CALLING UP THE DEAD

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<u>Calling Up the Dead</u> is a collection of seven short stories which all take place over the final hours of December 31, 1999 and the first few hours of January 1, 2000. The themes of time, history, and the reactions toward the new millennium (positive, negative, indifferent) of a variety of cultures are addressed. Each of the six major continents has a story, along with its cultural perspective, delivered by narrators both young and old—three female, three male and one balcony.

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PREFACE: TEMPUS VINCIT TEMPUS

In 1915, the Austrian Alfred Wegener proposed the theory of plate tectonics; the earth's continents, he explained, were not stationary but moved according to the temperament of the mantle upon which they lay. Indeed, Wegener assumed that at one time all of the continents were alloyed and formed the great land mass Pangaea. And over the last several hundred million years, these continents, which had spawned a series of "progressed" beings, had ever so slowly been distancing themselves (Tarling 6-7).

Is this not evidence enough, some might argue, for the inevitable drifting which humankind has experienced, where peoples are at war constantly and those that are not at war either seek to make war, prepare for war, or, the worst possible, shudder at the thought that they might somehow be content. "Content" is both a well and poorly chosen word in this instance: on the bright side, it conjures up (not only the obvious—content, meaning that which possesses quiddity) a certain satiety of society, a place where sufficiency is found and a place where one might wish to hang one's hat. However, the word "content" is but a few "iou-s" from "contentious" which Webster defines as, "exhibiting an often perverse and wearisome tendency to quarrels and disputes" (Webster 283). Such a definition, I might add, far from being passionless, as surely all dictionaries should be if they are to contain at least an estimation of truth, appears to have even been affected by the word [note the word "wearisome"]. In fact, the dictionary does seem to reflect a parental air with its, "Will you please stop doing that" attitude. The world rests on an unstable foundation, and as any surveyor, chartered or not, knows foundational problems are the very worst—no "quickfixes" are available.

And such a realization, of course, is reflected as the millennium approaches at such an alarmist rate, prompting "millennial anxiety." Exemplary of this, is the proliferation of "millennium countdown clocks." Our own US Post Office, here in Denton, Texas, owns such a clock, and as I stand in line and wait to send off what I believe to be precious items, I am forced to demand of myself an answer to the question: What's the point? A great strip of digital numbers above the counter, flashes its way down, down, down. The hundredths of seconds digit moves so rapidly that it is merely a neon red blur. And, to make matters worse, its arduous pace almost makes it appear to cry out for the other slower moving numbers to "Hurry up!" Admittedly, a second does not seem like very much, but as I look at the depleting numbers (the movement from 0 to 9 is always especially painful, as if I have really lost something) that final second, that one which we have waited millions (billions) of years does tend toward a grander significance.

And a countdown. No matter which way you look at the "millennium clocks," even if you are an atheistic-Luddite, it still looks (and feels) as if when all the zeros line up, something terrible is going to happen—the reason I use the word terrible is because, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that only bombs tick down to zero. And, even if we count ourselves among the "pragmatic" group above, it is not the fact that we believe there will be no explosion, but the waiting, the waiting, the waiting—even to see if we are right, is what brings on the anxiety, as any dental patient will tell you. At least, when you're in the chair you know it's over—there's always a chance, in the "waiting" room that he/she won't be able to "do you today" because of some reason or other.

Such dental dread and molar malportents in literature are not of new invention either: indeed, the birth of the short story (excluding Poe et al.) by name in 1887, signals the

beginning of the *fin de siecle* period for the last century, when the literary world panicked, partied, and prognosticated until a full and unrestricted breath was allowed when 1900 dawned. To borrow an old word (now often the brunt of many jokes), "progress" attained a grand (but, perhaps, ironic) zenith in this period. As Martin Travers points out, "transportation was radically improved through the invention of the electric locomotive (1879) and Daimler's internal-combustion engine; the potential for communications expanded through Bell's telephone (1876) and Marconi's wireless (1896)" (97). And, even though this twentieth century has seen a man on the moon and computers and the Internet, these can all be seen as merely extensions of previous endeavors. Prior to Bell, for example, there was *no* telephone; all we can hope for at the end of the twentieth century is a better telephone, even though our messages, be they decadent or moralistic, have remained constant. A man in the middle of the Gobi desert may be able to reach his sweetheart with a satellite phone, but will this make his proposal of marriage any easier to convey?

Millennial anxiety was to seek refuge in the minds of "fin-de-sieclers," and would gather even more strength when we examine what seminal works (and one death) were, indeed, published in the "great" year, 1900. As Kermode informs us, "In 1900 Nietzsche died; Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*; 1900 was the date of Husserl's *Logic*, and of Russell's *Critical Exposition of the Philosophy* of Leibniz. With an exquisite sense of timing Planck published his quantum hypothesis in the very last days of the century, December 1900. Thus, within a few months, were published works which transformed or transvalued spirituality, the relation of language to knowing, and the very locus of human uncertainty, hence to be thought of not as an imperfection of the human apparatus but part of the nature of things, a condition of what we may know" (97).

Science, exemplified by Planck above, had made tremendous strides, and it was the results of nineteenth century experiments which paved a brand new highway, but the greatest was yet to come in 1905, when Einstein published his *Special Theory of Relativity*. Isaac Newton, the king of the "ordered universe" of science was, gently, dethroned by a Swiss patent clerk, as Einstein examined how the Newtonian idea of space and time being separate could no longer be trusted: indeed, Einstein had realized a fourth dimension for humankind. Time was no longer "something that could be relied upon." And, although this occurred after the end of the nineteenth century it was here that the seeds of both Postmodernism and millennial anxiety were sown.

As James Coleman informs us: "We can conclude that according to the general Theory of Relativity, the universe was considered to be finite" (118). Finally, there was some hope—light which earlier had been proven to be the one constant in the universe, appeared to have a suitor. However (returning to time once more), as Coleman further points out (with hidden irony), "[A]n important development occurred in 1929 which completely invalidated it [Einstein's theory of the 'finite' universe]. For it was in that year that ... Edward P. Hubble, announced that on the basis of experimental evidence (the so-called 'red-shifts') ... our universe is in a state of very rapid expansion" (118).

