand into the water, talked. Her absence now was the coldest cold of all and he felt it on the inside of his skin. Mostly to switch thoughts, he took out his card and called Connie Bell. Instantly her face popped up, a distraction that worked worse than he hoped.

“Whassup, Enterman? Any news?”

“I’m getting nowhere fast,” he said. “And I have this feeling that you know more than you’re saying.”

“I swear.”

“Or maybe more than you think you know.”

It was a simple guess but a good one. One of the rules of intuition was that there was always more in plain sight than one thought.

“Tell me one more time. Exactly what did Tony do before he died?” Enterman asked.

“Took his last breath. What do people do before they die?”

“I mean specifically.”

“He lived.”

“I mean on that Sunday. From the moment he got up to the moment he disappeared,” he persisted. “What did he do? Step by step.”

“We gone through all this.”

“We are going through it again,” he insisted.

So Connie Bell told the story one more time. How Tony had woken up, how he had a boner and how he had porked her with it. How he went to the bathroom, showered, shaved, put on his pants. Shoes, shirt and et cetera. Had a bowl of Novabran or something. And how he finally—without saying another word to her which she thought was rude considering he had just been inside of her humping like a bronco and pumping all his stinking jissom and all—how he finally left and went down to the warehouse.

“Like I told you, that’s all I know. Then later on, he up and died. What do you want from me?”

“He went to the warehouse? You didn’t tell me that.”

“No? I thought I did. Maybe I’m wrong.”

“What did he do at the warehouse?”

“I dunno, hon.”

“How do you know he went there?”

“Just assumed. He worked there after all.”

“And he left you at around eleven.”

“Yeah.”

“But he didn’t arrive at the nursing home until twelve-thirty. Was he at the warehouse the whole time in between?”

“His business was his business. I didn’t stick my nose.”

“What *was* his business?”

“I told you, I don’t know. You’d have to axe one of the others.”

“I spoke to the people you suggested. All of them. They didn’t know. Your father doesn’t know either. No one knows. Who else could I ask?”

“Well now that you say it, he used to meet this guy Frank down there sometimes. He’s a cousin of mine. You could probably catch him over by the carousel. His name is Frank Bientiendredon.”

“Does he have a card?”

“Probly.”

“Then call him before I get there and tell him I’m coming. Tell him you *want* him to help me because otherwise he won’t. You *do* want him to help me, don’t you Connie?”

“Course, hon. I want to find out why Tony got iced as much as the next guy.”

“I hope you want it more than that,” Enterman suggested. “One more thing. What do you know about the Drakima?”

“The who?”

“Drakima.”

“Some kinda sexually transmitted disease?”

“It’s also known as the Sign of the Shees.”

“Oh that old thing. What’s it called...Drakima? It’s some kind of crazy fairytale the old beards in the family talk about. Don’t you go paying no attention to that kind of shit. Tony’s death has nothing to do with any of that hoodoo crap.”

“I heard that Tony might have stolen it.”

“No, yeah? Nobody tells me. What is the thing anyway?”

“You tell me.”

“The Sign? It’s supposed to be, like, some kind of family jewels or something.”

“You don’t know?”

“It’s a story. It’s handed down through the men in our family for generations. I’m a woman, they don’t talk about it to us.”

“About family jewels?”

“You’re a Jew, right? So you must have family jewels.”

“Yes but we wear ours.”

“Well we keep ours in a vault. The Sign of the Shees is supposed to be this sacred kind of thing. A contract between the shees and the earth gods. Sounds crazy, I know. But lookit, your Christians got your Shroud of Turin, right? And your A-rabs got your...whatever that thing is inside that temple over there. So what can I say? You really think Tony stole it?”

“Your father does.”

“Shit. Then that’s pretty serious. But to be frank whichew, Enterman, that does sound like my Tony. He was a real skunk, that one. He’d do anything for the con. But stealing from his own family...that’s low. If he did that, then he deserves to die like the scumbag dog he was.”

The carousel was on Surf Avenue, across the street from the main section of the Coney Island Amusement Park. The building was closed for the season but Enterman found an open door and went inside. And there it was...the classic carousel, still and silent, like a untasted birthday cake in an unopened box. And just like the rest of Coney it too had once been magnificent, then decrepit, then refurbished, then forgotten again. Now it was going through yet another round of renewal; the motor had just been fixed, the animals were waiting to be retouched. Polychrome horses were frozen in their prance but the russet manes were all chipped and cracked, their azure saddles peeling. The set of mirrors that ran around the center post were pitted, the gold frames tarnished.

Enterman stepped up onto the wooden platform of the carousel and stroked the head of a gold and orange pony. It was a pretty creature, in the middle of a whinny, its eyeball round as a coin. He ran his palm over the cracking paint and diddled a spot where the dull metal undersurface stuck through a patch in the flat veneer. He touched the crumbling leather reins and knew all about Maggie with the missing tooth and the musical talent being held in the saddle by her father who hoped to become the general manager of the store before the divorce from Jody who had lost the close election and...

“You Enterman?” said a voice.

Enterman snapped out of it and followed the sound up to the top of one of the nearby poles.

“Frank?” Enterman asked.

Frank was standing on the head of a huge leaping frog, fixing a connection in the gearworks above it.

“Connie says you want to ask me about Tony.”

“She’s right.”

Frank jumped down and used an old rag to wipe his footprint from the frog's forehead. He was a short man in overalls with a dark complexion, his hair combed back in frozen furrows. But he did not have the plain face of a plain old carousel keeper. He looked smarter than that. More like a graduate student doing a thesis on roundabouts.

"Okay. So what do you want to know?"

"You were Tony's friend?"

"I wouldn't say friend so much."

"But you did know him?"

"We were cousins."

"You hung out with him."

"I wouldn't say hung out so much."

Frank stepped off the platform and walked over to an electric junction box on the thick center post of the carousel. He flipped a switch inside of the box, turned a dial, and pushed two buttons. Suddenly the carousel lurched into life with a groan. The platform began to creak and spin and horses began to slowly lunge and plunge. Enterman felt the push of centrifugal force like a wind against him. The details of the enclosure in which the carousel revolved began to blur and the grinding of the gears was soon drowned out by the wheeze of an antique pipe organ.

Enterman watched Frank disappear as he spun around the center post. He saw himself and his steed reflected in the series of warped oval mirrors in their gaudy frames. When he returned to the same spot where he started, he saw Frank staring up at the gears. He had to shout above the sounds of the organ to be heard.

"Were you with Tony on Sunday?"

"When was that?"

"The day he died."

"Might have been."

"What did you do?"

"The usual."

"Which is?"

"Nothing much."

Frank was out of sight again. A series of oily paintings of past Coney Island rides came into view around the top of the center post, then went. Enterman had the sensation, deep in his middle ear, that the ride was speeding up. He gripped the pole of the horse, on a spot rubbed bare by generations of small hands holding tight but he had no time to fantasize about them. After another revolution, Frank was back in sight.

"You met him around eleven?"

"Around."

"And did nothing?"

"Nothing much."

"At the funhouse?"

"Probably."

"Then what?"

"Huh?"

Gone again. Enterman felt his hair being blow-dried against his will, and his coat whipping into a frenzy behind him. There was no doubt about it, he *was* going faster. Much faster. His hand was sweating. He tightened his grip and held the horse's muzzle with his other hand as he waited to come around to Frank again.

"Then what?"

"Then *what* what?"

"Where'd you go after that?"

Frank shouted something that sounded like a name.

"Who?"

Frank repeated it.

"Did you say Eddie Emmons?"

"Yeah."

"Why Eddie Emmons?"

"Beats me."

On the fourth revolution, Enterman finally saw the absurdity of the situation. He started to walk to the center of the platform so he could continue the conversation on terra firma. It was a fine idea, but he never made it. The force of the spinning was too great and as he shifted his weight to take a step forward, he was pushed back to the outer edge.

"She's running fast."

"Why Eddie Emmons?"

"I don't know."

"What'd you do then?"

"Left him off."

"What did *he* do then?"

"Don't know."

"And after that?"

"Don't know."

The shapes and colors of the carousel were beginning to merge as they whipped past the rods and cones rolling at the back of Enterman's eyeballs. He forced himself to focus on something—some one thing—to maintain his equilibrium. He tried the white ring around the eye of the horse he was struggling to hold onto. But even that seemed to be bobbling around in its patchy head.

"What do you think happened to him?"

"To who?" Frank yelled.

"To Tony."

"What do *you* think?"

"That you're taking me for a ride."

"It's free, ain't it?"

"Everything has a price."

"That's for sure."

The horns and bells of the calliope had become deafening. The spinning was turning Enterman's inner ear to spaghetti. And the horse he was clutching was bounding up and down like a raft on the ocean. Seasickness was in the works. And he was losing his grip on the pole. Slipping.

"You're not helping."

"It's out of control."

"Any suggestions?"

"Get off before you get hurt."

"I wish I could."

"Suit yourself."

One more round was all he could manage. The combined forces of vertigo, sweat, and physics overcame his tenacity. Enterman let go of his trusty steed and went flying off the platform like an electron. He landed with a thud on a thick pile of canvas dropcloths against one of the walls. He sat there for a few moments to control the reeling. It took quite a few more minutes for his brain to stop spinning within. And by that time, Frank Bientiedredon was nowhere to be seen.

Enterman was still disheveled and slightly dazed from the carousel ride when he met up with Rita again at the car. Rita thought he was drunk. He wished he was.

"Jesus, what have you been doing?" Rita asked.

"Going around in circles," he said.

"I couldn't get anywhere with any of those names. Let's call it a day. There's a new Humphrey ReBogart playing at the FourD."

“Actually, I had more luck than you did,” Enterman said. “Let’s try something first.”

“Not another one of your atrocious snacks. I can’t watch that anymore.”

“No, this is legit. Someone Tony visited before he died.”

“I thought nobody knew anything about what Tony did.”

“Connie Bell said he got up at around eight Sunday morning, porked her with his boner, had breakfast, and left at around eleven.”

“Thank you for that little detail.”

“But then he went to the warehouse where he met his cousin Frank. And they visited some guy named Eddie Emmons before Frank went on his way.”

“After which Tony arrived at the nursing home at about twelve-thirty, visited Mama and either talked to her or didn’t, stayed for twenty minutes or not, then was either forced or got voluntarily into a car and left. Died.”

“That’s about it.”

“So who is Eddie Emmons?”

“That’s what we need to find out.”

Enterman tapped into his card and prepped for an argument. But Leon, having just made half a million dollars trading RNA commodities on the GlobBoard, was more than willing to conduct a search for one Eddie Emmons. The only problem was that after consulting every legal and illegal database at his disposal, he came up empty. Ditto for any of the other clan members.

“What’d you say these people are?”

“Shees.”

“Well whatever they are, they ain’t on the Grid. No records of any of them in the Glob. Of course, that’s not so unusual. A lot of people have dropped out. For about fifty grand I can erase you if you want.”

“What about Edward Emmons or maybe it’s Emmins or Eamons or something.”

“Tried everything. Even used a phonemic algorithm to come up with sound variations. Nothing.”

“Ed E. Emmons,” Enterman tried.

“Zipperino,” Leon said.

But a young woman holding a purple purse and walking with a slight limp happened to pass by Enterman and Rita at that moment and said, in a kind and soft voice:

“Two blocks over, make a left.”

Sal Impelchik observed all this from the driver's seat of the Buick parked across the street but since he could not hear what was being said, his mind was wandering.

"Lemme axe you somethin," Sal said.

"Fuck dat," Willy said.

"No, seriously, I wanna know."

"You wanna know."

"That's right."

"Jess watch the tails."

"I'm watchin. They're standin there. Nothin. I'm sittin here watchin."

"Good."

"I mean, I'm sittin in this fuckin car wit you hour after hour like two bumps, and I wanna know."

"So what the fuck you wanna know?" Willy asked.

"What I axed you."

"What."

"What do you think about?"

"Hah?"

"What do you *think* about?"

"About wha?"

"You know...*think*?"

"Tink about what?"

"You're sittin in this fuckin car, right?"

"You got dat right."

"Hour after fuckin hour, watching them two bullshit around, doing nothin."

"Dey ain't doin nothing."

"No, I mean you. Me. We's just sittin here. Sittin. What do you think about?"

"What do I tink about?"

"Yeah."

"Dat's what you wanna know, y'dumb fuck?"

"Right. What do you think about while you're sittin there?"

Willy took a long moment to ponder that question, as though he had just heard it for the first time. He paused, looked off into the distance, seemed to doze off for a few minutes, then came back to consciousness with a well considered response.

"Nothin."

"Nothin?"

"Nothin."

"You don't think about nothin?"

"Nothin."

"Fuck."

That line of inquiry concluded, they both gazed out through the windshield of the car just in time to notice that Rita and Enterman were gone from where they had been standing.

"Shit," Sal said. "We lost'em."

"*You* lost'em, y'dumb fuck."

"Fuck you, Willy."

"Aright," Willy said, turning quizzical. "You tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"What the fuck do *you* tink about?"

"Who me?"

"You."

"What do I think about?"

"Yeah."

The question caught Sal off guard and he smirked to play for time.

"Food." he finally said.

"Wha food?"

"Steak. I was thinkin about a steak."

"You're tinkin about steak?" Willy said, surprised.

"Right. A nice big juicy steak. Wit onions."

"You're a dumb fuck."

"Fuck you, you axed."

"Y'dumb fuck. Y'lost'em. Now were sittin here."

"Oh yeah? Well at least I'm thinkin about somethin. Not nothin."

"Steak? That's somethin?"

"That's right."

"Fuck. That's nothin."

"No it ain't. Nothin is nothin. Steak is somethin."

"Y'dumb fuck."

"We lost'em, let's go."

"Drive around."

"What for?"

"Maybe we'll find'em."

"Bullshit."

"Go on."

"They could be anywheres."

“You lost ’em. Y’dumb fuck.”

“Shit.”

“Steak! What a fuckhead.”

It was 80 Emmons not Eddie.

This turned out to be an unimpressive two-story office building wedged between 78 and 81 on Emmons Street, two blocks over. The Chinese laundry that had occupied the storefront next to the main door was boarded up. One of the glass doors leading to the lobby was smashed and covered with duct tape. The lobby smelled like turpentine. The elevator was out of order. The palm scanner was covered with paint. The digital directory was on the fritz and an older one made up of plastic letters that was mounted on the cinderblock wall inside the building was covered with graffiti. Enterman had to swing open the glass casing so they could read the list of occupants.

“LazerWorks, Inc. Harold J. Felsen & Sons, Tax Accountants. Gleasons Plumbing Contractors. The Belizian Embassy.”

“Guess they don’t care about tourists,” Rita said.

“Ellwood Font, numismatist.”

“Stamps?”

“Coins. Hull & Crane, architects,” he read.

“Duroya Exports. Dong Lun Fhu, toys and novelties.”

“Hemplemeyer & Meyer, real estate agents.”

Enterman looked around the small lobby and counted doors.

“There are nine companies listed and there are five doors on this floor. Probably five on the second floor too.”

“An extra office,” Rita suggested. “Maybe Tony was using an empty one.”

Upstairs they did find one empty office; the door was open and there was no lock. Inside were two blank rooms, a pail of water catching a drip from the ceiling, one dead sneaker, a sickly chair, an old torn paper phone book and an ancient flat computer monitor on the floor.

“They’re gone,” Rita said, looking out the window onto the street below.

“Who is?”

“Those two hoods. They’ve been following us in a car. But they’re gone now.”

“Sal and Willy were following us? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why would I?”

“We could have tried to lose them.”

“We did anyway.”

“That’s good.”

“Not really. As long as they know where we are then we know where they are. It’s better that way.”

“There’s nothing here,” Enterman said, kicking the sneaker which began to count off paces in a sore voice. “Let’s go.”

On the way out of the building, Enterman stopped at the front door to let a minuscule insight buzz its way in. He turned quickly and went back to the directory, then to office number 4 in the rear of the lobby next to the stairwell. The sign on the door said Duroya Exports.

“*Du Roya* as in *Drakima Du Roya*,” he said to Rita and rapped on the glass panel of the door. “*Du Roya* is a shee word for king.”

“We’re closed,” said a voice inside.

“Mr. Nostromento sent us,” Enterman said through the door.

“We’re still closed.”

“It’s important. You can call him.”

“Come back tomorrow.”

“It’s about Tony Bell.”

The man who opened the door looked just like a shee in a jogging suit. He was short and trim like all the men in the clan. He had the standard dark complexion and the same bony face with its deep set eyes. A long earring that looked like a cherry was hanging from one lobe. He opened the door for them, then went back to a file cabinet where he was going through papers in an open drawer. These were real papers, not the ones with microweave that had replaced them, and this proved to Enterman that he was in fact one of the shees. They were not in love with nextech, unless it was stolen and could be fenced. The room looked like any cheap office with rented furniture, plastic plants, and the standard Cezanne hologram on the wall. A plaque on the desk read Nick Simple.

“What do you want?” Simple said. “It’s Sunday. I shouldn’t even be here. How did you know I’d be in?”

“I’m intuitive,” Enterman said. “We’re looking into Tony Bell’s murder.”

“Oh yeah?”

“We were told you knew him,” Rita said.

Simple’s neck stiffened slightly.

“Sure I knew him. He was my cousin. So what?”

“We were also told that he came to see you last Sunday, the day he died.”

“Oh yeah? Did he? Who told you that?”

“Frank,” Enterman said.

“Frankie told you that?” he said, still not looking up from the drawer. “I don’t think so. I don’t think Frank told you that.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Well did he or didn’t he?” Enterman asked. “Visit you, I mean.”

“You say Frank said he did, I say Frank didn’t say it. Does that answer all your questions? Now if you’ll excuse me, I got work to do.”

“It’s not Simple, is it?” Enterman asked.

“It’s as simple as it gets, pal.”

“Your name, I mean. You shortened it. From what?”

Simple looked up from his papers for the first time and glared at Enterman.

“Hey what the fuck? You from the birth certificate bureau or something? What do you give a shit about my name?”

“Gaspara Nostromento is paying us to give a shit.”

“Oh well, in that case,” Simple said, puffing with mockery. “My name just so happens to be Nickoladio Simplestimosso. But that don’t fit on the damn business card, okay? Now you say Uncle Gaspara sent you here? For what?”

“He said you’d be happy to help us find out what happened to Tony Bell. To help us put the pieces together.”

“I got no pieces. I ain’t seen Tony since a week before he died, okay? I don’t know nothing about nothing. Now if you don’t mind.”

Simple closed the drawer and walked over to the door to help Rita and Enterman through it. As he did, he reached into the waistband of his pants and pulled something out. It had a handle and a barrel. Rita was immediately on the alert, her right leg forward and her right hand poised. But Simple was only holding a small inhaler which he put to his mouth and sucked on.

“You should try a ginseng vapor treatment for that,” Rita said, pretending to stretch rather than follow through. “It’s better for the lungs.”

Simple wheezed instead of answering.

“Who’s Du Roya?” Enterman asked, pointing back towards the sign on the door.

“What’s that got to do?”

“I’m just curious because it’s an unusual name,” he lied. “I knew someone once.”

“It means kings,” Simple said.

“No kidding,” Enterman said, crossing his arms in the universal symbol of standing pat.

“Look, we took the name from Kings County. Kings County is Brooklyn, this is Brooklyn, so we took the name. Kapeesh? No laws broken. Now if you two

would excuse me,” Simple said and opened the door for them to leave through. “Real nice meeting you. So long.”

“What do you export?” Rita asked, charmingly.

“Whatever I can sell,” Simple said.

As he placed his hand flat on the door jamb to usher them out, Rita noticed the ring he was wearing on his finger. It was a silver snake with a diamond for an eye, the one that Connie Bell had mentioned to her that she was looking for.

“Nice ring,” Rita said. “Family heirloom?”

“A friend gave it to me,” Simple said, tapping it for luck.

Dead friend? she meant to ask, but there would have been no point. Simple had already slammed the door behind them.

“Something funny going on there,” Enterman suggested as they walked back out to the street.

“I can’t stand waiting,” Rita said.

Me either, he thought. But just what he could not stand waiting *for* was a bit murky. Yet the feeling of impatience was so powerful it was even overcoming his aggravation which was vast. But what was at the other end of it? A resolution of some kind? Acceptance? Triumph? Or was it all much more primal than that? Did he simply want to be in a warm place, running his fingertips over Rita’s skin and pressing out all other thoughts? As he caught himself thinking like that—like a man with a future—he shuddered to clear his mind. Rita took this to be the cold.

“Let’s get moving,” she said. “We need to do something.”

“Like what?”

“Anything active. We can’t just stand around.”

“Suggestions?”

“Let’s break in somewhere!”

From their list of possible targets, Rita’s pick was the funhouse where the stolen goods were kept. It was a good choice. Merely having a plan did in fact warm them up. And since it was Sunday, the park was deserted and there was no one else at the funhouse. No guard in front and the booth was empty. Rita walked over to the entrance door that was painted to resemble a boulder and studied the lock. It was not the usual hand scanner but just an ordinary cylinder lock, the kind found on any old door.

Collapsing on the floor like a thirteen-year old, Rita zipped open her bag and dumped the contents on the ground. Enterman studied them, hoping for a glimpse into her inner secrets. There were cosmeceutical make-up compacts, a few dermalipsticks, nail polish, a sonic hairbrush, a silky dress, her card of course,

a collection of tiny bottles filled with clear fluids, one LCDlight, a series of small tool kits, a bag of tea bags, and a thermoscope.

Rita picked through the various tool kits and eventually settled on a green canvas one. She put everything else back in the bag then turned her attention to the lock on the door. The kit contained a set of thin wire tools that resembled a dental set for wee folk. Rita took out one of them and slipped it into the bottom of the lock opening. She pushed it to the left and held it there with her left thumb.

“The lock is a cylinder that turns,” she explained. “There are holes in the top of it where a series of pegs that are sitting on top of the cylinder can slip down partway into it. When they drop down, the pegs stop the cylinder from turning. Then the lock is locked. But each peg is a slightly different length, so the irregular edge of the key lifts each peg up just enough to clear the cylinder so it can turn.”