When this is coupled with Einstein et al.'s discovery that the location of electrons (particles which make up the very essence of life) in and around atoms could only be guessed at, one begins to see how meaning too might possibly be just as difficult to define. As David Harvey points out, "Embracing the fragmentation and ephemerality in an affirmative fashion [as Postmodernists do] ... writers like Foucault and Lyotard explicitly [attack] any notion that here might be a meta-language, meta-narrative, or meta-theory

through which all things can be connected or represented" (44-45). Such meta-narratives are not unlike the "ether" of space through which it had been presumed light waves supposedly pass in space which Einstein discusses in his Special Theory. Here the "ether" which would explain away many problems of the universe, Einstein states "cannot be detected" (Coleman 44) because "[t]here is no heavenly body in our universe that we can use as a stationary reference point," (Coleman 47) and consequently "all motion is relative" (Coleman 47).

I appreciate that any marriage between science and literature lends itself to instability, but it is, today, from science and also from literature that millennial anxiety is born. Religious factors are no longer as prominent--although as Mark Kingwell's book illustrates, the psychic hotlines and the crystalball-Tarot-card readers are the new religions—but they will be dealt with following a return to the Wegener-like drift which is washing its way over humankind.

Whether we like it or not, we live in a Postmodernist society—although a realism of a sort abounds, it is more accurately a *realismo nervosa*, especially when it comes to the happiness that finity used to bring: when we encounter someone we know, we greet them, and ask how they are. But if they reply, "I'm feeling great", we ultimately translate that "great" into "okay" or "doing fine" because, we would argue—who could *really* feel "great" anymore? No matter what our bent-ism, we have learned, if anything, to distrust language as a medium for ordering human affairs. And, as David Harvey notes, "[I]f as the postmodernists insist, we cannot aspire to any unified representation of the world, or picture it as a totality full of connections and differentiations rather than as a perpetually shifting fragments, then how can we possibly aspire to act coherently with respect to the world?"

(52)—and such fragmentation has proliferated in the postmodern novels of Barth, Beckett, Pynchon and the stories of Borges. One might argue that this is ridiculous and that some "things" are universally thought of as bad. Such a situation is addressed in "Princess Preparation." There, an indifference to mutilation may well furrow Western brows but to the children of the story, it is nothing out of the ordinary.

Harvey further adds therefore that, "[A]ction can be conceived of and decided only within the confines of some local determinism, some interpretative community, and its purported meanings and anticipated effects are bound to break down when taken out of these isolated domains, even when coherent within them" (52)—see, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Coupling the notion that the location of electrons (the very foundations for life) can only be guessed at with the theory of relativity, it is no great step to an anxiety of millennial proportions as it appears humankind can only guess at its location, and (without a suitably stable point in space) only guess at whether or not it is moving forward—progressing? Perhaps the (not-so?) lowly barnyard animal will have the last laugh: it expected nothing, sought not the meaning of its existence, and therefore will not be disappointed with eternal damnation or glorification and too many unanswered questions, be it administered by God or science.

One might further argue, what is all the fuss and bother about the year 2000?

Numbers (although, as Kingwell informs us, numerology is surprisingly popular in this angst-ridden time) are surely arbitrary? And yet, when we look back to the years 1900, 1905, 1915 and 1929 when the above discoveries were made, those dates eerily peal off great traumas and tragedies—revolutions, deaths, and a stock-market crash which exposed Capitalism's (the "grand solution's"?) decidedly clay-like feet. However, a fuller history of

millennial anxiety will provide a decent bridge to the collection which follows because, for the sake of argument, history teaches us "something" even if it is that "there will be no change from the published program." Or, like a Beckett character, we want to move but "we do not move."

The millennium, or rather, the coming of the millennium has for centuries (millennia?) provided a fine weapon against the great silencing power of tyranny; even if that tyranny is ignorance. As Norman Cohn informs us, "The Middle Ages had inherited from Antiquity—from the Jews and the early Christians—a tradition of prophecy ... [which] ... in the language of theology ... there existed an eschatology ... which was chiliastic ... meaning it foretold a Millennium ... in which the world would be inhabited by a humanity at once perfectly good and perfectly happy." And, this prophecy, Cohn goes on to say, "were devices by which religious groups, at first Jewish and later Christian, consoled, fortified and asserted themselves when confronted by the threat or the reality of oppression" (27).

I will remove the Jewish/Christian/Otherreligion-ist elements from Cohn's quotations because they bear no direct relationship to *Calling Up the Dead*. I realize that labeling is inevitable and unstoppable but I must emphasize that although the observance of a human being as an individual is almost impossible as readers and non-readers alike are quick to place characters into groups: male/female, black/white, old/young. And, of course, depending on which brand of criticism one wishes to ignite, when the word "meaning" is used, there may be a great exodus—there, I have even thrown in a religious word. That aside, the essence I wish to extract from Cohn's quote, are the words: "console," "fortify," and "assert," because in all the stories from *Calling Up the Dead*, the characters are either

comforting, reinforcing, or affirming themselves. In terms of war, I am one side short of a fine four-sided and "pretty and complete" picture: consoling is representative of loss; fortifying is representative of "defense"; and, asserting is representative of "attack." The fourth side which is "victory," remains unfilled, but that is all part of the grand scheme of the collection—not only a quest, but a discovery of "victory." Of course, these victories may be extremely small, and may indeed be Pyrrhic, but they are nonetheless, I hope, a reminder that hope and sanity may one day rule, and need not be merely the result of religious zealots or peoples wishing to merely "even the score." Such reasons are selfish and would/may only bring about a false sense of harmonious security which can easily be quashed when a "reality" or two comes knocking. One such "harmony" was instigated in Germany in 1534, (exemplary of Benjamin Disraeli's quote: "The palace is not safe when the cottage is not happy") as Mark Kingwell tells us:

A group of armed Anabaptists, led by ... Jan Bockelson of Leyden, took over the town of Munster, declared it the New Jerusalem, and predicted it would become the center of New World Order that would arise when the papacy and the aristocracy were destroyed in the imminent millennial conflagration. Bockelson ... declared himself king, seized the possessions of the aristocrats ... and clothed himself and his fourteen young wives (the oldest was nineteen) in sumptuous clothes ... challengers to his authority were regularly beheaded ... [and when] neighboring landowners cut of all food supplies ... the town was sacked ... and Bockelson was tortured to death [and] he was drawn and quartered, and the four pieces of his body sent to

four distant German cities to advertise the adverse consequences of hastening end-times. (39-40)

And, *Calling Up the Dead* does not offer a particular individual throughout who may be the harbinger of "better times"; instead, I have attempted to cover as many possible individuals and, consequently, points of view, not with the intention of "reaching out" to everybody, but to allow for the birth of an every-being. A person who bears enough similarities to everyone as to be labeled (a horrible-sounding word approaches) average. Human beings are made up of an infinite number of, for the sake of argument, binary decisions: to be good, to be bad; to be kind, to be cruel; to desire to be beautiful, to be satisfied with our lot etc. Some characters possess more of one side than the other; of course, too much one-sidedness lends itself to Forster-like flatness where they become merely "types," and this, I hope, I have avoided.

Perhaps my use of the word "war" earlier was too harsh, but I wish to point out that such prizes, moreover rewards, are not necessarily received or handed over, but more often, won, after a great struggle; we often hear newscasters discussing the Middle East and the great "struggle for peace." And yet, a thousand, a million tiny wars are being fought every second of our lives between the synapses, and the resultant victors decide how we are "to be": and decisions are vital to each of the stories.

Perhaps a more complete excavation of *Calling Up the Dead* (before I look at each story individually) can be realized when I answer the question: why write about the millennium at all? Admittedly, this has already been touched upon earlier, but a decent understanding of the reasons behind such a project may help us to understand not only the piece as a whole, but some of the many decisions which contributed to its overall shape.

I begin with two quotes, one historical and one personal, from Mark Kingwell which illustrate the problem of writing about the millennium:

[T]he earliest Judeo-Christian apocalyptic warnings are those found in the "Apocalyptic Dream" sequence of the Book of Daniel, chapter eight. Written around 165 B.C., during a Maccabaean revolt against the tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanus, the original Antichrist, this text gives us the image of the four beasts of the apocalypse and predicts the fall of Babylon if idolatry is not forsaken ... around A.D. 93, was John's Book of Revelation which rounds out the familiar image of fiery end-times and describes the destruction of Rome, a general metaphor for the secular world. (29)

And, from the Preface of Kingwell's book:

Some time ago, a friend of mine, who heard that I was considering a book on the millennium, sent me a copy of the London-based *Independent* newspaper which featured a series of articles on 'How to Survive the 21st Century' ... 'In the short term," its author advised, "writers and artists should resist the urge to produce works on millennial themes. There are already several thousand in the pipeline" (xi)

As you can see, writing about the millennium is nothing new; in fact it was going on before we had the recognizable millennium we see, dare I say, looming before us.

Kingwell goes on to write his book of course, but he follows the last quote with a list of what his book is "not about." He assumed, and I have no reason to doubt him, that those "thousands in the pipeline" are, for the most part, crackpot books which are merely obese versions of tabloid news stories available at every supermarket checkout in the United States. The same is true for *Calling Up the Dead*, even though it is a work of fiction, and

could, therefore, be paired with the great fictions that such newspapers disgorge. And, in fact, *Calling Up the Dead* purports to be as un-millennial in its delivery as is possible—the millennium is to be seen as a catalyst, a spark setting off fires in the imagination which can only be controlled by a strong resolve and an adherence to the basic laws of relativity where, sometimes, 2 + 2 can equal 5 or 6 or even 3 depending on where one is standing.

N.B. Below is a list of the collection with the general locales and their respective times for quick reference when reading what follows about the stories.

Buenos Aires, Argentina 1:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Three For Tango"

Paris, France 5:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Regards, the Balcony"

Zaire 6:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Princess Preparation"

Russia 7:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Knockout: A Fairy Tale"

India 10:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Grove of No Birds"

South Pacific 4:59 p.m. January 1, 2000 "The End of the Beginning of the End of the World"

Vancouver, Canada 8:59 p.m. "Calling Up the Dead"

In a sense, because the stories all take place at the same time, the ordering of the collection is not as significant as it might be: one could start anywhere. Indeed, I have opted for a cyclical pattern, beginning in South America and traveling eastward to Canada. If anything, this journey is one toward death, and yet, at the same time, re-birth: the final story

(the title story) is not, however, meant to represent an ending, but, a new beginning--admittedly there is no direct link from "Calling Up the Dead" to "Three For Tango," but each story, and those stories between, all address, in some manner, the themes of time, the millennium, and the future. And although these themes are inextricably mixed, it is with them also in mind that I would like to discuss each of the individual stories.

The first story, "Three For Tango," takes the reader to Buenos Aires and the bedroom of Alejandro Boruca. Here, the millennium is a mere backdrop, a doorway to the process of aging. A series of flashbacks helps to paint a picture of the protagonist who is at war with time, at war with "getting old." He is not so much concerned with his appearance, but is in a quandary as to how to maintain the level of love he and his wife realized when they first met. He will need to venture down both a magical and a realistic path before he can find a solution to his problem. Time is seen as an enemy, and the millennium exemplary of a forward guard—Boruca is disturbed by the "youthful" nighttime activity which the millennium prompts. He seeks the attention of the young woman (even though she is a fantasy), and yet he really wants to rekindle the desire with his older wife: he needs youthful love in a matured relationship. The future is revealed by his grandmother who paraphrases the *amor vincit omnia idea*, when she explains that true love is not subject to time or its whims, and it is eternally young because it can be nothing else.

"Regards, the Balcony," and particularly Ms. Cartridge, might easily have tended toward bathos had I not chosen the balcony to be the narrator. Once again, it is able to place Ms. Cartridge and her plight into perspective—the reader may not have been intrigued by the story of the "perpetual and solitary honeymoonist," but he must always be reminded that this story is told by a balcony: a cold, marble and iron inanimate contraption. Two kinds of

love abound in the story (Ms. Cartridge's love for her imaginary husband, and the love of the balcony for Ms. Cartridge) and both refuse to be defeated by time. However, by having the balcony gracefully (if suicide can ever be graceful) release Ms. Cartridge from her wheel of illusion, two happinesses are found: first, Ms. Cartridge and the balcony can finally rest, relieved of their respective burdens, and second (by this very act) love has been discovered in the most unlikely of places: Ms. Cartridges' future has been decided, but few readers will side against the balcony. Again, the millennium garners little respect from the story and remains in the background, but I do not mean to detract from it, I merely wish to demonstrate that it will have varying degrees of importance throughout the collection.