Still keeping pressure on the first tool, Rita took out a second tool—a thin blade—and slipped it into the top of the opening. She moved it in slowly, concentrating on every millimeter.

“If you turn the cylinder as much as you can without a key, you put pressure on the pegs. Then you can go inside with a thin wire and push each peg up one by one. Keeping pressure on them, you can feel when each one clears the cylinder. And then...each one...gets slightly...stuck...in place.”

Enterman watched like an apprentice as she probed the lock. Her hands were strong but the movements she made with her fingertips were delicate, almost dainty. Her eyes were closed. She seemed completely peaceful, except that the effort was making her suck on her lower lip. There was something oddly erotic about the focus, the manipulation.

“Each lock has its own inner rhythm, of course,” she added. “The real trick is getting in tune with that rhythm. In sync. Almost as if the lock has its own awareness. I’m trying to get in touch with it, to feel its energy. To know exactly what it wants. Once I know that, I can *become* the rhythm. Get closer and closer until the lock and I are one. Then...it’s almost as if...I’m opening up myself...and being released...*voilà!*”

She opened her eyes and stood up. The lock was open. Enterman was sweating in the cold. They pushed open the door and advanced into the dark.

Following the narrow beam from Rita’s LCDlight, they negotiated the fun in the funhouse—floor tiles, spidery webs, weird mirrors—and found the door to the stairs and went down. Soon they were groping their way among the stolen appliances and devices stored throughout the room. There were also boxes filled with funhouse wares: colored ping pong balls, extra clown noses, mannequins.

The room was stuffed with stuff but nothing you could hang a murder on. After an hour of exploration, Enterman leaned against a crate and gave up.

"It's not here all right," he said.

"How do you know that?"

"It's an assumption."

"Based on what? The intuition thing?"

"On the fact that we don't know what the hell we're looking for and this could take forever."

"That's an excuse, not an assumption."

"What do you think an assumption is?"

Rita, still stumbling around in the dark, bumped into the heavy door of a metal cabinet and got her sleeve caught on the handle. Turning around, she focused the light beam on it to unsnag the material. It was caught on a long metal handle but when she freed herself and stepped back for a wider view, she found that it was not actually a cabinet at all. Much bigger than that. It was a vault. The kind of walk-in vault a bank robber would have taken an interest in. The heavy steel door of the vault was partly open. Enterman watched her as she tugged it open further and as her head disappeared into the recess of the opening. He heard her make the sound of a person who had just gooshed a very large bug, then watched her close the door again with great restraint.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's inside?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes I do."

"You don't."

"Do."

"Do not."

But he insisted and took the LCDlight from her hand. Then he went through the exact same procedure she had. Door, peek, gasp. Even in the bright glare of the beam, he could not believe that he was seeing what he saw. He stepped back, yanked the door fully open and aimed the light directly into the vault and onto the object inside so that they could both have a good look. This time there was no denying it. He was right the first time.

It was a corpse.

Not of the recently deceased but someone who had passed on a long long time ago. Long enough to become a near skeleton. It was hanging from a hook inside the safe. The skull, all stained and dusty, was propped at an awkward angle on top of a rumpled and discolored suit of clothes that covered the rest of the body. The suit was baggy and grungy, suggesting both that the deceased had lost a great

amount of weight and that he had never been tidied up since the fateful day. He was grinning the standard mad-skull grin from earhole to earhole. The hollow sockets of the eyes and nose glared pitilessly. There were patches of dark hair on top and the finger bones like sprigs dangled from loose sleeves.

It smelled exactly the way an unburied corpse should smell.

“Yeeech!” Enterman said but he did not like the way that came out. “I mean, what the fuck.”

“Do you think it’s Tony?” Rita asked, covering her mouth with her arm.

“I doubt it. This is more than a week of...you know...”

Just to make sure, Enterman took a closer look but quickly decided that all corpses looked alike. Against his better judgment, he poked around and explored the corpse’s pockets. Gingerly inserting his fingers into the musky fabric, he tried to feel around without looking, his tongue a slab of disgust, holding his breath. Rita, feeling sorry for him, tried to help, but as little as possible.

Suddenly, as they were rifling the mummy in the darkness, Enterman was pushed forward. He stumbled straight into the vault, almost kissing the mummy on its mouth. Meanwhile, there was a sound of scuffling footsteps on the other side of the vault door, followed by a thud.

“Shit!” Enterman shouted, pushing away from the dead body and tumbling out of the vault. “What the hell was that?”

“He got fresh,” Rita said.

The lights in the warehouse came on. Enterman closed his eyes until the stinging passed and when he opened them again, he saw that the corpse was still hanging on its hook, that he was on the floor in front of it, and that Rita was straddling a man lying flat on his back underneath her. The man might have been looking up her skirt except that he was out cold. He had the expression of someone who had been kicked in the head by a mule.

“I thought you said there were no kicks in Dokido,” Enterman said.

“That wasn’t Dokido, that was kickboxing. I studied that too,” she said.

“And that is not Tony!” said another voice.

It was Gaspara Nostromento who was suddenly standing stiffly in the space between two crates. His wide hat and long overcoat made him look like a recycled spy.

“Tony has been cremated,” he explained. “That is our custom. To return the deceased to the Great Earth Mother that made us.”

“I’m no expert,” Enterman said, standing up and pointing to the corpse, “but I’d say you took *this* guy out too soon.”

Nostromento stepped over his fallen comrade and took a position next to the corpse. There was a slight resemblance between them that Enterman decided not to point out.

“A different custom in this case,” Nostromento said, eyeing the corpse proudly. “This is my great-great-great-great grandfather. Tirradeu Simpletissimo. He was the High Mister in the time of the French Revolution. A heroic man. He saved hundreds of us from persecution. We honor him by keeping his body with us. On the *Giandi duo Mortada*—the day of our dead—we ask for his guidance.”

“I’m sure he’s a big help,” Enterman said, trying to dust all traces of the great man off his coat. “Is that the vault the Drakima was taken from?”

“Yes, it is. Tirradeu was the guardian of the Drakima.”

“Is that why your friend here tried to grab me?” Rita asked.

She was pointing to the man lying on the floor. Nostromento unceremoniously neatened up his late ancestor, stuffed him back into the vault, and closed the door on him.

“We thought you were the thieves again,” he said. “They were here last night. Obviously they think Tony hid the Drakima somewhere. They have not found it so they came here to search. Perhaps they believed that he put it back in its place.”

“No such luck,” Enterman said. “I’m afraid Tirradeu wasn’t of any help either.”

“No. We have searched the warehouse very carefully. I assure you, it is not here. But I must ask you, Enterman, to respect our privacy. Please do not break in again. If you wish any help, you need only to ask me. Are we not allies in this matter?”

Luna Park was a dream inside a dream.

Fantastic sparkling towers stretched upwards into the sky. It was a concoction really...part Arabian fantasy, part gothic fortress, part jeweled kingdom. Every single edge, every contour, every facet of each building was dotted with a shimmering incandescent burst. There were 250,000 lights in all, creating a glow that could be seen miles out to sea.

Luna Park was the second of the three great amusement parks that were built in Coney Island. Fred Thompson and Elmer ‘Skip’ Dundy built the park in six weeks. Luna Park opened on May 16, 1903 and cost them \$700,000, a fortune at the turn of the century. Their intention was to outshine Steeplechase, which was

already a great attraction. And they succeeded. Electricity being the great hope of mankind, they did it with light.

Enterman was back at Thoreau's sitting in a chair that was massaging him gently at acupoints. He was holding the photo that Etta Travers had given him as she explained all this. The photo showed the towers of Luna Park, dozens of them, at night in an electrical phantasmagoria. Ghostly, fabulous, fantastic. The lights burned so bright that no details could be seen, only the facades of the buildings against the night sky, like crystal gems on a black pillow.

After a long while, Enterman let his head slip backwards and drifted into napland.

In the penumbra of semisleep, he is back at the college again, lecturing to an audience of yahoos. It is not the real school or the actual lecture hall he used, but some kind of dreamy mangle of college and Luna Park. There are the usual molded seats, the hum of the digiwall, the density of bodies waiting. But he is wearing his purple doctoral robes and a top hat, holding a pointer. An accordion is being played. And the lectern is ablaze with lightbulbs.

Yowzah yowzah.

The course is The Psychology of Intuition, very popular with undergrads looking for angles. He waits for them to get settled into their seats, to stop flirting and twitching, to pay attention. When the din dies, he clears his throat and speaks. Intuition, he begins, is a natural system of information processing. People use it all the time whether they know it or not. It is a way of making sense of the world...

Step right up and learn the secrets of the ages.

Unlike reason, intuition is not analytic. It is synthetic. It is about making connections and putting together, not about taking apart. About construction, not deconstruction. Therefore, it draws on fiction as well as fact, on the vagaries of the imagination, on mistakes as well as conclusions. On forgetting and remembering, confusing and fusing...

Watch the cards, kid, and see if you can find the red queen.

Intuition does not order, it reorders. It takes input from the senses and stores this as patterns of awareness. To understand this process, we will be looking at approaches to knowledge and perception taken by the pre-Socratic Greeks, the rationalists, the German idealists, the linguistic philosophers, French post-structuralists, cognitive psychology, and research into memory, theories of mind, information theory...

Hep, hep, hep.

There was some kind of bug hovering. At intervals it buzzed Enterman's ears, then flew off on its darting journey through the penthouse. Enterman shook his head in his sleep to ward it off. It did not wake him and in the dream this became a moth fluttering on a hot summer night by the sea which was now visible at the back of the lecture hall.

He presses on.

To understand intuition better we can divide it into six basic areas. These are the six approaches we will take throughout the semester in our study of intuition. Put these on your cards and then I will go over what each one means. Empathology, sensitonomy, graspics, hunchism, patternality, narrativity...

You'll be amazed, astounded, at wonders beyond your wildest dreams.

Empathology is the ability to project your feelings outside of yourself. Sensitonomy refers to the development of a heightened awareness of your surroundings. Graspics concerns our ability to focus on either essences or details, whichever is more useful in a given context. Hunchism is the art and craft of guessing. Patternality concerns our talent for seeing patterns in apparently chaotic systems. And narrativity refers to the weaving together of disparate elements into cohesive narratives, making up stories. These are the building blocks of intuition.

Wanna hear more, you gotta pay a buck. Just one buck, folks. A single solitary dollar.

Of these areas, Empathology is probably the most familiar. Except that most people think of this as pure empathy, the ability to read another person's feelings. Empathy is part of the story but Empathology is a bigger concept; it is the study of how that process works. The capacity to read another's mental or emotional state is a crucial source of information about the world. Like all areas of intuition, it relies on one's ability to record and recognize changes in the environment, in this case another person. Body movements, twitches, vocal changes, subtle movements in the 126 muscles in the face. Everyone has the ability to pick up on these and infer from them. But truly empathic people have an additional talent or focus...they can project their own feelings onto what they pick up and make meaning out of them. In other words, empathy in part is putting yourself in their shoes so you can understand what they feel.

She walks, she talks, she crawls on her belly like a reptile. Step right up.

The lights in Luna Park buzzed in the warm ether of the summer. Moths drawn to them flapped dizzily in the hot corona before taking a chance and getting burned for it. Enterman swatted at the bug in his sleep and inadvertently killed it. The photograph on his lap fell to the floor. He incorporated this into

the dream by dropping his lecture notes and bending over to pick them up. Someone in the auditorium razzed him and the ocean swelled. He adjusted his top hat, tapped the podium with what was now a magician's wand, and continued.

People think empathy means feeling sorry for. But it is more than that. It means feeling with or feeling as. This use of the term feeling, by the way, does not refer to the Emotions with a capital E. When you talk about empathy, you are not talking about love and hate, rage and jealousy. Those are really categories of passion in a poetic sense. They are gross simplifications. If you want to know about the Emotions, take Professor Enders' course on opera.

Watch now as Gilda the Mermaid opens her gills and breathes underwater. Look at those lungs, folks. Wonders of Nature!

Empathology does not deal with the emotions but with something more complex than that...the realm of feelings. The term feelings refers to our on-going, non-stop, moment-by-moment fabric of responses to the world. What was the feeling you had when you looked out that window a minute ago? Or the feeling when you heard that song before on the radio? You felt *something* but it probably was nothing like joy or hate or sorrow, these big emotions. What you felt, and feel all the time that you are alive, is more intricate, more complex, more elaborate. Part of an ever-changing symphony of feeling that you are immersed in all day long. Hard to describe in simple words. Empathology is the study of learning to hear that symphony in yourself and therefore in another person.

And just for today, for that one tiny dollar, you can have the whole bottle of Dr. Bones Elixir. Cures all ills. Lasts a lifetime. Step up, step up.

Then there was a woman, not a student, sitting in the front row and Enterman thought that the whole scene from sideshow to podium to auditorium to ocean might be a dream. She was sitting there waiting for him to finish like she sometimes did. Was it time for lunch already? What was *she* doing here now? A tidal wave was rising from the rear of the room and he thought to grab her hand before it was too late, before it caught them and lifted them and let them fall and fall and fall and he reached out his hand and she took it but her long blond hair was all twisted into their grip...

Something wrong about his position was waking him up. Enterman had fallen asleep like a psychoanalyst with one leg crossed over the other, one hand resting on an arm of the chair, the other on his empty lap. There was a tingling in his foot from the crimped blood vessels. He shifted and started to stir. The symphony of feeling? That was the problem in talking to Mama. All the clues to her feelings—tone of voice, gestures, glances, facial expressions—that he might have

relied on were mixed up. She was from a different culture, that was one problem. But far worse than that, her dementia was scrambling all her feelings together. That was why he could not empathize with her, could not understand her. She was all confused, there was too much damn noise.

Lingering in the hazy zone between sleep and waking, Enterman saw Mama Nostromento lying in her bed as a clown chased a dog near the spotlight. Then she was gone and *he* was in the bed lying on his back, his face pinched, his left arm twisted into a warped fist. He could not speak, could not remember the names of the strangers who stepped up to the side of the bed, viewed him, and walked back to the Big Top. He was frightened but something else too...another feeling. He was holding on tight to the sheets, gritting his teeth. Refusing to accept the disorder. Someone came to the bed, a man with oily hair and a bull-horn, the ringmaster whom he knew was Tony and who now whispered something into the horn but it was garbled. Was it a secret, an instruction, a clue? Enterman could not hear. The flapping of the moths and the buzzing of the lights had become deafening. The show was starting.

Come one come all to the biggest little circus in town...

And just like that, Enterman opened his eyes. He moved his dead fingers, shook his syrupy head, and dragged himself out of the delirium. There was no blood at all in his right foot and his left was a tepid shoe of ginger ale. It was all a groggy fog...Mama, moths, lights, the lecture. Luna Park. But one thing was clear. There was no question about it any more as far as Enterman was concerned. Tony Bell had told Mama where the thing was. She knew it and the answer was locked inside her mind. He was convinced of that now. She was old and sick and confused and scattered. Lost in time, picking up the scraps of her own thoughts and wondering who they belonged to. But she was also damn stubborn. He could feel that much. Stubborn as an ox. And she knew exactly where the Drakima was. No doubt about it, he thought, as he hopped on his foot to bring the blood back.

Construction of the new skytram over the northbound lane of the West Side Highway made it impossible to hear anything as Enterman and Rita headed south in the Bentley. Enterman was practically screaming into the card but still not making himself clear to Leon whose completely bald oval head appeared in the frame as a soft-boiled egg. Leon was running the transmission through a series of noise cancellation filters.

“All right, stop shouting,” Leon said. “I’ve got you now.”

“I was asking you to get some information about neuroviruses.”

“Some information? Give me a fucking break here. I’ve got the entire contents of every major medical library on the planet. Plus all the files in the World Health Organization databank. Will that be good enough, oh master?”

“How about a quick summary?”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Leon spit. Lazy moron! Oh Leon, Leon could you please read everything humanity knows about neuroviruses and explain it to me in language even an orangutan could understand. Could you, please, pretty please?

“Well could you?”

Brains getting smaller, Purkinje cells shriveling, axons getting thinner by the minute, Leon thought. I could piss across a synapse faster than these dopes could absorb all my data. Was this the beginning of the end for humans? Hope so. The first salvo in the final conflict between hairyman and *Homo globus*. Obviously a kind of genetic entropy was setting in...they all had a damn neurovirus! Acetylcholine leeching out of their miserable brains and being crapped down toilets everywhere. Which was another advantage for my kind, Leon thought. No need for toilets. Blessed Darwin at work again.

“What do you think, Enterman?” Leon snapped. “You think I’ve got nothing better to do than sit here and read to you? Who do you think I am...Hans Fucking Christian Fucking Andersen? I’m running a Glob Service here. I’ve got clients. With real needs.”

“Come on, Leon. The upshot. Thoreau’s a client too.”

“No way. I’ll send a summary through as an uplink and you can read it for yourself onscreen. Why don’t you just get a virman to hold your hand?”

“Because I...we...can afford you.”

“Shit. By the way, I scoped out that twig image you sent me. It’s mistletoe.”

“Mistletoe?” Rita said from the driver’s seat of the car. “That has healing properties.”

“It’s from pagan rituals originally,” Leon explained. “Like the Christmas tree was. Mistletoe was a symbol of renewal for your pals the Druids. Why are you walking around carrying mistletoe? Are you trying to get a kiss or trying to start a new religion?”

“What about neuroviruses?” Enterman said.

“On screen!” Leon said and vanished.

Enterman adjusted the virtual screen so that it floated against the dashboard of the car. To do this he had to rest the card on his lap facing out which meant that everything was bouncing every whichway.

“Okay,” Enterman said, reading with difficulty and summarizing the information for Rita’s benefit. “Neuroviruses are the name of a cluster of diseases once

thought of as senility. Senility was considered part of the normal deterioration of the brain. But newer studies show that neurogenesis, brain growth, is the natural process even into advanced old age. So any consistent deterioration is seen as a disease process typically caused by this family of viruses. Most familiar is the one that causes Senile Dementia of the Alzheimer's Type or SDAT. Named for Alois Alzheimer, German neurologist who first discovered one of the characteristic symptoms of the disease. And so on. But that's only one type of virus, there are others that act in similar ways."

"I thought they could do something about that."

"With stem cells," Enterman said. "Here it is...it's called SCAN. Stem Cell Augmented Neurogenesis. But it's got problems. And in any case, it wouldn't work for Mama Nostromento."

"Too far gone?"

"The family is, not her. They won't allow her to be diagnosed let alone treated. They don't think there's anything wrong with her. They think this is her *destiny*."

Enterman tried to squeeze every drop of snake oil out of that last word but a quick nod of Rita's head told him she was not buying it. Probably believed it. She was a real seeker, he thought to himself, but maybe sucker was better. He went back to the screen and continued scanning.

"It says here there are about 100 billion neurons in the brain, all scrunched up together in a kind of web."

"There are 100 billions stars in the galaxy too," Rita said. "I wonder of that means the galaxy is conscious?"

"More likely it means that the Milky Way is senile. Anyway, the place where two neurons meet is called a synapse. There are chemicals at the synapses called neurotransmitters that travel across the gaps from one nerve fiber to another and carry information. But when these viruses attack the brain, the neurons get all screwed up and filled with shriveled filaments called tangles. The cells also develop plaque at the nerve endings from a protein called amyloid beta peptide, so the chemicals and their messages can't get through."

"What are you looking for exactly?"

"I'm not sure," Enterman said, still scanning. "The disease eventually kills off neurons, particularly in the hippocampus. That's where some of the memory process takes place. Research suggests that the neurotransmitter acetylcholine is a key factor here. The viruses replace acetylcholine by hooking into the receptors. Lock them up. Without enough of the neurotransmitter, the spark goes kaput. Less sparks, less faculty."

“Eggs have choline in them,” Rita said. “Maybe that would help the memory.”

“Mama Nostromento’s thoughts are already scrambled, she doesn’t need eggs. The upshot is that the disease is erasing her memories. But it says here that the memories are not in any one place in the brain. Each memory is spread out over the whole neural net. Like the way each small section of a hologram contains the entire image. Particular memories reside in a pattern of signals sent out across a multitude of synapses. The memory is in the pattern itself.”

“Does any of this help us?”

“Don’t know. But it means that you don’t really lose a particular memory because the brain can still create new neuronal patterns. It can rewire itself. What you lose is types of memory. Categories of remembering.”

“Such as?”

“Let’s see...here it is. Brains develop from simple to complex functions: survival skills first, like sucking and grasping; then motor skills, like sitting and walking; then bodily skills like going to the bathroom; then social skills like dressing and bargaining; finally conceptual skills. When you lose your memory, you lose these kinds of skills in reverse order, complex to simple. That’s how they can tell how far along the disease is. It says there are seven stages.”

“What stage is Mama in?”

Enterman was running his finger along the lines of text to keep his place when a small bump in the road sent everything joggling and he accidentally poked the screen. It felt like pushing the fat on a fat belly as the image dented and reformed. He set himself back up and continued to read.

“Stage One, the patient loses things and seems lost and confused. By Stage Six they’re thinking like a 3 or 4 year old. They can’t dress or bathe themselves. By Stage Seven — the last stage — they only have a few words, can’t walk or even sit up by themselves. So I guess she’s still at a fairly early stage. Two maybe. There’s still hope.”

“This all sounds dreadful.”

“Sure. Just what I’ve been saying. Life. You start out bald, toothless, and babbling like an idiot. You go through all this pain and suffering. And you end up right where you started...bald, toothless, and babbling. Who says there’s no god.”

“What are you going to do? Are you going to try to talk to her again?”

“Yes, but first I need some advice. Do me a favor and get off at this exit and turn around. We have to go back uptown?”

“Uptown? What for?”

“Tante Bela,” Enterman answered.
And he raised his forefinger up to heaven like a rabbi with an inspiration.