Time, the millennium, the future, even civilization have all but disappeared in "Princess Preparation." Here, I have chosen three, not-so-innocents, who have developed a kind of immunity toward death—and ultimately time. Again, the focus is two-fold: first, the obvious suggestion that the millennium is yet another gateway to further indifference: when CNN flashes scenes from Tutsi massacres we glance only sparingly, furrow our brows again and wonder how it is all possible—and yet in an instant we move on to lunch, to work, to HBO, to anywhere-but-there. And this is the kind of indifference with which the children deal with the massacre they encounter. But, secondly it is their decision to make a game out of putting the bodies back together which, I hope, separates this from "just another horrific-but-true thirdworlder" story. The story never denies that mistakes (a far too weak word here) will be made, but it is the manner in which we put ourselves back together which will shape the future: indeed, the Captain of the story realizes that we are the sum of certain specific parts, and that is why he scatters the bodies. The future is again bright when the nurse arrives, and is made even more brilliant because it is the faith of the children which.

for them, changes the nurse into the princess for whom they have waited and believed in so strongly.

Loss and renewal is the essence of "Knockout: a Fairy Tail." But total renewal is, of course, impossible: Nickolai has lost both of his parents and they will never return.

However, I realized that I could only "fix" Nickolai if I were to venture into the fantastic.

And yet, I wanted to make the story one that could be believed: I would not use magic, but rather, the unfamiliar. Again, this returns us to the "relativity" question: what may appear strange and unusual to one group is merely traditional to the other. Nickolai, the innocent, is not unlike the reader as everything is slowly (and then very quickly!) revealed to him: Lokya has "seen and done all that" before, as has Anyana and all of the other relatives. This is a marriage of attitudes then, where Nickolai, locked in his stagnant world of regret and indecision is finally able to free himself. The millennium is, once more, the occasion where an old "time" (the source of Nickolai's pain) can be expurgated through the realization of a magical future.

"Grove of No Birds" carries the reader to north west India. The protagonist, Buphra Ganesh, seeks the man who has won the lottery because he has not come forward to claim his ticket. Here, the millennium represents a kind of benchmark from which all time can be viewed. The past, recollected by Captain Aviery allows us a glimpse into a time when time appeared to move at a much more sedate pace. The present represented by Ganesh and his quest point towards an uneasy future. By having Ganesh as a newly returned Indian who has spent a long time away in England, I was able to generate a perspective. Ganesh is in a limbo of sorts—neither fully Indian (he does not speak the language very well) nor entirely British—which makes him a good choice for an unbiased opinion. The horrific manner in

which Mr. Chatursati—the winning lottery ticket holder—has selected his numbers, demonstrates to Ganesh how the passing of time can generate such horrors, as Chatursati represents the co-mixture of the new and Western (lottery) ideals with the older and Eastern. Captain Aviery's world was not a perfect one, but as he points out, time was slower then and it was much easier to both make and see our mistakes: a better future might have been ensured, but as Ganesh uncovers Chatursati's evil he has to wonder at what the future holds for India. By the end, Ganesh is still a man without a true identity, and he has realized that life and the future of India will be a struggle—the East needs the West as much as the West needs the East; after all, if it had not been for Captain Aviery saving his father's life, Ganesh might never have existed.

"The End of the Beginning of the World" is, once again, a story of revelation: at first, a global revelation, but inevitably a personal one. The millennium has taken center stage for this story and has been transformed into a great tool for commercial enterprise.

Time is not necessarily the issue here, but the manner in which we pass through its medium is on trial. The hero, Marsh, does not, however, report on the events from "on high"—he too is caught up in the whole mechanism; a cog who, as a reporter, merely passes on a signal. I wanted to have an imperfect character because it is for one more believable, but more importantly, a change, no matter how slight, will seem all the more large because of the great forces required. In a way, Marsh represents the world in human form—he is round and fat, he smokes and drinks too much—but he is, at the end, honest. And, it is with such honesty that the road toward a brighter or more enlightened future may lie. Marsh is by no means a reformed man who will quit his excesses and seek true love, but he has become

more aware of his debilities, and, perhaps, the world need not change so much as accept more of the situation it has found itself in.

Without any irony, we come to "Calling Up the Dead" which takes us beyond life and to the after-life (a much nicer-sounding place than Death!). The heroine, via the telephone calls, is taken through a whole lifetime which may or may not be her actual life—I have left this unclear because I do not believe it matters. What is important is how she reacts to each of the phone calls, to each of the chapters of lives which her deceased father, in a game-like fashion, has paraded before her. But, rather than have the heroine realize at the end all of her selfishness and her ignorance, I chose to end the story in the past tense, and allow, again, a certain amount of magic to enter the story. This fairytale-like ending again utilizes no wizards or legerdemain, because all of the "things" that happen are entirely possible, and this bespeaks the wonders of the world, where a fairytale is not necessarily an impossibility made up to charm children off to sleep, but an actuality which is merely the same incidents/objects seen in a different formation: a world where all outcomes are just as likely as any particular one. The future is seen as positive as we can imagine Miss Mith's father magical return from the dead to realign her personality, to make her realize a better life. Such a journey back from death hopefully allows for a dismantling of time: if death, an end to "human" time, can in some manner, be overcome, then a richer life, or at least the chance at a richer life can always be sought.

It is true that the millennium has not received "top billing" in these stories, but I have chosen it over any other day because of all the attention that it has and will continue to receive: it is representative of our subjection to time, to calendars, to numbers. As the title

of this Preface intimates; only time will defeat time, so it is best, perhaps, to leave it well alone. That is not to say that we can somehow magically extricate ourselves from time's grip, but that we should in the "mean time" concern ourselves with other more pressing matters.

I began with Wegener and I will end with him: the good news is that the "continental drifting" which we, as human beings, mirror may indeed have an UP side because we are bound by the earth, and, at some point in the future, the continents will again be joined together. We should learn to apply such a concreting idea to our own lives, and to content ourselves with the chiliastic joy that a better future is inevitable and that, without a doubt, more attention needs to be paid to creating a better present.

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PREFACE: TEMPUS VINCIT TEMPUS

In 1915, the Austrian Alfred Wegener proposed the theory of plate tectonics; the earth's continents, he explained, were not stationary but moved according to the temperament of the mantle upon which they lay. Indeed, Wegener assumed that at one time all of the continents were alloyed and formed the great land mass Pangaea. And over the last several hundred million years, these continents, which had spawned a series of "progressed" beings, had ever so slowly been distancing themselves (Tarling 6-7).

Is this not evidence enough, some might argue, for the inevitable drifting which humankind has experienced, where peoples are at war constantly and those that are not at war either seek to make war, prepare for war, or, the worst possible, shudder at the thought that they might somehow be content. "Content" is both a well and poorly chosen word in this instance: on the bright side, it conjures up (not only the obvious—content, meaning that which possesses quiddity) a certain satiety of society, a place where sufficiency is found and a place where one might wish to hang one's hat. However, the word "content" is but a few "iou-s" from "contentious" which Webster defines as, "exhibiting an often perverse and wearisome tendency to quarrels and disputes" (Webster 283). Such a definition, I might add, far from being passionless, as surely all dictionaries should be if they are to contain at least an estimation of truth, appears to have even been affected by the word [note the word "wearisome"]. In fact, the dictionary does seem to reflect a parental

air with its, "Will you *please* stop doing that" attitude. The world rests on an unstable foundation, and as any surveyor, chartered or not, knows foundational problems are the very worst—no "quick-fixes" are available.

And such a realization, of course, is reflected as the millennium approaches at such an alarmist rate, prompting "millennial anxiety." Exemplary of this, is the proliferation of "millennium countdown clocks." Our own US Post Office, here in Denton, Texas, owns such a clock, and as I stand in line and wait to send off what I believe to be precious items, I am forced to demand of myself an answer to the question: What's the point? A great strip of digital numbers above the counter, flashes its way down, down, down. The hundredths of seconds digit moves so rapidly that it is merely a neon red blur. And, to make matters worse, its arduous pace almost makes it appear to cry out for the other slower moving numbers to "Hurry up!" Admittedly, a second does not seem like very much, but as I look at the depleting numbers (the movement from 0 to 9 is always especially painful, as if I have really lost something) that final second, that one which we have waited millions (billions) of years does tend toward a grander significance.

And a countdown. No matter which way you look at the "millennium clocks," even if you are an atheistic-Luddite, it still looks (and feels) as if when all the zeros line up, something terrible is going to happen—the reason I use the word terrible is because, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that only bombs tick down to zero. And, even if we count ourselves among the "pragmatic" group above, it is not the fact that we believe there will be no explosion, but the waiting, the waiting, the waiting—even to see if we are right,

is what brings on the anxiety, as any dental patient will tell you. At least, when you're in the chair you know it's over—there's always a chance, in the "waiting" room that he/she won't be able to "do you today" because of some reason or other.

Such dental dread and molar malportents in literature are not of new invention either: indeed, the birth of the short story (excluding Poe et al.) by name in 1887, signals the beginning of the *fin de siecle* period for the last century, when the literary world panicked, partied, and prognosticated until a full and unrestricted breath was allowed when 1900 dawned. To borrow an old word (now often the brunt of many jokes), "progress" attained a grand (but, perhaps, ironic) zenith in this period. As Martin Travers points out, "transportation was radically improved through the invention of the electric locomotive (1879) and Daimler's internal-combustion engine; the potential for communications expanded through Bell's telephone (1876) and Marconi's wireless (1896)" (97). And, even though this twentieth century has seen a man on the moon and computers and the Internet, these can all be seen as merely extensions of previous endeavors. Prior to Bell, for example, there was no telephone; all we can hope for at the end of the twentieth century is a better telephone, even though our messages, be they decadent or moralistic, have remained constant. A man in the middle of the Gobi desert may be able to reach his sweetheart with a satellite phone, but will this make his proposal of marriage any easier to convey?

Millennial anxiety was to seek refuge in the minds of "fin-de-sieclers," and would gather even more strength when we examine what seminal works (and one death) were,

indeed, published in the "great" year, 1900. As Kermode informs us, "In 1900 Nietzsche died; Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*; 1900 was the date of Husserl's *Logic*, and of Russell's *Critical Exposition of the Philosophy* of Leibniz. With an exquisite sense of timing Planck published his quantum hypothesis in the very last days of the century, December 1900. Thus, within a few months, were published works which transformed or transvalued spirituality, the relation of language to knowing, and the very locus of human uncertainty, hence to be thought of not as an imperfection of the human apparatus but part of the nature of things, a condition of what we may know" (97).

Science, exemplified by Planck above, had made tremendous strides, and it was the results of nineteenth century experiments which paved a brand new highway, but the greatest was yet to come in 1905, when Einstein published his *Special Theory of Relativity*. Isaac Newton, the king of the "ordered universe" of science was, gently, dethroned by a Swiss patent clerk, as Einstein examined how the Newtonian idea of space and time being separate could no longer be trusted: indeed, Einstein had realized a fourth dimension for humankind. Time was no longer "something that could be relied upon." And, although this occurred after the end of the nineteenth century it was here that the seeds of both Postmodernism and millennial anxiety were sown.

As James Coleman informs us: "We can conclude that according to the general *Theory of Relativity*, the universe was considered to be finite" (118). Finally, there was some hope—light which earlier had been proven to be the one constant in the universe, appeared to have a suitor. However (returning to time once more), as Coleman further

points out (with hidden irony), "[A]n important development occurred in 1929 which completely invalidated it [Einstein's theory of the 'finite' universe]. For it was in that year that ... Edward P. Hubble, announced that on the basis of experimental evidence (the so-called 'red-shifts') ... our universe is in a state of very rapid expansion" (118).

When this is coupled with Einstein et al.'s discovery that the location of electrons (particles which make up the very essence of life) in and around atoms could only be guessed at, one begins to see how meaning too might possibly be just as difficult to define. As David Harvey points out, "Embracing the fragmentation and ephemerality in an affirmative fashion [as Postmodernists do] ... writers like Foucault and Lyotard explicitly [attack] any notion that here might be a meta-language, meta-narrative, or meta-theory through which all things can be connected or represented" (44-45). Such meta-narratives are not unlike the "ether" of space through which it had been presumed light waves supposedly pass in space which Einstein discusses in his Special Theory. Here the "ether" which would explain away many problems of the universe, Einstein states "cannot be detected" (Coleman 44) because "[t]here is no heavenly body in our universe that we can use as a stationary reference point," (Coleman 47) and consequently "all motion is relative" (Coleman 47).

I appreciate that any marriage between science and literature lends itself to instability, but it is, today, from science and also from literature that millennial anxiety is born. Religious factors are no longer as prominent--although as Mark Kingwell's book illustrates, the psychic hotlines and the crystalball-Tarot-card readers are the new

religions—but they will be dealt with following a return to the Wegener-like drift which is washing its way over humankind.