CHAPTER 6

A CASE OF BLACK MARIAH

Professor Bela Rosenthal sat at her desk in Kent Hall at Columbia University and tried to find something. Anything. Her card containing all the notes for that evening's lecture on The Postdeconstructionist Response to Phenomenological Inquiry, for instance...that would have been great. The Husserl vid would have helped as well. Or even the article on heart disease in overweight women. The FloatNote with the number of the student she was supposed to call? Anything. But it was useless. Everything she needed was buried in, on, or behind the mass of everything she did not.

Spying the silvery corner of a virtext, she tugged on it hopefully but only managed to send an entire stack of term papers onto the floor. They were on chamelic paper and the move caused each one of them to jitter through their pages so that the floor was suddenly a blinkering mosaic of half-baked theses. She frowned at first, then laughed. All was not lost. The fallen stack revealed an argon earring she had lost three weeks earlier. She put it in her ear and congratulated herself for finding it, having in the interim completely forgotten what it was she was looking for in the first place.

"Tante!" Enterman said, shoving the door open.

"Dollink!" she said, throwing her arms open and waiting for a hug which Enterman dutifully gave.

Dr. Rosenthal was a large woman whose arm flesh jiggled as she hugged back. In a loose floral dress that hung on her like a drape, and a huge scarf covering one

shoulder and knotted on the other, she looked like some kind of window treatment in a model apartment. Enterman made the introductions.

“So this is Rita,” Tante Bela said, holding both of Rita’s hands in the ready position for a Virginia Reel. “She’s absolutely gorgeous. Look at this *punim*. What a catch. My dear, Enterman has told me so much about you.”

“He has?” Rita said.

“Not a word. But I’m sure that he would if he ever decided to call me, the louse. When was the last time you called your only living relative?”

“Please, Tante, not now, we need your help.”

“All right. Have a seat and sit down.”

Bela’s face was kindly, with soft crinkles at the edges of her eyes that came from squinting to read in bad light. A short line of cloned pearls rimmed her neck. Her hair was an amazing pouf of rebellious strands. Her black shoes seemed too small to balance the eggplant of her body. She was pointing politely to the spot where chairs should have been, but every square inch of the office was taken up by piles of academic odds and ends.

“Maybe we should go talk in one of the classrooms,” Bela suggested. “I seem to have messed things up a bit around here.”

Enterman and Rita followed as Bela waddled down the hallway to one of the empty seminar rooms. It was a small room with a ring of chairs and a console in the center from which a mistscreen would rise to display images and text. Rita had not been in a college classroom in years but nothing much had changed. The hard seats, the glaring lights, and the sight of that timeless educational innovation...chalk. She sat down and instantly began to twist her hair around her index finger as she used to do in Sociology 101.

There was a message scrawled on the smartboard that read:

To be is to do—Camus

To do is to be—Sartre

Do be do be do—Sinatra

“Don’t laugh,” Bela said. “Jokes are very insightful. Wittgenstein said you could base an entire philosophy solely on jokes.”

“Nietzsche said a joke is an epigram on the death of a feeling,” Enterman added.

“What does that mean?” Rita asked.

“Beats the hell out of me,” he answered.

“Nietzsche was nuts,” Bela said. “Syphilis. It rotted his brain. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was a whole morphine trip. What’s this big fat mystery you have to discuss?”

“It’s a little complicated,” Enterman said. “that’s why we needed to see you in person. It’s private too.”

“Everything’s complicated, kids. But I have a class soon so just give me the *tachlis* on it. That’s Yiddish for the bottom line, my dear” she explained to Rita.

“I guess the bottom line is that somebody died,” Rita began.

“Somebody always died,” Bela suggested.

“But this somebody was murdered,” Rita explained. “His name was Antonne Bellarosita.”

“Fancy. He sounds like a gypsy.”

“Not a gypsy, he was a...” Rita began.

But Enterman jumped in quickly.

“That part doesn’t matter,” he said. “The point is that he stole something from his family’s vault. Something important. A kind of heirloom. They think he was killed by a group of men who also want this thing.”

“Very exciting. So what is this precious object?”

“It’s called a Drakima. But no one’s ever seen it. Including us. We think it’s about this big.”

Enterman closed his fingers just enough to hold a banana around the waist.

“Everyone involved thinks that this guy Tony hid it somewhere,” he said. “So do we. And we want to find out where. That’s the *tachlis*, tante.”

“So you’re looking for something,” Bela summed up, “and you know that you’re looking for it, and you want to find it, and other people want you to find it, or want to find it themselves, but no one has any idea what it is? You call that *tachlis*? That’s *mishegoss!*”

“Madness,” Enterman translated.

“We know what the Drakima is,” Rita said. “We know that it is some kind of ancient relic. We just don’t know exactly what it looks like.”

“Okay, I understand,” Bela said. “So then it’s a Black Mariah.”

“You mean one of those old police vans?” Enterman asked.

“No. My grandmother used to tell a story about Poland during the Second War,” Bela said. “The smugglers would come to her town in a black wagon they called a Black Mariah. But the people in town never knew what was inside of it. No windows, no openings. They would pay for the smuggled goods first and only find out later what they had bought. The problem was that every so often, when the van was opened up, there was nothing inside.”

“Why would they pay first knowing there might not be anything inside?”

“To find out,” Bela said. “They were Jews. They lived on hope.”

“That’s a joke,” Enterman said to Rita.

“Not a joke, a folktale,” Bela corrected. “Jokes only make you laugh. Well and good. But tales make you think.”

“I thought you could build a whole philosophy on jokes,” Enterman said.

“Don’t confuse me,” Bela said. “The point is...a Black Mariah means a mystery. Something unknown. Hidden. Something you want to find out, even if it turns out to be nothing. An empty envelope that is sealed is a Black Mariah.”

“Like our Drakima,” Rita said.

“Yes, but I’m a philosopher, dollink, not a detective. I don’t know how I can help you find it.”

Enterman took out his card and, quick as a professor, engaged the mistscreen in the center of the room. He zapped the information onto it and instantly his recorded conversations with Mama Nostromento appeared floating in 3space like cloud writing for all to see.

“I think this old lady knows where Tony—the dead guy—hid the Drakima,” he explained. “I’m convinced that she’s holding onto a secret. Her name is Mama Nostromento and she was the last one to see Tony alive. These are my conversations with her. Take a look.”

Bela, like most women in their sixties, had had laser correction to avoid glasses. But the newest screens that projected images onto the thin air taxed even bionic eyes. So she took the pair of half-frame glasses that had been hanging by a cord around her neck and set them on the tip of her nose. Peering down through the lenses, she was no longer the amiable aunt but a stern professor marking a student’s rotten paper on Plato’s dualism. Rita felt the return of undergraduate butterflies to her gut.

“I see,” Bela said once she read the transcript. “Like our friend Nietzsche, Mama too is completely loco.”

“She has a neurovirus which, as it progresses, destroys basic memory processes in stages. First you forget who people are or what they just said, then what day it is or where you are, then the names of things, and so on.”

“Sure, that makes sense. It must deconstruct the procedure of cognitive development,” Bela said. “But I see something else in her answers. There’s a kind of dementia here too. In other words, she’s not just childlike, she’s scattered. Out of touch with the moment. Lost in time. *Gottenyu*, it must be a horrible feeling.”

“I don’t know whether she’s answering me or thinks I’m someone else or thinks she’s talking to someone in the past...or what.”

“Sometimes she seems to focus on a single word in your question and that triggers her answer. Like here, where you ask about Tony and she says he’s a good boy. Was this Tony a boy?”

“In his twenties.”

“That could be a boy to her, I guess. Unless she means someone else. Is there another Tony in her life?”

“Don’t know. I can’t get her to answer a simple question.”

“Like where exactly is the Drakima?” Rita offered.

“Maybe she just doesn’t know,” Bela suggested.

“I *feel* that she does,” Enterman said.

Bela looked at him intently and saw the tone in his eyes and that mere impression ended all speculation about it for her once and for all.

“Okay then, she does. Now your problem is that it isn’t just a matter of what she doesn’t remember. It’s also a matter of what she does not forget.”

“Come again,” Enterman said.

“Every process in life is a duality,” Bela explained. “A balance of opposites. Most philosophy is based on this. If you focus only on one side of the coin, you miss the rest and therefore miss the coin itself. Remembering is obviously very important to us since it is the way we make connections. But forgetting is just as important. It is only by forgetting the details, for example, that we can absorb the essences of things. That’s basic phenomenology. Ignoring and forgetting are both crucial to consciousness. We have to forget in order to have any knowledge of the world or we would be overwhelmed by all there is. Creativity also depends on forgetting, mixing things up in new ways, forgetting how different they are, blurring and fusing. See what I mean?”

“Forgetting and remembering,” Enterman repeated.

“If we never remembered anything, we’d be locked in an eternal present with no past. But if we never forgot anything, we’d be just as trapped in an endless past and unable to move on. We could not live either way. Muddling, forgetting, and mixing up are just as important as remembering. But you know all this. It’s part of intuition. You know it from the Pacton thing.”

A graduate assistant opened the door and told Professor Rosenthal that she had a call. Bela had, of course, misplaced her card and therefore had to excuse herself to go back to her office and answer it at her desk. There was a moment of confusion as she walked out of the room, forgot which way her own office was and, when she finally got there, why she had gone there in the first place.

“The Pacton thing?” Rita asked once they were alone.

"A case I was involved in a few years ago."

"Thoreau said something about it. You were on the news."

"A missing child I found," Enterman said. "She was the six-year-old daughter of a rich businessman named Barnard Pacton. The police had tons of information about her but they had no leads. Thoreau knew Pacton so he asked me to get involved."

"Why did Thoreau ask you?"

"I was a professor of psychology at the time and I had written a book about intuition. I used to go to parties and do what I do...ramble about people's stories based on what I was seeing or sensing about them. Everyone thought I was a mind-reader but it was just a parlor game. Thoreau thought I might be able to help on the case. Find something everyone else had missed."

"And you obviously did."

"Because of what Tante Bela's talking about in a way. Forgetting. I decided that to understand the girl, I would have to forget everything that everyone knew about her. All the information that the family and cops had put together. Everything in the media and in the Glob, all those facts and details. And there were plenty. Too many to be able to develop any sense of what might have happened to her. So I ignored all that, tried to forget what I knew, refused to read it or discuss it. Instead I just spent time alone in her room. Doing what I do. Looking at what was there and telling myself stories. Pretending to be her and trying to feel what she felt."

"What was that?"

"A lot of things. Kid things. Need for attention, frustration, playfulness. But then after a while, I began to get this overwhelming sense of fear."

"Based on what?"

"I didn't know at first. It was just a feeling. That's what intuition is all about. I made up her story like I always do but it seemed to come down to how frightened she was. Scared that something was going to happen to her. That kind of thing would never have been on a police report. It was just something she felt that I sensed empathically."

"It was paranormal."

"Please!"

"Like distant prayer and Gaia lensing. The thoughts people have radiate in the world and effect things."

"Yes I think I read about that in a sci-fi novel called *Gas Attack from Uranus*."

"Well then how do *you* explain it. Your feeling wasn't based on anything concrete."

“It was, just not on something I could have easily identified. The story came first, from all the little clues and details I was picking up on by being there. Then the explanations came later. That’s the way intuition works. Everybody does this. We pick up on things we are not fully aware of and then find evidence to support it.”

“What exactly did you pick up on by sitting in her room?”

“The rigid neatness of everything. Too neat for a girl her age. Too neat to be casual in her own room. Like she desperately needed to get control over her world. And her drawings. She drew people without faces as though she didn’t want to recognize something. All her dolls were lined up...like sentinels to protect her. All of that built up into this sense that she was afraid of someone. Someone close to her.”

“Why someone close?”

“There was a cleared space on her closet floor. I sat there and felt that she could hide there. Hide from someone in the house. I guessed that it was her father.”

“How?”

“Why not? He was there all the time. He knew her better than anybody. It was a reasonable guess. And it turned out to be correct. Pacton had this weird relationship with his daughter. Not sexual, just needy. I thought the picture of her that he kept on his desk was about three inches too close to the chair. Too close, see?”

“And you were right?”

“He had arranged to have her kidnapped so he could be her savior. Heromania they call it...a crazy need to be a hero. The news, of course, said that I was psychic. Sitting in the room and getting vibes and all. But that was bullshit. It was ESP all right. But like I told you...Everyday Sensual Perception.”

The photo Etta Travers was looking at had been torn in half at some point, then taped back together. Under the tape, and using her morphing glasses to focus on it, she could see a couple being pushed along the boardwalk in a wheeled enclosure. A sign on the side of the cab read: The Boardwalk Rolling Chair Company, 75 cents per hour, plus tip. The pusher was a handsome black man in a black uniform, like a prince in someone’s posh court and the man and woman he was pushing in the chair were well-dressed and regal and all in white, holding hands.

The boardwalk at Coney Island was one of mankind’s great dumb achievements. A creation of pure frivolity not unlike the ice cream cone or the pinwheel.

The boardwalk proved that distraction could also be the mother of invention. On the boardwalk one could stroll or be rolled along at a leisurely pace—eating, chatting, observing—and still follow the endless furl of the churning sea. No one went to the boardwalk to get anywhere. It was an end in itself, an excuse. A way to shuffle along the shore without getting sand in your shoes. A means to meander.

Around the couple in white were teams of motionless amblers caught in the instant of their footfalls. Families, lovers, buddies. The planks of the boardwalk were laid out in neat strips where the shadows of strollers fell like splashes on a ledger. One man in a bowler hat was eating something with relish but she could not make out what it was. A child in a poufy dress was marching steadfastly, barely holding her mother's hand. In the background behind these figures, Etta could read the signs for the Bushman Baths, the Sodamat, Lido Pool, Photos While-U-Wait, Optimo Cigars.

In the foreground, a pair of daring men with bellies were leaning against the wooden railing over the beach. A new ordinance from Mayor LaGuardia had just signaled the end of tank top bathing suits and the men were posing topless in their trunks. One had his foot up defiantly on a bench.

It had been a sunny day that day, sharp shadows all around. But the aging of the paper had turned that bright light into a veneer of molasses. And there had, no doubt, also been a breeze but the banner on one of the distant hotels was frozen in a sculptured flap. Etta could easily imagine the smell of the sea air as it wafted across the boardwalk, carrying with it the scent of butter and lavender. Sounds of the surf and of a beach ball being slapped and caught. All those trivial moments: the coarse, uneven feeling of the sandy wooden planks of the boardwalk under her bare feet; the breeze lifting her hair; the maze of odors as she moved; a woman sitting on a bench leaning down gracefully to adjust the laces on her shoe.

That was Coney Island in August of 1931.

It was the summer she got engaged. But not to Nonny. That was never to be. Had he died in the Great War...or was that just a rumor? She never knew. No, this was her engagement to Thomas William Fryer who would turn his family's shoe store into a small empire of retail outlets throughout Brooklyn. Her first marriage. It would end in divorce many years and endless pairs of shoes later.

But back then, in the summer of 1931, she was full of promises and planning her wedding. And writing the first of many books. And shopping for a home.

Oh yes it was a wonderful time, 1931.

Or was that the year before?

Etta was so caught up in these musings that she did not notice the two men who were standing at the door to her room. They had been mulling there for a few minutes, trying to figure out just what to do now that they were there. The answer had been hard to come by.

“So? Now what?” Willy said, taking up most of the doorway with his short thick frame.

“I dunno,” Sal said, leaning on the jamb. “I seen him visit this room a few times.”

“So now what?”

“So we fuck her up. See what she knows.”

Willy looked in and saw Etta sitting in her glidechair facing the window, shoulders stooped. Her white hair was like an aura around her skull, giving her an ethereal presence.

“Adunno,” Willy said.

“Dunno wha?” Sal asked.

“She looks like my mudda,” Willy assessed.

“Hey, fuck your mother,” Sally suggested.

Willy looked at him quizzically.

“You fuck’er.”

“What I mean to say is...you gonna go soft on me cause this broad reminds you of your mother?”

“No,” Willy said. “I hated the old bitch.”

“Good. Then you hold her down and I’ll get the story from her.”

As they marched into the room, Etta suddenly became aware of them and she leaned back and tilted right very slightly in her glidechair to turn it around so she could face them. She looked surprised to see them but not at all unhappy about it. She smiled brightly and the muscles around her mouth erased the wrinkles, subtracting a good decade from her appearance. This made her look a youthful 130.

“Nice of you to come,” she said.

Her manner caught the two thugs wholly off guard. They were so used to being unwelcome everywhere they went that for a moment they were completely dumbfounded. Silent. Then Sal got himself back on track.

“Look lady, don’t give us no hard time.”

“Is that any way to talk? I’m sorry I didn’t put out any tea. But perhaps it’s too early for that.”

“Lissen, we didn’t come here to pussyfoot.”

"Would you like to sit down? You look tired. Are you taking care of yourselves?"

"Hey!" Sal shouted, sensing that he was losing momentum.

"Tell me how you have been," Etta said, folding her hands in her lap. "What are you up to these days, you're so busy."

Sal stepped forward and loomed, very keenly, over Etta in her chair.

"You know this guy Enterman right?"

"You didn't have to bring me anything," Etta said pleasantly.

"Enterman. This guy. He visits you right?"

"But you know, I certainly do expect a kiss hello after all this time."

Etta tapped her cheek with a knotty hand and Sal hiccupped. Willy, for his part, grinned. For all his thuggery, he loved it when things took unexpected turns. In spite of being built like a ham hock and having spent his life punching through things, he was actually a bit of a sillyboy inside.

"Go on Sally," he said. "Give this lady a nice big smooch."

"Fuck smooch," Sal said.

"Go on, kiss'er," Willy puckered.

"Fuck you too," Sal spit. "I got somethin else in mind."

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out his trusty knife, the one he had used to slit Tony Bell's face with. He assumed that the mere sight of it would terrify the old lady into an instant confession and stop all this nonsense. Wrong again.

"That handle is much too big," Etta said.

"Say wha?" Sal said, looking at the knife with new eyes.

"The balance is off."

"I'm gonna cut yer fuckin heart out with the balance is off," Sal complained, although he knew deep down that she was right. The balance *was* off. It always bothered him.

"I know all about throwing knives, believe me," Etta said. "I've been the target for my Uncle Cosmo for years. He's the best knife thrower in Coney. He won't buy anything but top of the line. Now if that's all you've got, I'm sorry but you might as well be on your way."

"Lissen a dis," Willy said. "She ain't afraid ya."

"Shut up!" Sal insisted.

"Kiss'er instead. Maybe that'll do."

"Look lady," Sal said, turning beet. "I didn't come here to sell your fucking Uncle Cosmo no fucking knife..."

"I'm used to colorful language, young man, but there is a limit!"

Sal, getting redder by the minute, began to explain the actual reason for the visit. He described in lucid detail precisely how they were going to cut her up like a steak unless she told them everything she knew about Enterman. But even as he started talking Sal was aware of the distraction, the noise coming from outside the window of the room. It started as a distant whoo, expanded into a nearby whoop, and ended as a series of whomping sirens accompanied by flashing lights on the street outside. Someone had called the cops and they were out there and about to bust in.

“Fuck this,” Willy said astutely, “I’m outta here.”

“Fuck you,” Sal concurred and battled with the older man to be the first one out the door, down the hall, and out through the basement exit of the building.

Etta seemed disappointed at their sudden departure even though she did not like them very much. They were rather crude and not very polite. But she loved having visitors. Perhaps, she thought, the commotion outside would deliver someone more interesting.

Leon watched this whole episode play out across four of his displays like some kid playing multiple online games and riding an adrenaline rush. Although from his perspective it was more like an ancient Greek god playing with clay figurines and deciding fates. On one screen he had hacked into one of the security vidcams on the building’s exterior and was watching the police pull up to the nursing home in real time. On another he had tapped into the GPS system and pinpointed Sal by his card and was watching a blip representing him moving quickly through a schematic of the building, searching for a rear exit. Other images pinpointed Enterman, currently up at Columbia University, and various data sets regarding the legends of the shees, a private bodyguard named Rita St. John, the history of Coney Island, and so on.

A god, after all, even a lesser one whose domain was only information, really had to be on top of things. Had to know what was going down. So Leon had taken it upon himself in his spare time to write a special program to keep track of Enterman’s every move, another to keep tabs on Rita St. John, and another to trail a hood with a prison record named Salvatore Impelchik. Not to mention a hypercool ArtAn program with analytical skills to collate all the gathering information, create intersection graphs, and make inferences.

Which is how Leon came to understand that Enterman was going out to Brooklyn as a favor for Thoreau, was being protected by Rita St. John who had studied Homeopathy at Berkeley, was visiting a mansion owned by someone called Nostromento, was making periodic stops at a nursing home where he was

visiting an inhabitant named Etta Travers, the oldest living Methuselan, and was being followed everywhere by the thug named Sal who had spent much of life incarcerated in various prisons around the state for petty crimes.

It was all there. All there in the endless flow of data generated by ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. The difference was that in the general scheme of things, no one gave a hoot what anyone did except to the extent that it helped sell products. But Leon, master of all that he was master of, had decided to give a hoot right here, right now, about this little group of anyones. No grand reason for this; nothing better than as a distraction from the norm.

What it all added up to, Leon still had no idea. But when he noticed, or rather when the computers pointed it out to him, that the thug was visiting the old lady, Leon sitting in his eggcup and judging mortal lives like pieces on a chessboard, decided that no good would come of it. So he called the police and reported a robbery in progress and would have felt fine about the whole affair but for one annoying piece that was missing and impossible to fill in using only the wisps in simspace that were the atoms of his world.

Namely...what the fuss was all about.

Why everyone was running around getting themselves all revved up.

The program tracing Enterman's path produced a diagram that looked a lot like the foraging patterns of small animals. A tireless search here, over there, back there, over here. Leon knew Enterman was not searching for food. So what was it? What the hell was he looking for? What difference did it make? And most of all...how could all this help him—Leon Weyerhauser—with his grand plan to take over the planet?

On her way back to the seminar room, Bela encountered Enterman who was on his own way back from the bathroom down the hall.

"It's good to see you out with someone," she said cautiously.