Whether we like it or not, we live in a Postmodernist society—although a realism of a sort abounds, it is more accurately a realismo nervosa, especially when it comes to the happiness that finity used to bring: when we encounter someone we know, we greet them, and ask how they are. But if they reply, "I'm feeling great", we ultimately translate that "great" into "okay" or "doing fine" because, we would argue—who could really feel "great" anymore? No matter what our bent-ism, we have learned, if anything, to distrust language as a medium for ordering human affairs. And, as David Harvey notes, "[I]f as the postmodernists insist, we cannot aspire to any unified representation of the world, or picture it as a totality full of connections and differentiations rather than as a perpetually shifting fragments, then how can we possibly aspire to act coherently with respect to the world?" (52)—and such fragmentation has proliferated in the postmodern novels of Barth, Beckett, Pynchon and the stories of Borges. One might argue that this is ridiculous and that some "things" are universally thought of as bad. Such a situation is addressed in "Princess Preparation." There, an indifference to mutilation may well furrow Western brows but to the children of the story, it is nothing out of the ordinary.

Harvey further adds therefore that, "[A]ction can be conceived of and decided only within the confines of some local determinism, some interpretative community, and its purported meanings and anticipated effects are bound to break down when taken out of these isolated domains, even when coherent within them" (52)—see, Conrad's *Heart of*

Darkness or Golding's Lord of the Flies. Coupling the notion that the location of electrons (the very foundations for life) can only be guessed at with the theory of relativity, it is no great step to an anxiety of millennial proportions as it appears humankind can only guess at its location, and (without a suitably stable point in space) only guess at whether or not it is moving forward—progressing? Perhaps the (not-so?) lowly barnyard animal will have the last laugh: it expected nothing, sought not the meaning of its existence, and therefore will not be disappointed with eternal damnation or glorification and too many unanswered questions, be it administered by God or science.

One might further argue, what is all the fuss and bother about the year 2000?

Numbers (although, as Kingwell informs us, numerology is surprisingly popular in this angst-ridden time) are surely arbitrary? And yet, when we look back to the years 1900, 1905, 1915 and 1929 when the above discoveries were made, those dates eerily peal off great traumas and tragedies—revolutions, deaths, and a stock-market crash which exposed Capitalism's (the "grand solution's"?) decidedly clay-like feet. However, a fuller history of millennial anxiety will provide a decent bridge to the collection which follows because, for the sake of argument, history teaches us "something" even if it is that "there will be no change from the published program." Or, like a Beckett character, we want to move but "we do not move."

The millennium, or rather, the coming of the millennium has for centuries (millennia?) provided a fine weapon against the great silencing power of tyranny; even if that tyranny is ignorance. As Norman Cohn informs us, "The Middle Ages had inherited

from Antiquity—from the Jews and the early Christians—a tradition of prophecy ...

[which] ... in the language of theology ... there existed an eschatology ... which was chiliastic ... meaning it foretold a Millennium ... in which the world would be inhabited by a humanity at once perfectly good and perfectly happy." And, this prophecy, Cohn goes on to say, "were devices by which religious groups, at first Jewish and later Christian, consoled, fortified and asserted themselves when confronted by the threat or the reality of oppression" (27).

I will remove the Jewish/Christian/Otherreligion-ist elements from Cohn's quotations because they bear no direct relationship to *Calling Up the Dead*. I realize that labeling is inevitable and unstoppable but I must emphasize that although the observance of a human being as an individual is almost impossible as readers and non-readers alike are quick to place characters into groups: male/female, black/white, old/young. And, of course, depending on which brand of criticism one wishes to ignite, when the word "meaning" is used, there may be a great exodus—there, I have even thrown in a religious word. That aside, the essence I wish to extract from Cohn's quote, are the words: "console," "fortify," and "assert," because in all the stories from *Calling Up the Dead*, the characters are either comforting, reinforcing, or affirming themselves. In terms of war, I am one side short of a fine four-sided and "pretty and complete" picture: consoling is representative of loss; fortifying is representative of "defense"; and, asserting is representative of "attack." The fourth side which is "victory," remains unfilled, but that is all part of the grand scheme of the collection—not only a quest, but a discovery of

"victory." Of course, these victories may be extremely small, and may indeed be Pyrrhic, but they are nonetheless, I hope, a reminder that hope and sanity may one day rule, and need not be merely the result of religious zealots or peoples wishing to merely "even the score." Such reasons are selfish and would/may only bring about a false sense of harmonious security which can easily be quashed when a "reality" or two comes knocking. One such "harmony" was instigated in Germany in 1534, (exemplary of Benjamin Disraeli's quote: "The palace is not safe when the cottage is not happy") as Mark Kingwell tells us:

A group of armed Anabaptists, led by ... Jan Bockelson of Leyden, took over the town of Munster, declared it the New Jerusalem, and predicted it would become the center of New World Order that would arise when the papacy and the aristocracy were destroyed in the imminent millennial conflagration. Bockelson ... declared himself king, seized the possessions of the aristocrats ... and clothed himself and his fourteen young wives (the oldest was nineteen) in sumptuous clothes ... challengers to his authority were regularly beheaded ... [and when] neighboring landowners cut of all food supplies ... the town was sacked ... and Bockelson was tortured to death [and] he was drawn and quartered, and the four pieces of his body sent to four distant German cities to advertise the adverse consequences of hastening end-times. (39-40)

And, *Calling Up the Dead* does not offer a particular individual throughout who may be the harbinger of "better times"; instead, I have attempted to cover as many possible individuals and, consequently, points of view, not with the intention of "reaching out" to everybody, but to allow for the birth of an every-being. A person who bears enough similarities to everyone as to be labeled (a horrible-sounding word approaches) average. Human beings are made up of an infinite number of, for the sake of argument, binary decisions: to be good, to be bad; to be kind, to be cruel; to desire to be beautiful, to be satisfied with our lot etc. Some characters possess more of one side than the other; of course, too much one-sidedness lends itself to Forster-like flatness where they become merely "types," and this, I hope, I have avoided.

Perhaps my use of the word "war" earlier was too harsh, but I wish to point out that such prizes, moreover rewards, are not necessarily received or handed over, but more often, won, after a great struggle; we often hear newscasters discussing the Middle East and the great "struggle for peace." And yet, a thousand, a million tiny wars are being fought every second of our lives between the synapses, and the resultant victors decide how we are "to be": and decisions are vital to each of the stories.