She put her chubby hand flat on his back to bolster him but he said nothing.

"It's about time, don't you think?" she asked quietly.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I know, I know. I'm just saying. You're young and you've been through a terrible tragedy. No one should have to. But there's a time to mourn and a time to stop mourning and start living again."

"Drop it, Tante!"

"Okay, okay. Don't bite my head."

He was always like that, she thought, even as a boy. His mother never knew what to do about it. He would shut down like a clam when he was upset and not

let anyone in to help. Still, Bela had seen the way he looked at this young woman, this Rita who carried herself so gracefully, with that transparently healthy leer that men can never disguise. Perhaps she would bring him out of himself and back to the world.

“She’s a real beauty,” Bela said. “And tell me, what does she do?”

“She’s a kind of 21ster ninja,” Enterman said.

“Ninja? I don’t think that’s Yiddish, bubelah.”

He pulled open the door to the classroom to find Rita still sitting there perfectly in her seat. The overhead light cast sensuous shadows under the curves of her breasts. Enterman tingled at this and Bela the philosopher thought about what a strange world we live in. A sea of ambiguity in which all things can mean all things. In which any phenomenon can be paired with any other one to produce an unknown result. Synergy of the unexpected. That’s why life was endlessly surprising. Except in one case. The one given in a world of questions. The one thing that was always predictable...a man and a nice bosom. That alone in the world was always as expected. That alone was sure.

“Don’t take offense at this,” Bela sighed, taking her seat again, “but in my opinion you’re asking your questions like a *shlemiel*.”

“Is that good or bad?” Rita asked.

“A *shlemiel* is a loser. Someone who spills water on himself, then spills wine trying to clean it up, then spills...”

“Can we get to the point here?” Enterman implored.

“What I mean to say is...your questions are too vague, they are all over the place. It’s not your fault. They’re ordinary questions for ordinary conversation. Most conversation is based on implicit agreements about the rules of conversations. But this woman has lost those rules. She has forgotten them. So now that we understand this, you change your tactic.”

“To what?”

“You have to do what we call in philosophy structuring questions to the limits of the inquiry. In other words, you have to be specific. Don’t just ask whatever logical things come to mind. You have to ask strategic questions. Use the Socratic method.”

“Like a cross-examination,” Rita suggested.

“Right. Like twenty questions. Sounds like a child’s game but it is actually the basis of all philosophical inquiry. You see what I’m saying?”

“I think so,” Enterman said.

“For example. What’s the one basic question you want to answer?”

“Where is the Drakima?”

“That sounds plain and simple,” Bela said, “but it isn’t. It’s really the tip of a very complex linguistic pyramid. For example, what does the word ‘where’ really mean? Is it a physical place or an imaginary one? And if it’s real, does the place still exist or is it gone now? Or has it changed? Does it look different? And how can she tell you where it is if she can’t even access the names of places?”

“I see what you mean.”

“And what do you mean by ‘is’? Do you mean where is it right now or where is it usually kept? Or where was it when she last saw it? If she saw it. She may even understand that you want to know where it is right now but think that right now is three weeks ago because of the dementia.”

“Or three years,” Rita added.

“And all this assumes that she can locate and hold onto the memory of the meaning of the word *Drakima* itself. Assuming that this is a word she knows now or ever knew.”

“She might have even called it something else,” Rita added. “Or forgot that she remembered what it was.”

“Make no mistake about it,” Bela said. “Meaning is a quagmire. Comprehension a miracle.”

“What should I do differently?” Enterman asked. “Make a list of twenty questions?”

“Good idea. Organize your inquiry ahead of time. First of all, break each question down into a much simpler series of questions. Ones that she is capable of comprehending quickly with her limited memory and enhanced forgetting. And don’t just ask the question, ask all the questions that flesh out the question. One at a time. Slowly. Short and sweet. Yes or no answers.”

“Okay.”

“And concrete. Be very specific. Above all, avoid references to time. It’s too confusing and I don’t think she can comprehend it.”

“Do you think that’ll work?”

“I don’t know but it will be interesting to find out,” Bela said. “What’s the end of all this? Do you get rich?”

“The world is put back into harmony,” Rita said.

“Ah, *tikkun olam*,” Bela said. “That’s Hebrew. It means the power to heal the world. That is certainly worth the effort I think.”

“Not you too,” Enterman moaned.

“I’m sorry,” Bela said as she stood up and motioned to the door. “I’ve got a class. I really have to go.”

“How can such a simple thing be so complicated?” Enterman said as he led the way to the elevator.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bela answered. “This kind of effort is what philosophers have been doing for centuries to understand the world. Maybe the universe itself has a neurovirus. It was lovely to meet you, dollink,” she said to Rita.

“A pleasure for me too,” Rita said, touching her arm.

“And good luck with this Black Maria of yours,” Bela said. “It’s very interesting. Like a treasure hunt. But don’t get yourselves into any trouble over this silly coin. Life is too short.”

“Thanks, Tante,” Enterman said as he jumped through the closing doors of the elevator.

Bela Rosenthal was already thinking of four other things—how to start her lecture, how nice a neck massage would feel, whether to have neutraSalmon again for dinner, and where the glasses around her neck were—when a hand shot out from the elevator, forcing the door to open again.

“What coin?” Enterman asked, popping his head through the doors.

“What’s that?” Bela asked, turning.

“You said life was short and we shouldn’t get into trouble over this silly coin.”

“I did?”

“Yes. What coin?”

“Did I say coin?”

“I heard you.”

“I don’t think I said coin.”

“We both heard you,” Enterman said, pointing back to Rita who was standing behind him in the elevator.

“When?”

“Just now.”

“Really?”

“Maybe you meant it metaphorically, like two sides of the same coin?”

“Yes,” she said, “I guess I did.”

“Oh,” Enterman said, and pressed the button for the first floor again.

But as the doors closed one more time, Enterman could not shake a feeling that something, something important, was slipping through his fingers. What was it? Sure enough, just as the doors were about to obliterate the last sliver of light from the hallway, four pudgy fingers appeared in the crack. The doors opened again.

“Now that you mention it,” Bela said, “I think I did say coin.”

“You did.”

“I was thinking before, when you first mentioned it, that a Drakima was a kind of coin. That’s the way I envisioned it when you showed me how big it was.”

Enterman bent his fingers into a circle again.

“That’s it. Like a coin. I’ve been imagining a coin the whole time we’ve been talking.”

“Jesus!” Enterman said, suddenly remembering the important something. It was a word. A word he had seen back in Brooklyn. On a sign. It meant nothing to him the first time around. But now it loomed in his mind like a marquee, all flashing lights, leading to the main attraction.

“Does that mean something?” Bela asked through the narrowing slit between the doors.

But Enterman was too busy madly punching the first floor button, hoping it might instantly transport him back to the building on Emmons Street in Brooklyn and that directory of offices made of plastic letters on the cinderblock wall.

In the beginning was the mist of all souls.

This was called the *Gandamunti*.

And all was one and the universe was good.

But this could never last, for *Mummerum* was greedy. Alone among the *Gandamunti*, he desired to glorify his name, to raise himself above all that there was. And so, he pulled away from the mist and became one alone. Isolated and apart. To show the power of his separateness, he created what the *Gandamunti* could not. He created time. And with this new entity called time—with then and then and then—he soon became the ruler of his own domain. And *Mummerum* dwelled within time and was the lord and master of all that lasted. And the *Gandamunti* marveled at his creation but took no part in it because they saw in time a great tragedy forming.

Alone in his time, *Mummerum* grew bored. He longed for the fellowship of the mist of all souls but he had gone too far to return to it. And so it came to pass that he created within time a diversion, a bright bauble that might distract him. And this was the *Mentaria*, the trifle within time, which had never been before. And the *Mentaria* held within it one single characteristic that was new in the universe. And *Mummerum* was well pleased with this and proud of his creation. And this new characteristic was change. Change was now loose upon existence.

But there was a heavy price to pay for *Mummerum*’s arrogance. There always is. Because with time and change there came something unexpected. Something that he did not create, something he did not anticipate. An unimagined thing.

With time and change came memory.

At first this thing called memory only swelled *Mummerum's* power, because by remembering he now became master of all the events within time. By remembering, he knew all that had gone before. By remembering he knew the differences between. And by remembering, he saw what had happened and therefore what might yet happen. Through this he understood the limits of his power, which only made *Mummerum* want more. And so, in time and change and memory, he abandoned his name and came to be called *Lord Delfinn* and thought to fill the void that he had created by making a world. A world of things and beings and unfoldings.

Thus did *Lord Delfinn* create the world and all there is within the world through time to distinguish him, and change to distract him, and memory to swell him.

Soon others, seeing how great this remembering was, joined him in time. And *Lord Delfinn* became the ruler not just of the world and its things and inhabitants and unfoldings but of other souls as well. Soon the world was filled with the mist. And the more powerful *Lord Delfinn* became, the more power he wanted. Such is the truth of desire. And there soon grew a great jealousy over the *Mentaria* and the change it held and soon thereafter a great struggle for the world in time.

And this was the beginning of what we call the War of the Immortals and their terrible battle over the world.

This was the beginning of the darkness.

This darkness is known as the *Cozimatista Mentiadis*. This darkness that flowed from the first moment of *Mummerum's* isolation, from the great mistake of time.

Gaspara Nostromento stopped reading and rested his finger on the last word of the entry. The Book of Allohar was heavier than he recalled. But of course, he was much younger when he last read it. It was hard now to remember all the ancient words, not just because his eyes were worse, but because the book was written in *balshee*, the old form. This was hardly ever seen anymore. A lost language of myth and it was taxing to try to decipher it.

He looked over at his mother lying in the bed. Her eyes were closed and, for the moment at least, the palsy was calm. She seemed to be sleeping but he could never be sure. She could wake at any moment, filled with fear, her wails filling the house. He decided to read on and followed his finger back down to the words on the page.

From the War of the Immortals a hero emerged. This was *Colidan mac Bar*, master of the staff. He was pure of heart and fought on the side of the First Men.

And when he took a wife, it was the daughter of the Round Lake at the Edge of the Earth. And she gave birth to *Mag de Ganeen*, who grew to be a great tale-teller. On the Narrow Mountain, in the time of shepherds and blue corn, *Mag de Ganeen* cast three round stones that landed at the corners of a perfect triangle. This was the *sid*, the magic dwelling place, and there she built a fire of mistletoe and sage.

When the moon was full, she sat on the fire for seven days, and drank goat's milk and ate honeycombs, and sang the story of the Immortals. And on the last day, surrounded by wolves howling to the moon, she too howled in the darkness and gave birth to the *Tre Matroni*, the three mothers of man and shee.

In the world of time, there are two ways of knowing. There is the truth of what was and there is the hope of what is yet to be. And memory ties these together like a golden vine. And without the vine there is no life and without the life there is no purpose.

Solunnia.

For this is the way it must be.

Man and shee are the caretakers of this vine. For this were they created. And the *Tre Matroni* are their mothers and *Colidan mac Bar* their warrior and *Mummerum* their creator and the *Gandamunti* their mist. Man and shee, entwined in the vine of their fate. It is the destiny of humans to go forward, to move the world ahead, to create and destroy, build and rebuild, and to make the future.

This is their fate.

This they must do.

And it is the destiny of the shee to repair the past, to correct the remembering, to bring what was into full comprehension, to tell the tale.

This is their destiny.

This is their purpose.

Past and future, future and past. There can be neither without the other. Nothing would exist without them, as there would be nothing in this world in time, nothing in change or memory, without the dual nature of man and shee, woven together like the vine that is their entwined fate.

So it has been.

So it must be.

Solunnia!

Was that another groan? Nostromento wondered, looking up. But he studied her face to find that she had not moved at all. Perhaps it was just a dream she was having and not another passage through the gate. It was hard to tell. She had one

foot in this world and one in the next. How could he know which one was calling her? After all, he did not know the secrets of the banshee.

But someone was now bent over the bed, laying berries at her feet neatly in a series of rows. It took a moment for Nostromento to realize that it was Papa Decienti. He was surprised that the old man could still make it up the stairs and had entered so quietly. Decienti moved haltingly as he placed the tiny red balls one by one in the spaces of the toes of her left foot and muttered a prayer. It was a gentle prayer for those in transition, hummed in the ancient tongue. More mysteries that Nostromento could not grasp. He was simply the High Mister, and a temporary one at that, but Decienti was the last of the *Nunia Thall*, the nine wise men, and he knew the suffering Mama must be feeling.

Nostromento closed the book and rubbed his eyes. Soon the time of Right Remembering would come. The ritual would be done. And soon the gate would close and the present would become a new past. Soon, as it was written, the old would die and the new would be born. But not yet; it was not yet time. He could sense that much. Certain things had to be resolved first. There were preparations to be made. And in this interregnum, he knew very well, all manner of morbid truths would be revealed.

Mama Nostromento stirred in her sleep and the old man touched her foot to comfort her, and Nostromento turned his thoughts to the Drakima and the grave danger of never recovering it.

Two hours after leaving Tante Bela, Enterman and Rita were back at the building at 80 Emmons Street. Propelled there by Enterman's dim recollection of the word *numismatist* on the building directory, they now found themselves sitting in the cramped office of Ellwood Font, coin dealer and purveyor. Font was a squiggly little man with the body of a baked potato and a butter pat for a head. He was sitting at a worktable, polishing one of his coins with a blotchy rag. The pair of enormous magnifying binoculars that were strapped to his head made huge watery bug-eyes dance in front of his nose when he looked up.

"And how may I help you?" Font asked, swiveling towards them on his stool.

"A man was here last week," Enterman said. "It was on Sunday actually. Do you remember him? His name was Antonne Bellarosita."

"I'm sorry," Font said. "I don't recall anyone by that name coming here. On Sunday you say? No, that can't be. I'm closed on Sundays."

He put the coin he was polishing down on a velvet mat, then picked up a second and began to rub it with the same grungy cloth. The circular motion he used

was both tender and incessant, from endless hours of practice. It was a lost gesture in a world of tapscreens in which fingers always poked, never rubbed.

“Does the name Tony Bell ring a bell?” Rita asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Font said, after a long pause. “Is this Tony Bell a coin dealer?”

“No but he *was* selling a coin,” Enterman said.

“No,” Font said, his eyes floating upwards, “I don’t remember anyone selling a coin on Friday.”

“Not Friday. On Sunday,” Rita said. “It was a Drakima.”

Font dropped the coin he was rubbing, which bounced off his foot and clattered onto the floor. His eyes seemed to swell behind the lenses of his viewer and his mouth fell open.

“And what, may I ask, is your interest in this matter?”

Enterman was about to explain how he had been hiding out in a friend’s penthouse to avoid his own life when he was tricked into investigating the murder of a fairy by interviewing an old lady with a neurovirus while being chased by a sociopath and protected by a 21ster bodyguard and all that. But in review, he did not think it sounded especially rational.

In the meantime, Rita had taken out her card, tapped through a series of false ID’s and finally held it up towards Font, showing that she was a special agent working for the United States Department of the Treasury, #372324.

“The man was murdered,” Rita explained.

“Oh I see,” Font said. But he seemed more disappointed than shocked. “I suppose you will insist that I cooperate.”

“Do you remember now?” Rita asked. “Tony Bell, last Sunday, the Drakima?”

“Yes. Now I know who you mean. As a matter of fact, I came in that Sunday just to meet with him. I don’t normally do that. But you see, once I heard what he was selling, I really would have gone anywhere to see him.”

“For a coin?”

“Oh no, sir. Much much more than that.”

“How much more?” Enterman asked.

Font wrote something on a slip of paper and held it out to Enterman and Rita like a calling card. It had the words AGRIGENTUM DEKADRACHM in neat stiff letters.

“How do these words strike you, sir?” Font asked.

“Like the 8:15 out of Grand Central,” Enterman said.

“You know their meaning then?”

“No, I never take the train.”

“Agrigentum dekadrachm,” he intoned, reading the words himself with awe. “We pronounce this second word as deka-*dram*. But in other languages, they sound out the *ch* and call it a deka-*drachm*. It comes from the word *drachma*, a monetary unit of ancient Greece.”

“Like Drakima.”

“Another way of saying the same thing.”

“So the Drakima is definitely a coin.”

“Tell me, what do you in your wildest imagination consider the Agrigentum dekadrachm to be?” Font asked.

“A poisonous blowfish off the coast of Chile that once ate a coin,” Enterman said, giving it a shot.

“Glory no. Your little whimsy pales before the truth of it. Allow me, sir and madam, to educate you.”

Font removed the binoculars from his head and put them in a pocket of his apron, revealing an ordinary pair of strained eyes. He folded the rag he was holding like a handkerchief and placed it neatly on a shelf, then smoothed out the creases of his apron. When he turned his attention back to Rita and Enterman, his face had the beatific look of a conductor raising his baton to start the last movement of the symphony.

“Imagine, if you will, a most glorious treasure,” he said. “A prize worth a lifetime of search and risk. And even treachery. Even death. A Maltese Falcon and a Holy Grail and a lost masterpiece of DaVinci and...and...and...”

“And?” Enterman said blankly.

“Can you comprehend such an object, I wonder?”

“Sure,” Enterman said, “It’s a treasure, it’s worth having, it’s worth dying for, the Holy Grail and all that. It’s everything. Fine, I understand all that. Which only leaves one question.”

“Please, ask it.”

“What the hell *is* it?”

“A coin, sir, as you have said.”

“A regular coin, like a quarter? That kind of coin?”

“Oh no,” Font gasped. “As much like a regular quarter as...as...as...”

“As we are like the gods of Mount Olympus,” Enterman concluded.

Enterman rolled his eyes back, closed the lids, took a snooze, and was awakened only by the sound of Font fussing with his card. He set it on the table, then brought up a virtual display, enlarged the picture, and angled it towards his visitors.

“Here we are,” Font said, pointing to an image of two coins side by side against a black background. Each one seemed to be about the size of an egg yolk.

“Have you ever seen anything so beautiful in your life?” Font swooned.

Many things came to Enterman’s mind and not a single one of them was a coin. He said simply:

“This them?”

“It, sir. This is it. The Agrigentum dekadrachm.”

“Actual size?” Rita asked.

“Yes. A picture of both sides, verso and recto. Exquisite, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’s just a coin,” Rita said.

“No, not just a coin at all. It is an incredibly rare coin of priceless value.”

“What’s it made of?”

“History, sir and madam. Pure history.”

Font pressed a few keys on the virtual keyboard and the image floating in space before them enlarged to display greater details and joined into one coin turning slowly in 3space. The front of the coin showed a profile of a Greek face. It was one of those full-cheeked, flat-nosed, curly-haired portraits of Alexander or one of the other Greats. Exactly what you would expect to find on an old Greek coin. The other side of the coin showed a muscular man sitting on a throne, holding a bird in his left hand and a pole in the right. There was also a word in Greek running down the edge next to the figure.

“So this is the famous *Drakima du Roya*,” Enterman said dramatically.

“No, that is not precisely what it is called. It might be referred to as a drachm, however, which is a common short term for a dekadrachm in some countries. I suppose *Drakima* could be another version. We call it a deka. I have never heard the term *du Roya*. Nonetheless, the Agrigentum dekadrachm is quite special. This coin was issued by the city of Akragas, which was a Greek colony in southwestern Sicily, to mark the defeat of Athens by the Agrigentines during the Peloponnesian War. It was minted in 410 B.C. You are looking at an image of one of the three specimens known to exist in the entire world. That is, until last week.”

“What happened last week?”

“Your friend came in to see me.”

Outside the window of the office, a snarl of cars was creating a honkfest. The elevated train roared by. And somewhere out there a man with a laser-ram was busting up pavement near a building site. But all that clamor did not seem to interfere with the dealer’s trance, filled as it was with thrill and awe.

“I could not believe my eyes,” Font continued. “I knew the whereabouts of the other three dekas. Any dealer would. The last one was sold a few years ago for

almost ten million dollars. But this Mr. Bell of yours was holding in his hand what I determined to be an authentic fourth coin. In perfect untouched mint condition. As though it had been sealed away in a vault for two and a half millennia. Of course, to be certain it would have to be tested under careful conditions. But just looking at it and feeling it, I was convinced that it was real.”

“What is it worth?” Rita asked.

“A fourth deka in perfect mint? Many many millions, madam. Whatever dreamers might be willing to pay to hold ancient Greece in their hands. But its true value cannot be measured by money. Just think of it...a Greek craftsman poured the silver into a mold over two thousand years ago. A rich merchant kept it as a souvenir for his oldest son. Perhaps a Macedonian prince wore it around his neck once. Who knows what tales of lust and treachery it holds. Murders perhaps, or daring heists. Oh, it is much more than a coin, my friends. It is history. In the palm of your hand. And I held it.”

“Held it?” Enterman asked. “You mean you don’t have it any more?”

The question brought Font down from his lofty reverie with a thump.

“Sadly.”

“Then Tony Bell didn’t sell it to you on Sunday?”

“Sell it to me on Sunday? Good heavens no. You don’t just hand over a fourth deka and get a check for it. The sale of a coin like this is quite complicated. It would take months of work to complete it.”

“And you told him that?”

“I did. And he was very upset about it. He seemed to want to trade it in right away. In fact, he became quite impatient with me, pacing around like a caged animal. It was very unsettling. He was not like my usual clients at all. He did not seem to be, how can I say, a man of character?”

“He was a street punk. A thief,” Rita said.

“As you say.”

“But you still thought the coin was real and were willing to arrange for it to be purchased?”

“He told me that he represented the owner of it and knew nothing about the coin itself,” Font said. “What can I say? I chose to believe him.”

“But he didn’t go for it,” Rita suggested.

“When I told him what was involved in getting the coin tested and assessed and placed up for auction, he became quite abrupt. I tried to explain it all to him but he simply would not be reasonable. So eventually he took the coin and left.”

“Do you know what he planned to do next?”

"I wish I did, madam. I was hoping to hear from him again. But you say now that he has died."

"Murdered," Rita reminded him. "And for the coin probably."

"Oh my good heavens."