Perhaps a more complete excavation of *Calling Up the Dead* (before I look at each story individually) can be realized when I answer the question: why write about the millennium at all? Admittedly, this has already been touched upon earlier, but a decent understanding of the reasons behind such a project may help us to understand not only the piece as a whole, but some of the many decisions which contributed to its overall shape.

I begin with two quotes, one historical and one personal, from Mark Kingwell which illustrate the problem of writing about the millennium:

[T]he earliest Judeo-Christian apocalyptic warnings are those found in the "Apocalyptic Dream" sequence of the Book of Daniel, chapter eight. Written around 165 B.C., during a Maccabaean revolt against the tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanus, the original Antichrist, this text gives us the image of the four beasts of the apocalypse and predicts the fall of Babylon if idolatry is not forsaken ... around A.D. 93, was John's Book of Revelation which rounds out the familiar image of fiery end-times and describes the destruction of Rome, a general metaphor for the secular world. (29)

And, from the Preface of Kingwell's book:

Some time ago, a friend of mine, who heard that I was considering a book on the millennium, sent me a copy of the London-based *Independent* newspaper which featured a series of articles on 'How to Survive the 21st Century' ... 'In the short term," its author advised, "writers and artists should resist the urge to produce works on millennial themes. There are already several thousand in the pipeline" (xi)

As you can see, writing about the millennium is nothing new; in fact it was going on before we had the recognizable millennium we see, dare I say, looming before us.

Kingwell goes on to write his book of course, but he follows the last quote with a list of what his book is "not about." He assumed, and I have no reason to doubt him, that those

"thousands in the pipeline" are, for the most part, crackpot books which are merely obese versions of tabloid news stories available at every supermarket checkout in the United States. The same is true for *Calling Up the Dead*, even though it is a work of fiction, and could, therefore, be paired with the great fictions that such newspapers disgorge. And, in fact, *Calling Up the Dead* purports to be as un-millennial in its delivery as is possible—the millennium is to be seen as a catalyst, a spark setting off fires in the imagination which can only be controlled by a strong resolve and an adherence to the basic laws of relativity where, sometimes, 2 + 2 can equal 5 or 6 or even 3 depending on where one is standing.

N.B. Below is a list of the collection with the general locales and their respective times for quick reference when reading what follows about the stories.

Buenos Aires, Argentina 1:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Three For Tango"

Paris, France 5:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Regards, the Balcony"

Zaire 6:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Princess Preparation"

Russia 7:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Knockout: A Fairy Tale"

India 10:59 a.m. January 1, 2000 "Grove of No Birds"

South Pacific 4:59 p.m. January 1, 2000 "The End of the Beginning of the End of the World"

Vancouver, Canada 8:59 p.m. "Calling Up the Dead"

In a sense, because the stories all take place at the same time, the ordering of the collection is not as significant as it might be: one could start anywhere. Indeed, I have opted for a cyclical pattern, beginning in South America and traveling eastward to Canada. If anything, this journey is one toward death, and yet, at the same time, re-birth: the final story (the title story) is not, however, meant to represent an ending, but, a new beginning-admittedly there is no direct link from "Calling Up the Dead" to "Three For Tango," but each story, and those stories between, all address, in some manner, the themes of time, the millennium, and the future. And although these themes are inextricably mixed, it is with them also in mind that I would like to discuss each of the individual stories.

The first story, "Three For Tango," takes the reader to Buenos Aires and the bedroom of Alejandro Boruca. Here, the millennium is a mere backdrop, a doorway to the process of aging. A series of flashbacks helps to paint a picture of the protagonist who is at war with time, at war with "getting old." He is not so much concerned with his appearance, but is in a quandary as to how to maintain the level of love he and his wife realized when they first met. He will need to venture down both a magical and a realistic path before he can find a solution to his problem. Time is seen as an enemy, and the millennium exemplary of a forward guard—Boruca is disturbed by the "youthful" nighttime activity which the millennium prompts. He seeks the attention of the young woman (even though she is a fantasy), and yet he really wants to rekindle the desire with his older wife: he needs youthful love in a matured relationship. The future is revealed by

his grandmother who paraphrases the *amor vincit omnia idea*, when she explains that true love is not subject to time or its whims, and it is eternally young because it can be nothing else.

"Regards, the Balcony," and particularly Ms. Cartridge, might easily have tended toward bathos had I not chosen the balcony to be the narrator. Once again, it is able to place Ms. Cartridge and her plight into perspective—the reader may not have been intrigued by the story of the "perpetual and solitary honeymoonist," but he must always be reminded that this story is told by a balcony: a cold, marble and iron inanimate contraption. Two kinds of love abound in the story (Ms. Cartridge's love for her imaginary husband, and the love of the balcony for Ms. Cartridge) and both refuse to be defeated by time. However, by having the balcony gracefully (if suicide can ever be graceful) release Ms. Cartridge from her wheel of illusion, two happinesses are found: first, Ms. Cartridge and the balcony can finally rest, relieved of their respective burdens, and second (by this very act) love has been discovered in the most unlikely of places: Ms. Cartridges' future has been decided, but few readers will side against the balcony. Again, the millennium garners little respect from the story and remains in the background, but I do not mean to detract from it, I merely wish to demonstrate that it will have varying degrees of importance throughout the collection.

Time, the millennium, the future, even civilization have all but disappeared in "Princess Preparation." Here, I have chosen three, not-so-innocents, who have developed a kind of immunity toward death—and ultimately time. Again, the focus is two-fold: first,

the obvious suggestion that the millennium is yet another gateway to further indifference: when CNN flashes scenes from Tutsi massacres we glance only sparingly, furrow our brows again and wonder how it is all possible—and yet in an instant we move on to lunch, to work, to HBO, to anywhere-but-there. And this is the kind of indifference with which the children deal with the massacre they encounter. But, secondly it is their decision to make a game out of putting the bodies back together which, I hope, separates this from "just another horrific-but-true thirdworlder" story. The story never denies that mistakes (a far too weak word here) will be made, but it is the manner in which we put ourselves back together which will shape the future: indeed, the Captain of the story realizes that we are the sum of certain specific parts, and that is why he scatters the bodies. The future is again bright when the nurse arrives, and is made even more brilliant because it is the faith of the children which, for them, changes the nurse into the princess for whom they have waited and believed in so strongly.