"Has anyone else come to see you about this?" Rita asked.

"No one else," Font said, turning slightly jumpy. "Are you suggesting that someone might? Someone involved in this...murder?"

"Let's hope not," she answered. "But in case anyone does, my advice to you is to forget that you ever saw the dekadrachm."

"Oh no, I'm very sorry. But that is something I could never do."

"For your own safety, I mean."

"Madam, you must understand. I have lived an entire lifetime in this office. For forty years I have come here every morning to work with my coins. Through storms and muggings and blackouts, I have come into this little room and dreamed of civilizations long past, of wars lost and won before I was born, of great events I have never seen. I have imagined the fingers of fascinating strangers holding these little discs that I might hold for a few moments. Here, at this small workbench, I have watched the flow of history and dreamed of stepping into it. A little man with little hopes, I know. But for one moment that Sunday I held an Agrigentum dekadrachm in my hand. With this hand I actually touched the story of mankind. This very hand. And that, madam, I shall never ever forget."

Gaspara Nostromento took a swig from a tall bottle, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He tilted the neck towards Enterman as an offer but Enterman waved it away. There was a film of spit over the rim that glistened in the late afternoon light. Enterman had arrived at the house with greater determination in his eyes and Nostromento guessed this meant that he had uncovered some new news. But so far, Enterman was disclosing nothing.

"I simply do not understand," Nostromento said. "You say the investigation is moving along but you cannot tell me what you have uncovered?"

"Not yet," Enterman said. "I still have a few pieces to put together. I know for sure that Sylvo Targul sent Sal and Willy to kill Tony and find the Drakima. When they didn't find it on him, they broke into your mother's room at the nursing home. That didn't work so they broke in here."

Nostromento shook his head as though the news meant nothing at all to him. He took another swig and said, "Yes, yes. But what about our Drakima?"

"I'm closing in on it."

"Do you know what tomorrow is, Enterman?"

“Tuesday.”

Nostromento exhaled a lifetime of held breath.

“If only it were that simple. Tuesday! Just another day in the week. How pleasant that would be. But no, I am afraid that it is not quite that simple. Tomorrow is the *Dua Ockia Hie*, the twenty-eighth day before the winter solstice.”

“Oh that. I forgot.”

“It means nothing to you, of course. You are a modern human being, living in your apartment with its InSens system watching over you. Traveling into your simspace where everything is now, now, now. You modern humans are completely out of touch with the ancient rhythms while all around you planets and galaxies beat out an eternal pulse.”

“All right...so what happens on this special Tuesday?”

“It is the time for the ritual we call the *Mentia du Alavarus*. The Right Remembering.”

“Is it a secret ritual? Can I come?”

“No you cannot! No one is permitted but those who are permitted. You already know more about us than any of your people have in many generations. But this ritual is sacred. A stranger who observed it would have to be killed.”

“This is the ritual for which you need the dekadra...*hurggggh!*” Enterman sputtered, collapsing into a fit of coughing to cover his words.

No point in saying too much, he thought. He was better off if no one else knew exactly what he knew about the coin. Yes, that would be much better if he decided to follow Plan A which was to return the coin to Nostromento. Knowledge was control. And then too, it would not hurt Plan B either...taking the coin, selling it, and buying his own penthouse. Knowledge was leverage too.

“You don’t need the *Drakima* to perform this ceremony?” he said, correcting himself.

“Yes we do,” Nostromento said. “I was hoping it would be returned by now. But since it has not, it seems that we have no choice. We will have to risk performing the ceremony without it. It is time and we do not have our *Drakima*. But what can we do? We shall perform the ritual at midnight nonetheless, just this once, and assume there will be no dire consequences.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“Then we shall never go to our *Berugua Vapori De*, the village beyond the clouds. What you humans would probably call heaven.”

“So you can do what you have to do without the *Drakima* then,” Enterman said. Plan B was sounding much better by the minute.

“No! We will perform our ceremony and hope for the best. But we *must* have the Drakima back or we cannot exchange it for our new sign. That is the way it goes. Old for the new throughout the millennia. Without the Drakima there will be no moving ahead. The consequences of that to us are unthinkable. But even that is of little significance compared to what will happen to you and yours.”

“What’s that?”

“Believe me, Enterman, that is one thing you do not ever want to know!”

Rita St. John at the beach; she was leaning on the railing of the boardwalk, overseeing the Atlantic that seemed to stretch out endlessly before her. With some time to kill before the ride back to the city, she had gone to the shore to stretch and think. The whole business seemed to be coming to some kind of resolution but precisely what kind was unclear. There were still too many unknowns, too much was unsettled. She did not feel in control and that made her uneasy.

The ocean always gave her a sense of comfort but not this time. Try as she might, she could not see the sea as the blood of the earth mother or the sand as her bones. Nor feel the spinning iron core at her center as a heartbeat. She tried to meditate there, to hum, to sync with the rhythm of the tide, to channel Gaia, but nothing was working. Instead she felt the chilly salt air in her hair and watched the sand whip into tiny tornadoes and felt stuck. There was not enough happening, no motion. No news about the Drakima and no plan about how to proceed. She hated that. And whether she and Enterman were even getting close to solving the case was anyone’s guess.

Rita took out her card and tapped the Oracle icon. When a thumbpad materialized, she solemnly placed her thumb on it and waited for the program to read her aura and come up with a response. The thumbpad was really used for identification; it was a fingerprint reader. But the makers of Oracle claimed that it could also be used to evaluate psychic energy states. In fact it did no such thing and just randomly selected wisdoms or parables from its library. Rita knew that was how it worked but she relied on it anyway. After all, she thought, like the I Ching and natural selection and even subatomic particles, randomness had an intelligence too. So when an entry entitled *Feeling Stuck?* appeared on her screen, she read it with due sobriety.

It said this:

We live on a planet rotating so fast that at this very moment you are moving around on its surface at 820 mph. The planet itself, of course, is also revolving around the sun at 66,527 mph and both planet and sun are speeding through

the stellar neighborhood at 43,200 mph. This neighborhood of local stars is whipping around the outer rim of the Milky Way galaxy at 490,000 mph. And the galaxy is careening through space at 180,000 mph along with the other galaxies in our local supercluster, itself traveling at 540,000 mph.

But that is not the end of it.

All of this—supercluster, galaxy, star, planet and, of course, *you* standing there feeling stuck—is blasting from the center of the Big Bang that started the whole tizzy at the dizzying speed of 1,159,000 mph.

Add all that up and what do you get?

The simple fact that a newborn baby will have traveled the equivalent of 60 million miles—two-thirds of the way to the sun—by the end of the very first day of life.

Ever feel like you are going around in circles or just spinning your wheels? You may very well be.

But standing still? That's impossible. No matter how stuck you think you are.

She closed her eyes and tried to sense that movement as the activity of all the people involved in the case. She could track someone to the end of the line, but not all of them. Which one would lead them to the Drakima? Slowly one figure emerged in her fantasy at the center of this imaginary swirl. It was Sylvo Targul. Somehow, she thought, he was the key to everything. On a hunch, she placed a call and instantly her face, digitized and compressed, slipped into the datastream where it was packeted and reconfigured dozens of times, routed, rerouted, and eventually appeared on the incoming call window in the electronic cocoon of Leon Weyerhauser.

In the normal world everyone had a card, which meant that everyone was on the Grid and therefore reachable by everyone else. To block salespeople, scammers, and screwballs, most folks also had guardian programs that analyzed and prioritized incoming calls. Leon, who thought of other human beings largely as a kind of irritating virus, was protected by a fancy ArtAn, an artificial analysis program that only let through a tiny percentage of callers. The program relied on, among many other parameters, facial recognition and emotion analysis. New faces, angry faces, needy faces were all rejected. Familiar faces, important faces, and interesting ones were considered. The faces of beautiful women always got through.

Rita got through and instantly Leon's own face appeared on her card looking like Humpty Dumpty hooked up to some kind of braindrain.

"Yeah, wow!" Leon said, recognizing her from the brief glimpse days before. "I was thinking of calling *you*. Listen, I don't know what the hell you and your boyfriend..."

“Boyfriend?” Rita repeated.

“You know, Enterman.”

“Just friend,” she said quietly, although within that whisper there was the wisp of a notion that that might change.

“No kidding?” Leon said and dreamed of the future, a mere 500,000 years hence by his reckoning, when all humans would be like himself, protoplasm on a spoon, having evolved beyond bodies, mind melding and fucking through the quantum flux. A future, also by his reckoning, in which he and Rita might just have a chance.

“What *about* us?” Rita asked.

“You mean you and me?”

“You were talking about me and Enterman.”

“Oh yeah. I don’t know what you two are up to but I’ve seen the bad boy sheet on this guy Targul. It goes from here to Cignus. He’s a real psychopath this guy. You two had better watch your step.”

“That’s what I was calling you about. Enterman says you can track people and their cards. That true?”

“You bet. But not Targul; he’s invisible. He doesn’t carry a card so he’s not on the Grid.”

“I thought everyone was.”

“Everyone is...except the ones who aren’t. Like celebrities and crooks, people who have their *people* do everything for them. Why don’t you tell me exactly what you two are up to? Looks like you’re searching for something. Something I assume Targul stole since he’s a crook. But what is it? Maybe I can help you.”

Leon did his best trying to sound sincere in his concern even though it was utterly false. He was asking for two reasons and neither of them was worry. First, he was basically a high-tech voyeur and had to know what was going on. And second, he knew that sharing data was the closest he was likely to come to sharing a date with the likes of Rita.

“Did Enterman tell you what we’re doing?”

“No,” Leon confessed.

“Then I can’t either. Can you tell me anything about what Targul has been up to today?”

“No. But his two buddies have been over to a building on Emmons Street a few times. I could get you a list of occupants.”

“No need,” Rita said, her dilemma solved. “Thanks Leon, you’re a sweetheart.”

“I am? Say, I know this is going to sound a little weird but have you ever tried to have...”

But she was gone and his question hung miserably in the air like an unrequited smooch.

*In the moment before waking,
as the clock begins to toll,
a million lights start making,
a Dreamland inside the soul.*

“My Poppa wrote that,” Etta said to Enterman. “He really loved this place.”

She was again reading from the back of one of her photos and showing Enterman a section of the scrapbook that dealt with the third of the great Coney Island amusement parks. Steeplechase had been a magnificent trinket and Luna Park a glorious gem. But the third one was the biggest, the grandest, the most magnificent of them all. Everything under the sun was crowded there onto 60 acres near the sea, with its hot lights, tango dancers, moving pictures, lurid shows, cabarets. All the noise and its implications. The bizarre, the lovely, the amazing. Every form of entertainment known was there for every kind of seeker. It was a living catalog of life in all its confusion, profusion, fusion.

This was Dreamland.

“It was built by a shady state senator named William A. Reynolds in 1904,” Etta said. “My father worked there as a carpenter at first, then later on as a performer and a strongman. That’s where I grew up, Nonny. Can you imagine? My teachers were jugglers and tricksters. My lessons were in water squirts and tight-rope.”

The photos she had of Dreamland showed a vast Hollywood version of Egypt, Rome, and Mars, all rolled into one. Immense limestone monuments with dragons and tall columns dwarfed the crowds. The apotheosis of the ridiculous, it was called. Even in the freeze of the photo, he could detect the exhilaration, the flutter and dither.

“It had everything,” she continued. “Everything you could possibly imagine. The canals of Venice with pumped water, the Swiss Alps with refrigerated air blown in by huge fans. Mr. Reynolds even brought an entire village of Eskimos from Canada to live on a fake ice floe. And there were Filipino tribesmen and samurai warriors too. All on display. In Midget City, three hundred little people lived in a half-scale New York.”

As she talked and turned the pages of her album, the full vision of Dreamland emerged. It was a whole world onto itself—a miniature copy of ours in concrete

and wood—and full of all the same desires and whims. Like spirits lining up for their next brief lives, the visitors came by the hordes to savor each experience. A million electric lights framed these offerings in an otherworldly glow.

“This a picture of an exhibit called Creation,” Etta explained. “It covered 60 centuries of biblical history including the End of The World. Hell Gate here had a vast underground cavern showing the hereafter. I remember this chute with the red paper flames. And the fires of Armageddon twice a day. Once they ran the fires a third time because the Queen of Denmark was visiting. You should have seen it, Nonny.”

“It’s something all right.”

“Mr. Reynolds once told me ‘never underestimate our appetite for tragedy.’ He knew that disasters were a crowd pleaser so he shipped in 600 veterans of the Boer War to restage the great battles in a huge stadium. And there were floods and tornadoes too. Plus a replica of Mt. Pele that erupted every hour.”

“Was it all catastrophes?”

“Oh no, there were good things too. It was all of life, you see. Dr. Couney—he was the inventor of the incubator—set up shop in Dreamland and 7,500 infants were born there. That was actually the most popular exhibit of all. And if you didn’t like that, there were 450 movie halls, and the girlie shows, and all the rides. Fabulous. Fantastic.”

“What happened to all of it?”

“The world changed, Nonny.”

“Was it all torn down?”

“No. On May 27th in 1911 there was another terrible fire there. Of course, there had been ones before in Coney. People always said it was punishment for the sin. But I never believed that. I always thought it was all the gas and electricity. They don’t mix very well. And the fact that it was far from the water pumping stations.”

“And the fire destroyed it?”

“It started at the Hell Gate exhibit in Dreamland. A bucket of hot tar that was used to create the flames of the inferno caught fire. But it was underground and there were vertical airshafts in the ceiling that went all the way up to the street. And they just fanned the flames. Thirty-three fire companies came. The fire lit up the night sky. The animals went stampeding onto Surf Avenue. I chased a horse down the beach. But it was no use. I remember at dawn how dead it all was. Exactly like a crematorium.”

“Was that the end of Dreamland?”

“In a sense it was, because it was a glimpse into the future. We just didn’t know it at the time. You see, it was just before The Great War and soon the whole world was going to burn and with it, a way of thinking, a positive outlook. Then Mr. George Tilyou—the man who built Steeplechase—died. And Thompson of Luna Park went bankrupt. People did not want to see recreated disasters any more. They had real ones.”

“So it was never rebuilt?”

“It was...but it was never the same. Dreamland was rebuilt by 1923 and the people still came. On a summer Sunday by the sea, they still came and paid their money and ate and played. But without the same magic; that was gone forever. Then in 1944 there was another fire. Luna Park was closed two years later. And by 1964 Steeplechase closed. The bell in the tower chimed once for each of the 67 years it had been open. Then, the silence of the surf forever.”

“But there were other parks here.”

“Yes, Astroland in the 1960s. Star City in the 2020s. But the great moment of Coney Island is gone, Nonny. Gone with the past.”

“It’ll come back,” Enterman said. “You said so yourself. There’s talk again about renovating it now.”

“Buildings, yes, and entertainment. Shows. I suppose all that will come back. But not all those lovely people, Nonny. All those families who came to play in the ocean, to eat, to dance. They’re gone forever. All gone.”

A single tear slid down Etta Travers’ cheek, rode the crease at the side of her lips, then dropped off into the thick fabric of her black dress, where it too vanished.

It was true, Enterman thought. All those ghosts like visitors at a wake for the living, untouchable. Not just Isabel but all the others. The last man to leave Hell Gate before the night horn; the fireman who pulled the girl from the flames of Dreamland; that young couple fighting the night wind to walk on the Coney Island beach under the full moon of June. And not just these but the millions, the billions. All the souls who have ever passed through.

All gone.

It was possible to inhabit these losses, he thought, to wander through them endlessly like a funhouse. To lose your way there and linger forever in one spot, transfixed by what you could not see. And too easily, Enterman was snared and trapped by how thoroughly *gone* it all was.

But then an odd thing occurred.

A moment.

It was a moment in which nothing happened. A blink in the universe only. When all the spinning and expanding reached the same pause at the same instant. A space in time. And in that moment, by a kind of thoughtless implosion, Enterman stopped. He stopped looking, seeing, reacting, fidgeting, sensing, wheezing, ranting. Stopped the compulsive storytelling. Stopped grieving. Within that compressed gap, the world turned inside out. And suddenly—quite by an accident of time and space—the clangor of history was on the outside and the silence of the present was within.

Sitting there in Etta Travers' room, no sound to distract him, no screens to occupy him, and with the entire universe momentarily flipped, Enterman was no longer an actor in his own dilemma. Suddenly he was an observer, like a man sitting on a park bench and inspecting every thing that passed by. Little bits of things, morsels of a life. This, that, the other. Quantum particles of the subatomic mind. You could build a whole theory of personality on that, he thought. A kind of micropsychology, beyond the Id, group dynamics, or existential ennui. What we really are is the little events in the memory. The bubbles of experience. A quintillion tiny moments—little nothing-at-alls—that added up to something. A life, maybe.

And the amazing thing was that it was not their sum total that mattered. Not the moral nor the theme. Not the bigger picture. No, it was the moments themselves, the vastness of them. The particularity of them. Know them and you know the person.

Examples: the five-pointed sheriff's badge pinned to the coat with the rough collar scratching his 6 year-old cheek; the smell of her skin just before making love and the soft pale light through the window shade; that red cat with the prickly fur under her chin and the round eyes that his mother had loved; the taste of that spaghetti in the white clam sauce in the restaurant with sawdust on the floor; the darkness in the lecture hall before the digiwall came on that time when the first image was stuck; bay water on the broken toe in Southampton in August; the moment on the hill near the trampoline when he first pressed his fingers into that girl's tender thigh. What was her name?

All things long past, nowhere to be found. Except here in this moment before a thought.

Recipe for a mind: take these tidbits and all the rest, all the junk and the gems, put them in the memory pot and let them steep for a lifetime. Carefully stir. Heat with passion. Add spice. Voila! Now close your eyes and see. Bit by bit, the savory sips: his mother wipes lipstick from his cheek and leaves a damp impression; cowboy boots tight around the calves; smell of honey dripping into hot tea. Touch of

the virtual keyboard as he pecks out a love letter. The brown gloves wet from the rain. Spider on a touchscreen. Bananamush.

You could easily get lost in there. Floundering in the flotsam. That is what was happening to Mama Nostromento after all; she was lost in the soup of her own mind. As he was in his just now with thoughts of Isabel and the way she laughed with all her gums when he called her *bubbie* that time on the white white sheets and the cold sun that day and the wrench in the heart and the letting go with frigid fingers. No, he thought. I will *not* think of that. That was all gone too. Nothing left of it but an article in some archive of traffic fatalities that no one read. All of it. Wisps of half-truths, half forgotten. Lies to live by.

And was there a way to forget the death of those you lived for, he wondered for the thousandth time. Ever a way to forget and live on? And for the thousandth and first time he answered, yes. There had to be. Had to be. Had to.

Then in another moment, as they always do, the moment passed. Time went left and space to the right. The universe twisted into kilter again, back to its usual contortion. And there Enterman was, sitting in the chair, staring at Etta's kindly face. The clock had advanced, proving that eventuality was back and confirming the one-way flow of existence. Enterman inhaled and scratched an itch. He was back in the middle of the ballyhoot with only a vague ringing in the ears from all the din that went before.

It struck him then that memory was all we had. That it was our triumph and our hope. Nostromento was right. To know was to remember. This was what made us what we were, nothing less. But it was also our tragedy. It was also the saddest, most fragile thing in the world. Sadder than forgetting. Sadder even than the passing of the past.

Memory was.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon on just another Tuesday. Nine days after the murder of Tony Bell, twenty-eight days before the winter solstice. A full moon, hidden by the afternoon sun, waited for its glorious moment in the night sky. Planets took their supporting positions. Jupiter twinkled over North America. Ten thousand worlds in the Oort Cloud vied for attention. Dark matter shifted. Gravity tugged. The tides expanded.

Outside on the streets of Brooklyn, a Christmas tree vendor wrapped tight cords around his bushes and fought the wind. The sounds of Nat King Cole's synthed rendition of Silent Night filled the air as a Capsule with a dented fender drove past a puddle and splashed inky goo on a woman waiting to cross the street. Two boys got into a shoving match and one of them dropped his chamelic

paper which had an x-rated picture on it that began to melt. A subway train roared by underground. The traffic light on the street above it changed to red. There was a blown nose, fanfare to the coming cold.

Ordinary life.

And all the while in Coney Island at the edge of the sea, a small band of shees made their preparations. They gathered the old books and candles, the twigs, menhirs, and sacred stones. The ones who were supposed to, shaved their heads. The others made garlands and crowns of herbs. Animal blood, cooked into a purple curd, was mixed with sand and water to create a paint, then applied to ornate tattoos with #2 sable brushes from Art's Art Supply. Leather masks, carved from old shoes and adorned with feathers and buttons, were taken out of their boxes. The bones of the ancients were laid out like new shirts on neatly-made beds.

It was time.

It was the time of Right Remembering...the *Mentia du Alavarus*. And all things were prepared and put in their proper place, waiting for the word, waiting for the sign from the High Mister, that all was well with man and shee and that the ceremony that would cure the world could begin once more.

CHAPTER 7

IN THE REALM OF HELL GATE

Sylvo Targul sat silently at his usual booth and slowly and repeatedly dropped his steak knife into the spot between the first two fingers of his left hand outstretched on the tabletop. The knife missed his skin by hairs but each time the blade hit the wood it made the sound of a bone breaking. Sal watched him with growing anxiety, but when he started to get up Targul shot him a surgical glance that pinned him back down again.

Things were reaching a point of diminishing returns and this was making Targul impatient. He did not like waiting for things to happen. Especially when the delay was caused by other people. In Bucharest one year, in a similar mood, he sliced the throat of a woman who had gotten ahead of him on a milk line, then stepped over her and her screaming child like so much street garbage.

There was a stony silence among the three men as they sat at the booth and waited for Targul to decide what to do next. But even this was clearly making him irritated. He looked at Sal again and this time missed his mark. The knife sliced right into the web of skin between his fingers and blood began to drip onto the table. Targul never flinched, never budged. As though he had no feeling. Willy watched him with admiration, knowing how good it was to ignore pain, how cleansing. Sal, for his part, got ready to bolt as the red pool widened. But to

his surprise, Targul merely grinned and shook his head as though he had reached some kind of epiphany.

“All right,” he said in that agonizingly slow voice that was the sound equivalent of hanging torture. “You two clowns are finished.”

“Finished?” Sal said. “I mean, hey. We done what you axed all along.”

“You done shit.”

“Lookit, Mr. Targul, maybe this thing is gone. Maybe Tony never had it to begin with. Maybe this Enterman guy is full of bull.”

“Are you thinking again, Sal?”

“I’m jess sayin...”

“Cause if you’re wasting my time thinking, Sal, I might change my mind about what to do.”

“I’m not thinking,” Sal shrank.

“He don’t tink,” Willy added, coming to Sal’s aid.

“Good,” Targul said. “Then here is what you do next. You set up a meeting with this Enterman character and me. We’ll meet. And I’ll take it from there.”

“Yeah but...”

Targul looked directly at Sal with absolutely no expression on his face. A dead mask hiding not a trace of humanity inside. That was enough to shut Sal up, not just for the rest of the meeting but for the remainder of the morning. But it was too late. He had gone one ‘yeah but’ beyond his quota. He sensed that something was about to happen but not fast enough and he barely saw the slash coming.

Rita, unaware of all these momentous events happening all around town, was at the kitchen counter in her loft cooking. She sautéed two sliced onions for quite a long time, until they turned dark and sweet. Half a pound of green beans were steaming behind her. Once the beans were soft she put them, along with the onions, into a blender. She added one cup of chopped walnuts. She put a tablespoon of miso mixed with a tablespoon of water into the frying pan that had held the onions, stirred to create a paste, and added that to the blender. She added a pinch of Kava Kava. Finally she chopped it all together until it was smooth, adding a tablespoon of water or two to get the right pasty texture. She chilled it and waited for Enterman to arrive.

“What’s next?” she asked when he came in.

“Mama,” Enterman said. “I want to try talking to her one last time. She’ll be alone tonight.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s the *Mentia du Alavarus*,” he said, overdoing his Boris Karloff. “The Ceremony of Right Remembering.”

“What does it mean?”

“Nostro wouldn’t say too much about it. Very hush-hush. I think it’s got something to do with the Tre Matroni, the three earth mothers of man and shee. Or maybe not. In any case, there are no humans allowed.”

“Good because I’ve got an idea about who we should track when you’re done,” Rita said as she placed her paté in a ceramic bowl along with some whole wheat crackers. Green tea in ergonomic cups on the side. Enterman scooped some of the mush onto a cracker and then into his mouth.

“Chopped liver,” he said. “This is really great. I thought you were vegan.”

“I am. Do you have a gun?”

“A what?”

“Bang bang?” she elaborated.

“No way. Guns make me nervous. Where would I get a gun anyway?”

“Thoreau has one.”

“He does?”

“I don’t like violence either,” Rita said. “But you do have to protect yourself.”

“It’s not the violence that bothers me,” Enterman said. “It’s the mood.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“If I had a gun, there’s a really good chance that I’d blow my brains out on a bad day and regret it the next.”

From a drawer in the kitchen she pulled out a canvas bag with a zipper. She opened it up and took out a pistol which she held up for inspection. It was not one of the new microceramic jobs known as ceraguns with laser spotting but just an old small, black Beretta automatic.

“It’s an antique,” she said. “But it works. Just for emergencies. I’ll show you how to use it.”

“Show me?” Enterman said, taking the gun with due machismo. “I’m a man, it’s genetic. Like baseball.”

“On second thought, you take this one,” Rita said, switching the Beretta with a slightly larger .38 Special from another drawer.

“More impact,” Enterman nodded.

“No, the other one’s automatic. This one is a revolver. With this one, you can only shoot yourself in the foot one shot at a time. You think you can hit what you shoot at?”

“Sure,” he said. “All I have to do is decide what the target is *after* I’ve hit something.”

“These people can be dangerous, Enterman, stop kidding around.”

“I thought they were happy little forest shees?”

“I mean Targul and his friends. They’ve been following us all over and they’ll be around tonight for sure. We have got to be careful. Look,” she said, standing up, taking the pistol back from him, and pointing it at the front door. “Keep a straight arm, support it with your other hand by holding your wrist, look down the barrel. Bend your knees.”

To demonstrate this last part, Rita pulled her skirt up to the top of her thighs in order to take a wider stance. Enterman’s attention was ripped in half by the opposing forces of violence above and sex below. Observing him paying attention with only the sleazy part of his brain, she quickly straightened up.

“Now you try it.”

“Kabamm!” he said with maximum schwarzenegger.

“Okay,” she said. “Maybe we’ll go for strategy instead.”

In the bathroom with the cracked plaster on the ceiling and the perennial water stain under the tub spout, Connie Bell watched herself in the mirror as she untwisted the rollers and combed out her hair. She felt unhappy as always with the sheen, tint, and wave.

“Fuck,” she said, accidentally dropping one of the rollers into the toilet.

A yellow spot at the back of the bowl near the tank reminded her of Tony, who used to miss when he was drunk but never thought it was a big deal. Why should it be? He knew, after all, that Connie would always clean it up. And she always did.

“Double fuck,” she said.

After checking on Annie to make sure the girl was preoccupied with her dolls, Connie climbed to the top of the bedroom closet and pulled a box down from the upper shelf. It was an ordinary cardboard box that had once held a pair of boots. She struggled with it at first but eventually got it in hand and dropped it onto the bed. Collapsing next to it with a grunt, she took the cover off. Inside was a bundle of burlap that she slowly unwrapped to disclose a mummified carcass covered with paint, dirt, and beads. What this dingus had been in life—animal, child, fish or fowl—did not matter. No one knew anymore. All that mattered now was that it had died at the *Kerkas Mundi*, the sacred oak tree at the center of the earth, and was therefore a symbol of rebirth.

Connie was not certain how much of this she believed. Not much for sure. But when she took it out of its wrapping and pressed it like a baby to her breast, she suddenly felt something stir within. A long forgotten heat perhaps or a desire

she never knew she had. It was hard to tell. These feelings did not have words or ideas to clarify them.

After a few minutes, still holding the mummy, she began to rock back and forth on the bed. Slowly at first, then more quickly, and then violently. It was not something she was actually doing, not by choice at least, but it came automatically and easily. And soon her chest was on fire and her throat burned and when she could no longer contain herself, she tilted her head back and opened her mouth and a million years of volcanic roiling erupted. And Connie Bell, who fought to be normal and have all the normal things like love and friendship and shopping in her life in Brooklyn, Connie Bell who dreamed of marrying up and moving to the suburbs and joining a canasta club, suddenly cracked in the heat and from her center burst forth her inner nature like lava. And now she was who she was and had been all along. She was Constantina Bellarosita, great-great-granddaughter of the Darkwood and the Singer of Shadows, the next in line to stand at the gate, and she held the mummy tight and she began to howl, shrieking like a banshee, into the still stillness of the air.

Leon Weyerhauser, catnapping in his chair, failed to notice the slight shimmy on one of his screens as the solar wind caused a momentary interference with the satellite network. At least that was one explanation that the ArtAn system would generate to explain the loss of some data. The ArtAn system, after all, knew all about astrophysics and its relationship to information processing. How atoms jarred microwaves and frizzed bits. How data dissipated into the energy of the world. The laws of particle dynamics. And the way that quantum uncertainty interacted with photons according to relativistic rules. But all this was only one theory.

The effect might just as well have resulted from the earth passing through the mind of *Mummerum* on the twenty-eighth day before the solstice. That made sense too but it was not something either the computers or Leon would have considered. Leon was a trog—a troglodyte—living in an electric cave and following his own inner cycles of sleep and scrutiny. The computer was his hearth. Together they made sense of the universe solely based on the ebb and flow of bits through the pipeline. There was no place there for myth, for legend. The bigger questions of origin and meaning and direction were all outside the cave, where Leon and his system never ventured. Never cared to. Never could go.

And so, through all these fateful affairs and their nudge of the Glob, Leon snoozed in his shell and dreamed of voluptuous women with probing hands and great buckets of olive oil and all the time in the world to wallow in it.

When they got back to Brooklyn, Rita went to Connie Bell's house to check on Annie for the last time and Enterman returned to the Nostromento home where he intended to talk to Mama also for the last time. But he did not get very far. As soon as Rita disappeared around the corner, he found someone blocking his path.

The man standing in front of him was wearing a white mask that covered most of the upper part of his face. His eyes, oily slits in the white gauze, stared Enterman down. He was holding a metallic object in his hand that looked like a knife. It was a stand-off in which Enterman had the next move, so he reached into his pocket and felt around for the gun. But it was upside down and backwards and he could barely figure out where the handle was. Fiddling quickly, he tried to get it in the right position so that he could shoot before he was stabbed. But all this was taking much too long and that allowed the stranger to take a step closer. He could have easily slashed Enterman across the chest and gotten away with it. But he did not because the object he was holding was not a knife. The metal Enterman could see was actually the exposed edge of a titanium endosplint that covered his entire first finger. And the mask turned out to be a mass of bandages covering a seriously broken nose. Enterman could see that the eyes were not even red with rage, they were simply swollen.

"You're a big fuckin pain in my ass," Sal said from under the dressing. "You and that crazy broad of yours."

"You look terrible."

"Don't fuck wit me. I begged the man to let me ice you, the both a you. But he don't wanna do that. So instead of slicing y'guts up for sausage like I want to, I'm here to ask for the pleasure of y'company. Fuckin world."

"What do you want?"

"I told you what *I* want but that'll have to wait. So for now, you just come wit me to see the man. And don't give me no hard time about it neither. Your kung-foo dyke ain't around to protect you."

"What does Targul want to see me for?"

"Fuck should I know? What am I here...the answer man?"

Sal led the way through the side streets of the neighborhood until they came to Coney Island park. Enterman followed him into the remains of Astroland, past the entrance to Star City which was still boarded up pending reconstruction, then across the park and past the Wonder Wheel and the go-karts, to a chain link fence next to the Boardwalk that was locked with a padlock. Sal opened it with a key.

“You go inside and wait,” he said.

“Why here?” Enterman asked.

“Fuck you.”

“Sorry about your nose.”

“Fuck you.”

Inside the fence there was a thick iron construction, like the foot of an abandoned bridge that cast a shadow over the entire enclosure. Even looking up, Enterman could not see the whole structure that loomed above and he had no idea that he was standing at the bottom of the Parachute Jump, the great symbol of old Coney Island. It looked like an inverted Eiffel Tower, visible all the way from Staten Island and maybe even from Idaho on a clear day. The long chains that once lifted the chairs and dropped them below billowing chutes were now tied to the base of the tower. The rivets on the structure had turned red with corrosion. Like so much at Coney, the Jump had been closed for years, then resurrected, then closed again and now stood like a rusting umbrella-works over the park. Still, it was the most familiar ride of all; it was on all the old postcards and in every sim. You could not miss it. That is, unless you were standing directly beneath it.

Enterman was caged inside the security fence that kept people away from the relic. Off to the left, a few yards away, a small kid’s carousel slowly turned. But there were no kids. The hot dog stand was closed. A dead trashcan lay motionless on its side. There was no one else around anywhere.

Then a figure approached from the boardwalk. Enterman watched him take a curving path around a Ring-the Bottle booth, swing by the Loop-A-Loop, then pass swiftly around the tiny carousel. He was wearing an overcoat with the collar up and looked like a black market crook. He had broad shoulders and pointy shoes and was eating chestnuts from a small bag. When he noticed Enterman, he made a beeline for the cage, stopping for a moment beneath a faded sign that read Parachute Jump. Enterman suddenly realized where he was. The bag the man was eating from had the word Chestnuts printed on it. Even the lying trashcan said Trash. How nice that everything is labeled, Enterman thought, hoping for a Targul button on the man’s lapel. There was none but Enterman knew it was him. Knew because this angular figure in black made him feel deeply creepy.

Targul undid the lock on the fence and walked over to Enterman. The gate swinging closed behind him sounded a series of tinny notes. It was all like the setup for a scene from an old spy movie but Enterman was too jittery to remember which.

Up close, Targul was a trim man with a small head, an effect magnified by the overcoat and a prison crewcut. Closer still, Enterman could see that the skin on his face was bad, really bad. A relief map of the Carpathian Mountains with every rock shown. His eyes were cold ravines divided by a scar that ran down the center of his nose from some vicious gang slaughter back in Romania.

"Ever been up in it?" Targul asked, tilting his head to the top of the Jump.

He had no particular accent except for a slight thud on certain letters that hinted at a foreign tongue. And his voice was unusually soft. He spoke flat, with no emotion at all. All of which gave him the charisma of a shovel, the kind they use to dig graves.

"Afraid not," Enterman replied.

"Coney Island is dead now. Not like the old days when all this worked. I came here when this jump was still running. Got a girl to go with me so I could feel her on the way down. Her chest went up due to the drop. Chestnut?"

"No thanks."

"You're younger than I thought."

"It's a habit of mine."

"It's a habit of mine," Targul said with a coarse laugh. "That's funny. The guys told me that you were funny. Now I see what they mean. You're a funny guy. Let's sit down."

Targul guided Enterman over to a bench near the base of the Jump. It was a metal bench, barely wide enough for the two of them, and it was hanging on chains from an overhead bar.

"Sit," he said.

Taking that as a command rather than a suggestion, Enterman squeezed himself in. Targul did too so that they were now very close. Closer even than strangers in a public restroom. To Enterman this meant way too close. He tilted his head back to look up the great height of the structure rising behind them, so as not to seem too familiar.

"It goes up there all right," Targul said. "Way way up. You afraid of heights, Enterman?"

"Not from below."

Targul flapped his fingers in the air as though swatting away a gnat. In fact it was a signal to Sal who was standing near the control box of the ride. Enterman had not noticed him before. Sal threw a switch and the bench the two men were sitting on lurched, then swayed back and forth. There was a clanging sound. And the bench began to rise.

Enterman, reflexes like a mugwort, only then realized that the bench was part of the ride and that they were on it. The chains that held the chair suddenly seemed too rusty for their own good. Or his. But by the time he thought of jumping off, his feet were already dangling too high above the ground.

“This thing still works?” Enterman said.

“Nah, they closed it down for the last time years ago. But they keep it as a symbol. This is just a bench for the workers. They have to keep the whole thing from falling apart. It don’t have chutes no more.”

Suddenly Enterman’s recurrent flying dream came to mind, the one where he suddenly realizes that he is dreaming and decides to soar like a bird. Not by flapping his elbows but by floating up and up until the world below is a miniature landscape, twinkling with lights. Nice dream, sweet dream. Coasting across the rooftops, near a stadium, then over Central Park...

But the reality was nothing like that.

As the street dropped away, Enterman could feel the pulse in his neck fibrillating. The chain fence around the Jump quickly become a dotted line. The tops of buildings along the boardwalk came into view and the few people walking through the streets dwindled to dolls in a wee toyland. Soon the vast stretch of the Atlantic Ocean rose up on the right, its deckled edge like a rip along the shore. Tankers and trawlers appeared at the far edge. The patchy colors of the cold, icy, then freezing sea stretched out to the horizon, all the way to the cliffs of Dover somewhere beyond.

“Is this really necessary?” Enterman asked, realizing that the only reason heights never bothered him before was that he had never actually been up in one.

“Good. My point exactly. You tell me what is necessary,” Targul said.

Like medieval monks illuminating a manuscript, three of his cousins carefully brushed inks onto Gaspara Nostromento’s skin. The outlines for the pictures had already been drawn on his leathery hide with the blood of a first born goat. There were twenty pictures in all, covering every inch of his body and these told the story of the shees from the beginning in the forest at the center of the One Land all the way to the exile in Coney Island. All that was left now was to fill in the colors with paint made from crushed berries and leaves and mixed with the whites of eggs. As his cousins completed this task, three of the women standing at the corners of a triangle around them chanted and stamped their bare feet.

Nostromento tried to keep his mind on the ceremony but thoughts of the murder, of his mother, and of the missing Drakima kept intruding. There were

too many difficulties, he thought, too many things out of place. Troubles all around. What would it mean?

And where was his brother Tontonnio now that they needed him? Where was he? Tontonnio with his swagger and his big laugh and his way of taking charge of everything? Would any of this have happened if he were the High Mister as it was intended? Probably not. And could he, Gaspara, ever fill his big brother's shoes? Probably not.

As his cousins finished the colors on the scene depicting the marriage of Queen Falla and the Wanderer, Nostromento began to wonder—for the first time openly in the silence of his own mind—if this *Mentia* was not the beginning of the end for this cycle of worlds. Somewhere in the Book of Allohar was the story of a curse put on the shees so that, in a time of suffering, the past would intrude on the future and overtake it. Was this that time? Was this that curse? Nostromento blanched at these thoughts but Decienti, sitting on the floor nearby, dismissed them with a gesture of his hand. Keep your mind clear, he seemed to say, unburden your desires. Stop thinking and feel the swirl in the cycle of eventuality. Nostromento tried. He knew such things were not to be imagined, not while the earth was listening.

“I used to hang out here sometimes as a kid,” Targul said, kicking his feet.

“I thought you were from Romania,” Enterman said, simply to keep his mind off the distance from his ass to the sidewalk.

“Yes, my family is. But I lived here for years when I was a boy. I went back to Romania to take care of some business as an adult. But for a while, I was just a kid from Brooklyn. Bad boy. Got in quite a bit of trouble. I was a real J.O.”

“Jerk Off?” Enterman asked, without thinking.

But luckily Targul laughed again.

“Funny guy. J.O. means Juvenile Offender. There was a fellow who was after my girl once. He looked like you. I dropped him off the Wonder Wheel. Then pissed on him from above. What a fucking time.”

“I can imagine.”

Enterman had looped his arm through the back of the chair as a safety. Straight ahead, the projects down near Manhattan Beach loomed over the intervening buildings, then stood stark and alone as he and Targul continued to rise. They were in the land of the seagulls now and as the wind jostled the chair the oxygen dropped. Enterman reached down to make sure the strap holding him in was secure and instantly realized that there was no strap. Underneath his feet was

a long, solid column of emptiness. All the way down. Way down to the ground below.

“No,” Targul said. “I sure wasn’t no angel.”

“Hey, who wants to be?” Enterman said, looking ahead.

“So big deal, so they busted me up and down the line. So what? I been through reform school, work camp, jail, prison, deportation, you name it.”

“I believe it.”

“I pretty much done everything bad that a bad person could do. But I don’t make a federal case of it. I accept it. Do you see where I am going with this?”

“Up?” Enterman said, unable to think of anything else.

“Funny. You’re funny, like they said. What I mean is...I seen and done it all. Everything. So I understand the way things go. You screw up...you screw up. Mistakes happen, I don’t bust my balls. But if there is one thing I cannot tolerate, it’s a fuckup. Do you understand what a fuckup is?”

Targul dropped a chestnut and watched it fall and fall. Enterman did not watch. Instead, he tried to think of subways, graves, deeply rooted trees, anything on the land or lower.

“A fuckup is someone who says he is going to do something and then does not do it. Now take this Tony Bell for instance. He and me, we had a deal. He was going to cop this thing and then we were going to fence it and split the profit. Simple, no?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I mean *not* no. Yes.”

“Good. On top of which, this Tony Bell comes to *me* with the deal. I never even heard of this thing. But he tells me it’s worth my time, so what do I say? I say let us do this thing together. As partners. Now I ask you, is that not a fair deal?”

“Absolutely.”

“Right? Am I right in this matter or not?”

“Very much so.”

Enterman gripped the seat with his other hand too. Though probably only an illusion, the tower of the Jump seemed to be starting to sway with the wind. Enterman gulped down a quart of saliva and tried to focus. Targul, meanwhile, pumped his legs like a kid on a playground swing. And the swing swung.

“Then I find out,” Targul continued, “and this is through a third party mind you, that Tony does not want the deal no more. And he don’t even have the balls to tell me straight. Do you understand? After setting up the whole deal with me,

he suddenly decides that he is in it for himself. And where does that leave me? Where?”

“Hanging?” Enterman suggested

“That’s right. He has decided on his own without consulting with me, his partner, that the thing is worth a lot more money than he thought and the fuck with me. So what does that make him?”

“A fuckup.”

“No, here I have to disagree with you. Ordinarily it would make him the classic fuckup. But he is dealing with me—with Sylvo Targul—in this case. He knows how I do business. So that makes him a *dead* fuckup. Big difference. Do you see what I mean?”

Thinking the question was rhetorical, Enterman didn’t answer. So Targul slapped him on the back to get his attention. The seat bounced wildly as Enterman threw himself backwards to compensate for the motion.

“Do you see?” Targul asked again.

“Son of a bitch!” Enterman said, reeling.

“Exactly. Good. We agree. So now you see why I had to have the mother-fucker cut to ribbons so I could spit on his rotting corpse. You understand that, right?”

The chains holding the chair were creaking as they caught the tailwind of a gale from Canada and began to wobble.

“All right,” Targul said. “That is all done with. Past history. It is the future we got to think of now. So I want you to tell me straight out...do you got it?”

“Me?”

“Do you got the thing?”

“No, I don’t have it.”

“But you know where it is, yes?”

“No. I don’t have it and I don’t know where it is.”

“So you are still looking for it too then.”

“I was.”

“So maybe old man Nostromento has gotten hold of it. Maybe he found out where Tony put it. This is possible, yes?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I see. You don’t think so. So then tell me this...where the fuck is it?”

“No one knows.”

“No one?”

“No.”

“Tony knew. But he did not have it on him. We looked,” Targul said. “So he must have hidden it somewhere, but we been looking everywhere. So far no luck.”

“Me either.”

“Do you know what it looks like?”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

“Not at all. Only Tony knew.”

“We know it is a small thing. Like this big.”

He bent his thumb and first finger into a ring, roughly the size of the Drakima. It was the first time Enterman noticed that Targul was not holding on to anything. He was just sitting on the edge of the seat, gesturing and kicking, as though they were still on the ground. But his bravado did not in any way rub off on Enterman himself.

“I’m not sure, but I think you’re right,” Enterman said. “About that big.”

“I am wondering should I believe you on all this?”

“I wouldn’t lie,” Enterman said, meaning not while hanging by a thread hundreds of feet in the air with a psychopath for a seatmate.

Or maybe it was all a silly mistake, Enterman thought. Maybe Targul had not been convicted of manslaughter. Maybe it was just a typo...a lost apostrophe and a missing space between words. Not actually *manslaughter* at all but *man’s laughter*. Convicted of man’s laughter. All a big silly mistake. Hahaha. Yes.

There was a jolt. They had finally reached the top and there was nowhere else to go. Except down, of course. Enterman saw that contingency right away and looked up, hoping to find a rooftop restaurant with a friendly hostess. Instead he found just what Targul had promised...that there was no parachute attached to the chair. Above them were only the skeletal remains of the ribs that once held the white cloth.

“There’s no parachute,” Enterman said.

“I told you. They took them off years ago.”

“Now what?”

“Now the fun part.”

Targul looked all the way down and grinned maniacally.

“What exactly do you want?” Enterman asked by way of his last request.

“I want that you should keep looking.”

“You mean down there?” Enterman asked, twitching earthwards.

“Funny guy. No, I don’t mean looking down there. I want you should keep looking for the thing.”

"I thought you didn't."

"That was then. Things change. You have to stay flexible."

"I thought you sent Sal and Willy to..."

"You think too much," Targul interrupted. "That is a bad habit you got. From now on, while we got our deal together, I don't want you to think. Just do. It will be much better that way."

"Our deal?"

"The deal is this...you keep looking for this thing. I cannot afford the manpower no more. There are other deals that need my attention. And anyways Sal got hurt on the job, so he is out of commission sort of. So I want you should keep looking and when you do find it, you come to me with it. We'll work something out then."

"What if I don't find it?"

"Don't think negative, that is most people's worst mistake. They think too negative and they mess everything up. Just go ahead and find the thing and make sure you don't be a fuckup about it. You don't tell me one thing and do another. Do you understand what I mean?"

"But I don't think..."

"You see, there you go again! It is just like smoking, bad for your health but very hard to quit. Just find the thing. Hey, did you hear that click? Get ready."

"For what?"

"For the Jump," Targul shouted.

The chair dropped.

It happened so quickly there was hardly time for the heart attack Enterman expected. Instead, he felt the blood rush to his lower eyelids, his ears fall off, and his testicles tickle his tonsils. The rest of the descent was only a blur. At first there were no details at all. Just colors and the whoosh of the wind. But then, all at once, he could see the ground coming up fast. Curbs, hydrants, napkins, pebbles.

Just before the seat could smash to bits, it slowed, then stalled, then stopped. Targul, unmoved, ate his last chestnut from his bag. Then he stood up, dusted some crumbs from his pants, adjusted his collar and said:

"Just bring me the thing. And remember to not make me go looking for you."

Enterman nodded and remained in the chair, waiting patiently for his internal organs to drop back into place.

Mama Nostromento was sitting up in the bed not sure herself if she was emerging from or drifting back into sleep. Enterman walked in smile first but she

did not recognize him because he was mixed up in her mind with many other young men walking in. She thought:

Here's my *Tamitom!* What was I so worried about? I knew he would come. Now he will rub my head and make the ache go away. *Tamitom esse demetesere.* No, this is not Tamitom. Who is this? Tony? Is it my boy Tony? Tontonnio! He come every day. Such a good boy, he look after his Mama. Some day he grow up and make the High Mister for us. So strong, my Tony. He say, Mama don't let go. Mama don't let go, don't let go. Okay, Mama *don't* let go. You tell Mama, you tell Mama everything. You in trouble again, Antonne? You been bad boy again? *Mama senfuscat.* Hide in the bed now, quick on the floor. But you, who are you? I do not know this face. Is this man the *Docator?* He give me needle, it hurt my arm. No more. No more needle, you understand? You are nice man. You got a nice face. Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?

It was clear from her expression that the old woman did not recognize him from his previous visits, Enterman thought. But she did not seem especially agitated either. Drugged probably, or maybe the dementia was getting worse. Her eyes started to close, so he quickly took out his card and brought up some notes he had made to guide him. Carefully, distinctly, he began to read.

"Mrs. Nostromento?"

"Who are you? I don't know you."

"Mama?"

When she did not answer, he repeated it again, but bluntly, like an answer: "Mama."

"Yes?"

"You saw Tony."

"Who, Tony? Sure, sure I see Tony. He a good boy."

"Tony Bell a good boy."

"Tony Bell," she said, thinking about it. "He in trouble again?"

"Yes, he's in trouble," Enterman said. "He's not a good boy."

"My Tony? My Tony's a good boy!"

"No, bad. Tony is bad."

"You don't know. He's a good boy, my Tontonnio. He make the High Mister."

"Never! Not him."

"When he old enough," she insisted.

That was it, Enterman thought. There were two different Tonys! There was Tony Bell—Antonne Bellarosita—the loser wiseguy who had married Mama's granddaughter Connie. And then there was the other Tony—Tontonnio—who

was her other son. Gaspara Nostromento's older brother. Mama was getting them confused...the son who had died too young and the son-in-law who had visited her every day and been murdered.

"Tontonnio Nostromento," Enterman said. "He's a good boy."

"Sure. My Tontonnio. He tell a joke."

"Tontonnio will be High Mister."

"Sure. When he old enough."

"Sure. But what about Tony Bell?"

"Tony?"

"Tony Bell, Mama."

"Who?"

"Antonne Bellarosita. *Ontonah*. He is in trouble."

A light flickered inside her skull and she nodded. Enterman was encouraged and continued.

"Antonne came to visit you," he said.

"He visit me every day. May I have a cigarette?"

Sidetrack. Ignore it.

"Tony had something."

"He didn't have no jacket. You get cold I say to him. But he never listen. He do what he do."

"Antonne had something for you."

"He was in a hurry."

"Antonne had the Drakima."

"*Ontonah*?"

"*Ontonah se enclava tadino*?" he asked. Did Tony hide it?

"Say."

"Say?"

"He say don't. Let go."

Offsides. Penalty. Come back to the center. Try again.

"*Oona degesta se*? Where is it?"

"Where?"

"Did Antonne tell you where it is?"

"Where it is, this place?"

"Did he tell you where he put it?"

"He a good boy."

Too complex. Losing track. Keep it simple. Simple and plain.

"Antonne had the Drakima."

"He did?"

“Antonne put it away.”

“*Say.*”

“Antonne told you.”

“He tell me.”

“He told you where it is.”

“It’s New Jersey.”

“Did Antonne give it to you?”

“Give what?”

“The Drakima. Does Mama have it?”

“Mama...”

“*Mama postrejena se?*”

“Are you a doctor? I got pains in my fingers. You fix?”

No, it was getting too complex again. Normal speech was a mire and Enterman felt himself pushing too hard through it. So what if the fate of all life on earth depended on it? The past, the future, all that crap? He had to slow down. Take it step by step through the holes in her attention. He tried again.

“Tony...Antonne...saw you.”

“When, last week?”

“Antonne saw you.”

“He come every day.”

“Antonne had the Drakima.”

“Yes,” she said, but vaguely.

“Antonne had the Drakima in his hand.”

She looked disturbed, trying to remember something, succeeding and failing in the same flash.

“Antonne gave you the Drakima.”

“A good boy, Tony. Don’t stay out late.”

“Did Antonne give you the Drakima?”

“*Say.* Don’t. Let go, he say.”

“Antonne gave Mama the Drakima.”

“Don’t you worry, I say. You know you can trust your Mama.”

“Of course! Where did he put it?”

“Is Tony here?”

“Antonne gave Mama the Drakima.”

“Don’t. Let go.”

“Mama put Drakima away.”

Enterman pretended to have something in his hand and, doing a theatrical pantomime, acted out tucking something under the mattress.

“Did he put it here?”

She watched him with great interest but did not make any connection.

“You make bed,” she said. “The sheets feel clean and soft. I go to sleep.”

“Antonne put Drakima here,” he said and repeated the action, this time opening the drawer of her night table.

Still no reaction.

“Tony put Drakima here,” Enterman said, pretending to slip something over the upper frame of the window.

Nothing. No response. Not a glimmer.

“Tony gave Drakima to Mama,” he said one more time, and pressed his thumb into her open hand.

“Don’t. Let go,” she said. “I sleep now.”

“Sure,” Enterman said, frustrated. “Go to sleep. Don’t tell me where the *Drakima du Roya* is hidden. Let the universe go all to hell. Why should I care?”

“Room 213,” she muttered, closing her eyelids.

“Room 213?”

“Every day.”

“Is the Drakima still in room 213?”

“Don’t let go, he say.”

“Not to mention that Targul will probably kill me if I don’t find it.”

“Don’t let go, he say.”

“I know. You told me. Like a million fucking times.”

“He come to visit every day. Every day. Every day...”

Just before midnight, Coney Island became a black tableau of angular shapes against a blacker sky. A silver dollar moon hovered over the park, casting long moonshadows on the tar and gravel. The wind blew indigo clouds into the panorama. There was a light mist of rain on the ground that gave these tones a glossy shimmer. Nice night for phantasmia.

Enterman and Rita were walking down the street a few blocks away from the building at 80 Emmons. At Rita’s insistence, they were following Nick Simple who had just left his office and was entering the amusement park. She predicted that of all the men in the clan, Simple was the one to trail. He had Connie Bell’s snake ring, so he must have known Tony; according to Leon he was still meeting with Sal and Willy, so something was up. And he was creepy. Based on this, Rita decided that he was the one most likely to lead them to the Drakima.

Near an abandoned ticket booth, Simple met another man and exchanged a few words. When the two of them continued on together, Rita knew that her

hunch was right. For one thing, meetings at midnight were always suspicious. Moreover, the man Simple met was none other than Sylvo Targul. As the two men walked slowly through the lanes of the amusement park, chatting all the way like old friends, Enterman and Rita followed softly, unseen. Eventually they arrived at the funhouse where Simple opened the door and led Targul inside.

"There's a mystical vibration in the air. Can you feel it?" Rita asked as they waited across the lane under an old freakshow sign advertising the Turtleboy, the Half-Woman Half-Ape, and the Two-Headed Girl: Twice the Fun.

"Must be the D train."

"No, I mean a kind of ancient power. I think this may be a point of confluence."

"It is. The F train stops here too."

"An energy point," she insisted. "A sacred place. Like Stonehenge. Giza. Mount Zion."

"How about we skip the cosmic boojoo and figure out what to do next."

"Nothing," Rita said, disappointed. "Just wait."

The waiting paid off. Others arrived, all vaguely familiar, and disappeared through the door. Frankino Bientiedredon also known as Frank, the man from the carousel. And Tintinay Terrandelius, the somber-faced fellow from the house. Also the two men who had stood as guards a few days before. And the man Enterman had seen sweeping the street one day in front of Astroland, and another wiry little guy from the bumper cars ride, and one who had been rifling through the trash pails on the boardwalk on another day. All faces barely noticed, hardly seen. Peripheral images, easy to overlook. But unavoidable now as one by one they arrived on the scene and disappeared behind the boulder at the funhouse entrance. Once the parade stopped, Rita and Enterman cautiously went in too. They navigated the sloping floor and the cobwebs and the dummy ghosts and found the door that led down into the basement. The underground warehouse was completely dark. From the bottom of the stairs, they could see all the men of the clan in a cluster at the far end of the room, some of them holding laserlanterns. They were silent as they organized themselves and began to move as a group toward a vaulted brick arch on the opposite side of the warehouse.

With great stealth, Rita and Enterman followed them through the arch, then down a long series of burrowing tunnels and accessways and ramps that ran underneath Coney Island and the streets above. There was a hidden world down there, unseen by the surface dwellers. Not on any map or plan. Like a secret brotherhood of moles, the men of the clan led the way silently through the maze of old sewer tunnels, abandoned railway trenches, and stone aqueducts built in

another age and forgotten long ago. The ground beneath their feet went from concrete to brick to stone to mud and right down to the bare earth. Enterman and Rita inched along behind them—not close enough to be seen, not far enough to get lost in the gloom—following the darting lights through entrails of the sub-city.

After twenty minutes, they all emerged from a low hallway barely large enough to squeeze through and into another subterranean chamber. But this second chamber was no mere cellar warehouse. This was an immense underground cavern the size of an entire football field. The dingy walls that enclosed it were fifty feet high. It was the auditorium of a parallel world where vines, roots, and fungus grew. There were even mushrooms growing on the dank floor. And at the center of this vast cave was a wide green inland sea—some kind of toxic waste dump—shimmering bleakly in the haze.

“Where the hell are we?” Rita whispered, trying not to sink into the murk.

“You hit the nail on the head,” Enterman said. “We are in Hell. Or at least someone’s version of it.”

He knew that for a fact. As they crept along the edge of the wall to stay concealed, he could feel the thick planks of wood like railroad ties that held the dirt back. The wood was wet and warped, and anchored to the earth with wooden bungs. Antique engineering. Letters and numerals carved into the planks immortalized the initials and dates of the workers who had built the underground cavern. Every other plank had a rusting cast iron hook for attaching rope.

Enterman knew precisely where they were. And this was no intuition. He had seen it all like a vision right there in Etta Travers’ scrapbook. On one of the post-cards she had saved. The flames of the inferno, Satan at his throne, red devils dancing and poking the fires, hot roasted corn on the cob. The cave they were in was all part of the old exhibit, that park to end all parks. Yowzah, yowzah. There was no doubt about it. It was all that remained of one of the greatest rides at Coney Island, created to recreate the pit of hell and the drama of damnation and all for only a five cent ticket.

For this was Hell Gate, the dark underside of Dreamland.

A workman’s scaffolding, six stories high, stood off to the side behind a wooden column. It was old but newer than the cavern itself and still sturdy. Built perhaps for some more recent renovation. To get out of the mud and get a better view of what was going on, Rita and Enterman climbed it. The sounds of their shoes clanging against the metal echoed throughout the chamber. But the noise

was quickly drowned out by the shees as they began to build a fire near the water and to clear an area around it.

The scaffold reached almost to the ceiling and with great effort they got themselves to the top level where two planks of rotty wood made a handy seat. Like a box at the devil's opera. Enterman had an odd sense of movement on the ceiling directly above their heads but wrote this off as vertigo. Meanwhile, Rita settled in and took out what looked like a high-tech banana.

"It's a darkfield thermoscope," she said, putting it to her eyes and focusing on the group many dank yards away. "Pumps up the photons and let's you see like an owl. Take a look."

Enterman took the glasses from her and pressed his face into the soft cushions around the lenses. The view inside was enlarged and sharp and had a slightly reddish tint. Now in the dark he could clearly make out all the faces of the people standing near the water down below. The scene was unearthly, onyx figures silhouetted against a purple background by the flickering chrome firelight.

They were all there. All the men, forty or more of them, mulling around. After a few moments, they took some objects from a sack and each man put on a majestic headdress of wood and feathers. Some of them also put on elaborate masks that turned their faces into grotesque animals. They were naked from the waist up, their lean bodies covered with paint or mud or leaves. A few had stone necklaces, others held tambourines. Nostromento himself was stripped to the waist and Enterman could see that his body was completely covered with tattoos.

They were using this cavern, this ancient remnant of old Dreamland, as a *sid*, Enterman thought, a sacred site. Then something icky dropped onto Enterman's shoulder. He flicked it off and refocused the lenses.

When they had cleared the area of debris, the men gathered near the fire as it burned at the shore of the inland lake. Behind them, at the edge of the muck, was a large object that must have been built on the spot since it was far too big to have been hauled in. It looked like a fairytale tree that had grown into the form of a man. In fact, it was not a real tree. It was a sculpture in vine and branch that had been trimmed and shaped into the outline of a human being with outstretched arms and legs. A crude topiary to be used as some kind of effigy...a twigman mounted on two small floats that rocked as the tidal foam came and went.

As Enterman and Rita took turns with the scope and watched from their high perch, the group in the mud below played out a bizarre ritual around the fire. They were chanting and dancing and prancing and tossing fluids into the flame to make it flash in different hues. Then with a signal from Nostromento, all the men suddenly took positions at equal distances around the fire, facing away from

it. They stood stiffly and closed their eyes. Their hands were up and open in front of them, fingers together except for the thumb and pinky sticking out. There was an eerie deadness as they stood in this ritual pose, still and silent. Rita sensed a power there that touched her deeply, all the way down in her vitality. A rhythm being adjusted. The phasing of the moon, the expansion of the tide, zigzagging of the outer planets, cry of the dolphin somewhere out to sea. Her period kicked in and she sensed that something ancient waiting to be awoken was stirring. She shuddered from the forces being funneled.

Enterman sensed it too but only through the filter of his suspicions. As something far more obvious and more sinister...the power of any people in a gathering, the lens of group synergy. Like a brainstorming session among scientists or a chance encounter at a cocktail party. A decision in a bunker. He shuddered too and pulled up his collar against a cold wind that did not blow.

Then something changed. Rita had taken the scope back and was looking through it when she saw what happened. The men in the group had just opened their mouths, round as moons. They tilted their heads back, bent their knees, set themselves for the next move.

“What’s going on?” Enterman asked.

“Listen,” she said.

The sound rose up softly at first, barely louder than an empty echo. But it grew and grew. It sounded disjointed at the start, a mere noise forming. But soon the din collapsed into a single tone. The grave choir had found its voice. It was not a melody but a rhythmic cadence, midway between a chant and a howl. The vast cavern caught the sound wave and bounced it holophonically until it threatened to burst the walls. Pressure in the air gave Rita a headache and she grabbed her temples. The thick glass of the scope did not shatter from the sound but it might have.

Three of the men broke the circle and carried a chair to the edge of the water. It was an ordinary wooden chair but sitting on it was a small boy, covered with white ash and wearing a crown of white feathers. The boy was smoking a large cigar and grinning as he watched the proceedings like a mogul at a matinee. Then Gaspara Nostromento put on a crown of twigs and leaves and turned towards the fire. He looked like the King of the Mudmen in an ecstatic trance as he picked up a drum and a sprig and held it over the fire. He began to chant.

*“Indie este Sexarbor
Rominutus el Robur.”*

One by one each of the others formed a new ring around him and chanted along with him.

*“Abnoba pater in disendi
Dis pater maludori du vivendi.”*

Keeping their precise distances from each other, they began to circle the fire. At the far point of this formation they had to step through the green swamp to complete their rounds, which meant tracking through a slimy goop. But they did not seem to care. From a pile of objects that encircled the blaze—mere trash and discards strewn all around—each man in turn bent down, picked something up from the pile, and threw it into the fire which erupted into a red column. Decenti, the old man from the niche, who was having difficulty walking with two canes, struggled to do it nonetheless. On one round, he picked up a bag and tossed it into the fire. Enterman thought he heard a screech.

“What’s going on?” Rita asked, trying to pry the scope away from him.

“I think we’re up to your basic chicken sacrifice,” Enterman said.

“That’s disgusting,” she said.

“Maybe it was a cooked chicken,” he offered.

And round and round they walked. Circling and chanting and tossing. Bobbing their heads, spinning in place, clambering low like apes, then stiff like zombies. Enterman would have laughed but he would have been alone in it. There were no guffaws, no horsing around, no lodge meeting humor. Whatever they were doing, it was serious as hell to them. Rita was solemn as well. It seemed that no one was taking it all in with the zillion grains of salt that he was.

A gong sounded and echoed demonically in the vast recesses of the cavern. The sound was the precise pitch to awaken the sleeping inhabitants of the ceiling of the cave. Rita and Enterman were so transfixed that they did not notice the change at first. It began with a vague rushing sound, like hairs bristling. Then the ceiling began to heave above them. Finally the air became thick and stinky. And a choking smell filled their lungs.

Now Enterman could see what he had only sensed before. That the ceiling was alive; a plague of flying spiders left their nests and took to the air. Like locusts they swarmed through the cavern, a huge dense dark cloud of spindly legs and spiny antennas. Enterman and Rita buried themselves in each other and tried not to let the spiders inching through their hair force them to give up their position. The outburst lasted minutes that seemed more like the final days. They could feel the insects pinging up against them as they swarmed, searching them for food, probing, creepycrawling. Rita quickly realized that she did have one phobia after all and tried not to scream. Enterman cursed Thoreau for getting him into this, simply as a distraction from the bugs.

The shees too had seen the swarm and waited for it to subside. It took ten minutes for the frenzy to abate, the black cloud slowly dissolving. As the spiders calmed down and settled back into their nests, the men of the clan took up their fetishes and continued with their ceremony at the rim of the underworld lake. Again Nostromento led the chant:

*“Assintimastos no luro ment
Retrieda Fagus per contallidient.”*

The men broke off from the circle and formed a rhumba line to the twigman. Nostromento was at the head of it and holding a burning torch taken from the fire. He stood before the twigman and held the fiery stick up in front of it. Someone placed a long cape made of matted loam over his shoulders. He shouted a few words as he stood holding the torch, then touched it to the foot of the tree. The flames caught quickly and began to climb up the vines of the statue.

*“A Dis Pater, a tre matroni
Par humana briare al yol incatervoni.”*

All the men put their hands on the burning wickerman and gave it a good solid push. It was heavy and a few of them fell into the water from the effort. But after a few tries they were able to muscle it into position and the man of twigs began to float slowly into the misty sea. One of the men caught a flame on his pants and had to roll on the ground to put it out. Soon the inner tide had lifted the pontoons and was carrying the figure out into the middle of the water. The men in the group lined up along the edge and chanted:

*“Mento, menta! Alavadero!
Deventuk ratius! Quintell adero!”*

Oil or grease or waste on top of the water caught fire too as the twigman slowly bobbed in the gloom. Enterman tapped the focus on the scope and zoomed in on it but he could not believe what he saw. So he refocused, rezoomed, relooked. And still could believe it.

*“Alavadero! Alavadere!
Mentio fortatso eternitere!”*

At the front of this man of twigs, in a gap in the vines just where the two arms branched out and now surrounded by the flames, there was a face. A real face not a mask. The face of a real man. Enterman looked again but there was no denying it. He could clearly make out the two glaring eyes, the mouth frozen into a horrific scream. He could not hear it, the chanting overwhelmed it, but he could easily imagine the shriek of the person trapped in the burning twigman as he floated out into the ravenwing deadness to be scorched, drenched, then consumed by the toxic ocean.

It was Sylvo Targul.

Impossible, Enterman thought. He looked into the wrong end of the scope hoping to find the cause of the illusion. But there was nothing. Watching him and thinking that he had gone daft, Rita took the scope back. But when she looked she saw it too and knew that what they were watching was not some thrilling rite of passage, not some documentary on a quaint religious practice. And not just a sprightly dance around a warm fire in an underground cave.

This was a human sacrifice.

"My god, it's Targul," Rita gasped.

"I know," Enterman said.

"That's murder," she protested.

"No," Enterman said. "It's justice."

Within a half an hour and after another round of dances and chants, the entire event was over. As the fire consumed the pontoons, the charred wreck of the twigman with its cremated occupant sank into the water. A plume of steam rose into the air where the inner ocean devoured the ashes. The chanting stopped. The masks and headdresses were removed. The fire on the mud floor was extinguished and the laserlanterns were turned off. The handful of shees were once again a bunch of nobodies in the middle of nowhere doing nothing much at all.

They seemed to have no great urge to leave, an attitude not shared by Enterman and Rita on their perch near the spiders. But they could not descend the tower without alerting the ones below to their presence. Enterman noticed that the scaffold was near a high ledge at the top of the cavern wall. It was some sort of antique accessway. He climbed up onto it and began to grope around in the dark with his hands. It was all slimy there and he could feel the spiders skittering over his skin. When one of them jumped and landed on his face, he slipped and gasped. The sound echoed everywhere. But the group all the way down on the ground did not seem to hear it as they continued to mull about.

"What are you doing?" Rita whispered.

"Looking for an opening."

"What makes you think there is one?"

"She said it had airshafts."

"Who said?"

"Etta. She said the airshafts went all the way up to the street and that they made the fire worse."

"What fire?"

Suddenly his hand slipped into a hole as the surface of the ceiling gave way. There was an opening all right. It was just large enough for him to fit through, like the entrance to an attic. He reached up and felt around above the opening where he discovered the surface of another floor. He squeezed up through it and found himself in another dank room.

"It's a way out," he said back into the hole.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Etta told me about it."

"Who the hell is Etta?"

"Never mind. Come on. This must eventually lead up to the street."

The room he was now standing in was another empty underground chamber, much smaller than the cavern but just as cruddy. A faint light coming from somewhere above it illuminated a flight of stairs at the far end of the room. Enterman kneeled on the grimy floor, reached back down through the hole and grabbed Rita by the arm. He started to pull her up. Holding onto him with one hand, Rita jumped up from the ledge and grabbed the frame of the opening with the other. More spiders dropped onto her face but she tried to pretend they were snowflakes. The fantasy did not really work and when one of them landed on her lips, she shook her head in disgust. That motion tilted her bag and something dropped out, bouncing off the ledge and clanging against the metal of the scaffold. They stopped to see if it was heard by anyone else.

It was.

Like opening night at the theater, dozens of light beams began to search the ceiling. At first, Rita was hidden by the planks of the scaffold and could not be seen. But as the shees moved around below to get a better view, the lights eventually fixed on her form dangling from a hole in the roof. There was a commotion down below, more lights, more frenzy.

And then a shot rang out.

"Shit!" Rita said, struggling to pull herself through the hole. "Don't let go!"

Don't let go, Enterman thought?

"Keep pulling," she said, swinging and scrambling. "Don't let go!"

And for the second time that phrase boinged in his head.

Don't let go!

Of course...that was it!

Don't let go.

But he did.

As he felt her hand slip from his, he quickly grabbed her under the armpit and tugged with all his might. There were more shots, echoing through the cavern.

The spiders took flight again, obscuring the lower half of her body as she dangled and giving them a few more seconds of cover. Enterman heaved one last big ho and finally pulled Rita through. He grabbed her hand as they stood up and raced for the stairs.

"I'm an idiot," he said.

"Not at all," she said. "There's nothing as thrilling as being shot at and missed."

"I don't mean that," he said. "I mean the Drakima. It's been right there in front of me all the time."

"It has?"

"When we get out of here, get the car and meet me in front of Nostro's house in twenty minutes."

"And you?"

"I'm going to get the Drakima."

"You know where it is?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"You just told me."

"What did I say?"

"You said...don't let go."

Enterman was positive that he was being chased all the way to the house. But he could not say for sure since he did not turn around to look. There was no time for that. He had no doubt that they would kill him if they caught him and Rita too. They were both outsiders, rite crashers, mere humans in the midst. The only way he could protect both of them was to have something to bargain with. Something to trade. The Drakima fit the bill perfectly.

He was also certain that he knew where it was and that in a few minutes—if they did not catch up with him first—he would have it. He could practically feel it in his hand as he rounded the corner near the old mansion. His intuition about Mama had been right all along but he had not followed it to its logical conclusion. Tony visited her because he trusted her. She was the only person he *could* trust. Of course he had given the Drakima to her to hold for him since he knew she would never give it up. She would never give it to anyone but him. She couldn't. Because she thought he was her dead son Tontonnio and would never harm him. Because she was a banshee and above deception. Because she was too ill to trick him. But above all, because she was too damn stubborn to do anything else.

She had it the whole time. That is what she was trying to say to Enterman all along in her own muddled way. With those same three words Rita shouted at him but with a slight change of emphasis.

Don't let go.

She had said it every time Enterman touched her. But her accent and her dementia had given it a different meaning. He thought that she was complaining about being touched, imploring him to leave her alone. He thought she was saying, "Don't! Let go!"

But that was not it. What she was saying was not a protest at all. It was an instruction. It was exactly what Tony said to her when he gave her the Drakima. He said, "don't let go."

Mama, don't let go.

And in spite of everything—the confusion of forgetting and the tyranny of remembering—she was determined to do what he said.

To not let go of the Drakima.

The front door to the mansion was open when Enterman raced up to it. From a position at the top of the stoop he could see men running towards the house a few blocks away. There was no time to dawdle and so he ran inside. In the library on the first floor of the house, the women of the clan were gathered. They were sitting on the floor around a pile of stones, all dressed in green veils covered with leaves, chanting their own strange hymn. He did not stop there for a blessing.

In the first room at the top of the stairs, two men were sitting back to back in chairs. They were bound together at the elbows with duct tape and surrounded by a circle of dead headless pigeons. They looked groggily at Enterman as he stopped at the door. It was Sal and Willy. He did not pause for a chitchat.

At the doorway to Mama's room at the end of the hall, the wailing met him like a hello punch. She was in the throes of one of her banshee agonies, her head rolling from side to side, her good hand clenching the sheets. The splintering wail poured from her open mouth in waves.

Enterman, his heart thumping, fought the sound like a gale wind and pressed over to the bed. He sat down and tried to calm her by stroking her arm, talking gently. Soon the cry began to lighten and fade. Her breathing evened out and her face relaxed. The wailing stopped. Her eyes were closed. Enterman leaned over and touched her left hand, the palsied hand that he had always seen clenched into a spastic fist.

"You can let go now, Mama," he said.

But she did not answer.

"It's all right, Mama," he said calmly, "you can let go."

“Yes? Is all right?” she muttered.

“Yes,” Enterman said. “It’s me, Mama. It’s Tony.”

“My boy Tony?”

Her eyes were barely open, there was dry spittle at the corners of her mouth. She moaned once.

“It’s *Ontonah*, Mama,” Enterman said. “You can let go now.”

“Don’t let go,” she said.

“I’m safe now. No one can hurt me.”

“Yes?”

“You don’t have to protect me anymore.”

“*Essu Dedess?*”

“Yes,” Enterman said. “*Igo dedess*. I’m in *Berugua Vapor De*.”

“Ah, *bolleto*.”

“I’m safe now. Let go now, Mama. It’s time to let go.”

He began to stroke the fingers of her closed fist very gently.

“Don’t. Let go,” she said, but her voice was weakening.

“It’s okay,” Enterman said. “It’s your boy Tony. You can let go.”

“*Say?*”

“Yes, let go Mama. *Say*. It’s time.”

The tension seemed to slip from her and her face softened. Even the palsy gave up its grip. She opened her eyes and Enterman saw relief in them. A kind of solace.

“Let go, Mama,” Enterman said.

She did.

The knuckles on her left hand flattened. The tendons on the back vanished. The fingers went from white to pink. The fist rolled over and opened. Inside, like an egg in a fleshy nest, was a shiny silver disc.

The Drakima.

Enterman thanked her as he took it but she did not hear him. In the moment between waiting and wondering, between holding on and giving up, in the pause between cries, she had slipped away. Mama Nostromento, who called for all those who passed through, had stepped through the gate herself. *Ela dedess*. And just like that, the banshee was gone.

Enterman did not know this woman lying there with closed eyes. She was a stranger to him. No one of importance. Who was she after all...a banshee, an old woman, a neurovirus patient? These were just facts. He knew nothing of her really and she meant nothing to him. But he felt the echo of her stillness reverberate inside himself. Common chords sounded there and he leaned over and kissed

her cheek. Not just for her but for himself. And for Isabel and for his own mother and for all those ghosts, those Steeplechasers and the seekers after beer and electricity. The bathers, the breathers, the botherers. For all the lovers and wives and sons and mamas who must one day let go. For all them he kissed her and touched her hand for one last time.

Gaspara Nostromento, emerging from the funhouse, felt an ache in his heart and remembered his mother's white skirts. He grabbed his chest and considered that the doctors were about to be proved right after all. But the sensation quickly passed and was replaced by a lull, as though all the honored souls that surrounded him were holding their breath at the same time. Decienti, walking behind him with help from Tintinay, felt it too. They all did. Nostromento faced away from the moon and saw his own blue shadow on the ground. He held his knotty hands up with the palms forward, as if to touch the dead air and gain strength from it.

Mama was gone, they knew it without thinking, without talking.

End of an era, beginning of the next.

The new iteration was at hand.

Solunnia.

The most interesting thing about the coin that Enterman held in his fingers had nothing to do with the weight or shine or diameter. Those measures were predictable: it was about the size of an egg yolk; it felt vaguely heavy; and it looked just like the picture Ellwood Font had shown him. No, the most interesting thing about it was something else entirely. Enterman studied this for a long time. He mulled over it, full of doubt at first, but his confidence slowly bloomed into conviction. It was hard to accept that the emerging fact was true because it required a faith in good luck which Enterman did not have. Nonetheless, after careful deliberation, he had to accept it. The simple fact was that no one in the entire clan knew what the Drakima looked like.

He bounced and flipped the coin in his palm. It was almost too good to be true, he thought. He could give Nostromento any coin and no one would know the difference because no one had ever seen it. No one was ever supposed to see it. At least until the boy became High Mister years from now. And how would *he* know what the coin was supposed to look like? Enterman could hand over a fake or a substitute or the Susan B. Anthony Silver Dollar he had been given by his father. No one in the whole wide world would question it. And who was to say that a nice shiny silver dollar was not an even better Sign of the Shees? Or a token from the old New York City subway system a more legitimate talisman? It was all

a bunch of hogwash anyway. Creaky myths and fables. Not something Enterman had a stake in one way or the other.

But a priceless Agrigentum dekadrachm...that was another matter entirely. And the more he thought about it, the more he thought about it. It was perfect. He could slip a fake into Nostro's little box, wait a few months for the furor to die down, cash in the coin. Then buy his own home, his own clothes, his own car. In effect, buy his own life back. It was perfect.

Too perfect.

Which is why no one was more astounded than Enterman himself as he stood before Nostromento the next morning and solemnly handed him the *Drakima du Roya*. The real one. The one he had taken from Mama's fist. Nostromento accepted the coin with great bearded reverence. He never even glanced at it as he put it in its case, closed the box, and handed it over to Decienti. Yet he breathed a grand sigh of relief for all his ancestors past and descendants still to come, for the future of man and shee, and for destiny itself.

Enterman sighed too as he watched the coin disappear under the shadow of the lid. He shook his head and scratched his ear and could not figure out why he had decided to give it to Nostromento. Perhaps, he thought, it was the wrong time to anger the gods...assuming that there were any and that they got angry or even cared about such dumb matters. Or perhaps it was his sense of duty, of promises made and kept. Or the notion that everything should be in its right place or there would be hell to pay because the world was out to get him and would look for any excuse to do so. In which case, he would have spent his whole filthy rich existence waiting for a calamity to redress the balance because that was the way he knew things worked. And that simply was not worth it.

"It is good," Nostromento said, taking Enterman's hand. "You have helped us just as you promised you would. Certain other things can be overlooked because of it."

"Nothing to it," Enterman said. "We've all had to make tough decisions."

"What I have done, I have done only for the clan," Nostromento said. "Is it wrong to think of your family above all else? Am I a wrongful individual?"

"I just solve mysteries," Enterman said, rather jauntily. "I don't judge them."

"Nonetheless we wish to repay you, Enterman."

"If you insist," Enterman said pleasantly, with the fey smile of bank teller.

"We shall help you as I have promised to do. As for the Drakima, it will go into the vault for six years and then be passed on to my nephew. He will find us a new sign. He is a smart boy. He will take us into the next period of the world. I

am certain it will be a time of great difficulty, well worth foretelling. But a time of great hope also.”

“I’m sorry about your mother,” Enterman said.

“There is no need. We do not see death in the same way as you do. She is in a more perfect place now and her suffering is over. It is the time for a new banshee to take her place. This has been decided. Long long ago.”

“A new banshee? Anyone I know?”

“Yes. It is Constantina Bellarosita.”

“Connie Bell?” Enterman laughed. “She’s going to be the new banshee?”

“In time she will accept her destiny as we all must.”

“Tell her that Nick Simple has her good luck ring. She’s going to need it.”

“I will,” Nostromento said, leading Enterman out of the library by the arm. “As for you, I ask you to return here tonight at midnight. It is time to repay favors.”

The work in Brooklyn was done. The shees had their coin back, the man behind the murder had been duly murdered, and Sal and Willy were back in state custody. Enterman, free of all commitments to it, had no particular reason to stay there. He would return at midnight and let Nostromento return the favor, but that really was of no consequence. The story was done, the little drama over. Still, there was nothing particularly tragic about the ending. Leaving Brooklyn, after all, was no opera. It was more like an ad jingle. Enterman hummed it as he considered that there was one last stop he knew that he had to make and that it was not an easy one. Rita was driving him there in the Bentley and took his silence for regret.

“You did the right thing,” Rita said.

“I just gave away a fortune to a deluded lunatic.”

“Maybe he’s not.”

“Believe me, if there was ever a case of a deluded lunatic, that case is this case.”

“Maybe the world would have ended today if you hadn’t returned the coin. You don’t know. Everyone’s responsible for something, for some small piece of the universe. You did the right thing.”

“I’m so glad,” he cracked. “Make a left here. I have one more right thing to do.”

Following his directions, Rita pulled up in front of the Central Borough Care Center and waited while he went inside. The facility looked just as it had the first time he visited...dullish and drab. Etta Travers was sitting in her glidechair facing the door to her room as though waiting for his arrival.

“Etta,” he began just as he had practiced it, “I have to go away.”

“Go away? You mean on another business trip?”

“I mean, there won’t be any reason for me to come back to Brooklyn after today.”

“But why?”

“Mrs. Travers,” he said tensely, “I’m not exactly...”

“We have so much to talk about.”

“Yes, but you see, I am not exactly who you think I am.”

“Who is?”

“No, what I mean is that I’m not this young man you think...”

“Oh that,” she said. “Don’t worry, Nonny. I know.”

He tried again:

“I’m not the person you...I’m not this person you call...”

“I know you’re not,” she interrupted.

Her smile was tweaked at the corners as though she felt sorry for him. Caught off guard, Enterman stood there like a lump and fumbled.

“Listen to me,” she continued. “Life is short. There is only time to live, not dwell on the past. Believe me, I am old enough to know that very well. All these photos and memories we’ve been looking at...no one cares about them any more. Why should they, it isn’t their concern. But to me, the events of a summer evening in 1917 are as important as this morning’s news. At my age, that’s all I’ve got.”

“Yes, I know. But you see I’m actually...”

“You are a kind man. Willing to play a little game with me. To listen to my sweet lies and to help me remember. To make these memories vivid once more. You have helped to remind me that I lived once, was admired once, even loved once. And I appreciate that very much, my young friend. It was very nice of you to play along with me.”

“You knew all along that I wasn’t Nonny?”

“Of course I knew. I’m not senile.”

“But then why did you pretend I was?”

“There is no Nonny really. Nonny was a wish I had once. A wish you were nice enough to grant me. He was a boy I saw strolling on the boardwalk a long time ago. Very kind but also rather bitter. Very much like you. Maybe I never even knew his real name. To tell you the truth, I don’t remember any more. He was probably married and had loads of children. Over the years I used to think of him from time to time, imagine what his life was like. What he might have said

to me. What might have happened. But who knows, maybe he was a skunk. It doesn't matter."

She was waving him over to her with a cupped hand. It was the way she always indicated that she had something important to say. Enterman followed the gesture and put his ear next to her lips.

"Listen," she said. "I'll tell you a secret, just as my Poppa told me. Three little words. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Closer," she said, holding his arm.

"Okay."

"Revel in your time."

"That's four words," Enterman protested.

"All the better!" she said, releasing him. "Now if you'll excuse me, I think I have to take a nap."

At the doorway he looked back to find her still watching him through the warping lenses of her glasses.

"Wednesday is going to be a good day for me to have visitors," she said. "They're starting to have bingo here on Wednesdays. And I hate bingo. I hope Wednesday is a good day for you, Nonny."

"I won't even be in Brooklyn."

"Ever?"

"No, but..."

"For how long then?"

"I don't know."

"So you *could* come back."

"Yes, I guess so."

"Then Wednesdays. When you get back."

"Yup," Enterman said. "Wednesdays will be just fine. Perfect."

For a long time Enterman did not notice that it had worked. He went about his business. He held the cool handle of a fork between his fingers and thought of the previous holder whose name was Rasmussen and had twins and worked in insurance, just as Rita touched his hand gently but suggestively to get his attention back. He cleaned his teeth and noticed that the Ultrafloss was fading and that it was time to get a new one. He threw fourteen beans and saw a glimmer of the pattern that he might grasp with just a bit more practice. He watched a piece of chamelic paper soar like a hawk over the water tower on the next roof and presumed that it descended to the street and smacked some lumpy girl who thought

she would need robolipo before she could fall in love. He passed through the screens of the Glob and let the sights and sounds bobble him. In other words, it all seemed just like life as usual. The world going on as before.

But it was not.

The ritual had changed everything.

Enterman did not remember much of his private rite with the shees. It was almost as if he had been hypnotized to forget everything. In a distant vision he could see an empty room somewhere in the mansion, the men of the clan standing around him, the laying on of hands. He recalled a circling motion, a rhythmic chant, while he told the entire story of his life from the beginning and through all the difficulties. He had screamed in rage at some parts, cried at others and even laughed, as he told them all about being a boy and then a young man and then losing a young wife in a car accident after only two years together. These among many other things. And all the while they shouted and jumped around him, drank their milk, placed berries in his toes, and whacked him with leafy branches. When dawn came, drenched in sweat, feeling dizzy and exhausted, he had been led back out onto the streets of Brooklyn and sent home.

In fact, they had done just what Nostromento promised they would do. They thought the thoughts that would help Enterman remember best. They called on the spirits of the earth to heal his past and they sang his praisesong and they danced for his foretelling. Then they said *dombenne* which meant "so be it, it is done."

Enterman did not even notice the change for weeks. It was a subtle switch, slim as a wish, but his life was different thereafter. Not in any big way; there were no talking bushes, no thundering mountains. No visions of worlds inside worlds. No leap of faith. But in a small way it all changed. So small, in fact, that it could have been mistaken for no change at all.

He simply began to tell himself a softer story, to see things in a better manner. The pattern of his thoughts shifted a few tones to the light as he found himself thinking of the good times with Isabel. The nice memories. Or even not thinking about it at all. And in this quiet way *the thing* that had plagued him for so long became just another thing and he quietly began trusting in the rightness of life going on. He started to assume that he was where he should be in the here and now. He thought about teaching again. And was fascinated by the fact that Rita St. John was just as fascinating as he thought all along.

All this simply because his past had been foretold.

Was it Nostromento's doing? The shees? Their ceremony in the night? Or was it just the passing of time...a natural healing process? That was hard to say. And

in the end, it did not really matter. It was a Black Mariah, a mystery that may or may not be solved. Yet one morning, in spite of himself, Enterman woke up thinking better things, appreciating more, suffering less. The anger he had needed so much had passed. And there were new plans, new friends, new ideas. He barely noticed the change himself. He simply lived it.

And either way—magic or fact—the effect was exactly the same.

Solunnia!

As it was supposed to be.

Her name is Mama Nostromento and someone close to her has been murdered. She may be the only one who knows why. But the truth is locked inside her mind, lost in a tangle of thoughts as a neurovirus ravages her memory.

Enterman, expert in intuition and reluctant investigator of strange events, is called in to find the answer and Rita St. John, a beautiful and very uncommon bodyguard, is there to protect him.

It is 2050 and the worldwide communications net known as the Glob ties everyone together. But can all the technology of the near future, instant information at the merest whisper, help them to solve this mystery before time runs out?

The answer lies in a secret world, hidden from outsiders, under the ruins of old Coney Island. It is a world of mythic forces and dark rituals that threatens to overpower even the latest high-tech wizardry. Because Mama Nostromento is no ordinary witness; she is a banshee, gatekeeper for the dead.

Alan Robbins is an award-winning writer, graphic artist, and teacher. He is the author of numerous mystery, puzzle, and humor books.

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