Loss and renewal is the essence of "Knockout: A Fairy Tale." But total renewal is, of course, impossible: Nickolai has lost both of his parents and they will never return. However, I realized that I could only "fix" Nickolai if I were to venture into the fantastic. And yet, I wanted to make the story one that could be believed: I would not use magic, but rather, the unfamiliar. Again, this returns us to the "relativity" question: what may appear strange and unusual to one group is merely traditional to the other. Nickolai, the innocent, is not unlike the reader as everything is slowly (and then very quickly!) revealed to him: Lokya has "seen and done all that" before, as has Anyana and all of the other relatives.

This is a marriage of attitudes then, where Nickolai, locked in his stagnant world of regret and indecision is finally able to free himself. The millennium is, once more, the occasion where an old "time" (the source of Nickolai's pain) can be expurgated through the realization of a magical future.

"Grove of No Birds" carries the reader to north west India. The protagonist, Buphra Ganesh, seeks the man who has won the lottery because he has not come forward to claim his ticket. Here, the millennium represents a kind of benchmark from which all time can be viewed. The past, recollected by Captain Aviery allows us a glimpse into a time when time appeared to move at a much more sedate pace. The present represented by Ganesh and his quest point towards an uneasy future. By having Ganesh as a newly returned Indian who has spent a long time away in England, I was able to generate a perspective. Ganesh is in a limbo of sorts—neither fully Indian (he does not speak the language very well) nor entirely British—which makes him a good choice for an unbiased opinion. The horrific manner in which Mr. Chatursati—the winning lottery ticket holder has selected his numbers, demonstrates to Ganesh how the passing of time can generate such horrors, as Chatursati represents the co-mixture of the new and Western (lottery) ideals with the older and Eastern. Captain Aviery's world was not a perfect one, but as he points out, time was slower then and it was much easier to both make and see our mistakes: a better future might have been ensured, but as Ganesh uncovers Chatursati's evil he has to wonder at what the future holds for India. By the end, Ganesh is still a man without a true identity, and he has realized that life and the future of India will be a

struggle—the East needs the West as much as the West needs the East; after all, if it had not been for Captain Aviery saving his father's life, Ganesh might never have existed.

"The End of the Beginning of the World" is, once again, a story of revelation: at first, a global revelation, but inevitably a personal one. The millennium has taken center stage for this story and has been transformed into a great tool for commercial enterprise.

Time is not necessarily the issue here, but the manner in which we pass through its medium is on trial. The hero, Marsh, does not, however, report on the events from "on high"—he too is caught up in the whole mechanism; a cog who, as a reporter, merely passes on a signal. I wanted to have an imperfect character because it is for one more believable, but more importantly, a change, no matter how slight, will seem all the more large because of the great forces required. In a way, Marsh represents the world in human form—he is round and fat, he smokes and drinks too much—but he is, at the end, honest.

And, it is with such honesty that the road toward a brighter or more enlightened future may lie. Marsh is by no means a reformed man who will quit his excesses and seek true love, but he has become more aware of his debilities, and, perhaps, the world need not change so much as accept more of the situation it has found itself in.

Without any irony, we come to "Calling Up the Dead" which takes us beyond life and to the after-life (a much nicer-sounding place than Death!). The heroine, via the telephone calls, is taken through a whole lifetime which may or may not be her actual life—I have left this unclear because I do not believe it matters. What is important is how she reacts to each of the phone calls, to each of the chapters of lives which her deceased

father, in a game-like fashion, has paraded before her. But, rather than have the heroine realize at the end all of her selfishness and her ignorance, I chose to end the story in the past tense, and allow, again, a certain amount of magic to enter the story. This fairytale-like ending again utilizes no wizards or legerdemain, because all of the "things" that happen are entirely possible, and this bespeaks the wonders of the world, where a fairytale is not necessarily an impossibility made up to charm children off to sleep, but an actuality which is merely the same incidents/objects seen in a different formation: a world where all outcomes are just as likely as any particular one. The future is seen as positive as we can imagine Miss Mith's father magical return from the dead to realign her personality, to make her realize a better life. Such a journey back from death hopefully allows for a dismantling of time: if death, an end to "human" time, can in some manner, be overcome, then a richer life, or at least the chance at a richer life can always be sought.

It is true that the millennium has not received "top billing" in these stories, but I have chosen it over any other day because of all the attention that it has and will continue to receive: it is representative of our subjection to time, to calendars, to numbers. As the title of this Preface intimates; only time will defeat time, so it is best, perhaps, to leave it well alone. That is not to say that we can somehow magically extricate ourselves from time's grip, but that we should in the "mean time" concern ourselves with other more pressing matters.

I began with Wegener and I will end with him: the good news is that the "continental drifting" which we, as human beings, mirror may indeed have an UP side because we are bound by the earth, and, at some point in the future, the continents will again be joined together. We should learn to apply such a concreting idea to our own lives, and to content ourselves with the chiliastic joy that a better future is inevitable and that, without a doubt, more attention needs to be paid to creating a better present.

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CALLING UP THE DEAD

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ABSTRACT

Calling Up the Dead is a collection of seven short stories which all take place over the final hours of December 31, 1999 and the first few hours of January 1, 2000. The themes of time, history, and the reactions toward the new millennium (positive, negative, indifferent) of a variety of cultures are addressed. Each of the six major continents has a story, along with its cultural perspective, delivered by narrators both young and old—three female, three male and one balcony.

CALLING UP THE DEAD

November 31 Vancouver 8:59 p.m.

Once upon the curb I can finally smoke. But there is a price. For each inhalation of smoke also requires the inhalation of burning and frozen Canadian air. Vancouver airport air, to be precise.

A taxicab slushes itself up to me, flecking my black pants with shining particles of diamond dirt. The electric passenger window buzzes, then whirrs and dies, half-way down.

"You ride, lady?" An Hispanic voice asks. And it is just a voice, as I cannot not see a head: just a voice through a half-opened window. But a warm half-opened window. I open the back door, slide my solitary bag (I am *not* staying longer than I have to) in ahead of me, and sit down.

I give the driver the address which I retrieve from my number one notepad inside my left pocket. I then concentrate on a tiny piece of paper, vaguely spelling out the words No Smoking, as if I can somehow make it disappear telekinetically. The sign actually reads, "No S king" because the "mo" had been gnawed away. No doubt by other privacy-invadees like myself.

The taxi driver must have noticed my cigarette as I waited outside the airport, shivering in that too thin of a coat, and on cue he taps the window with a dirty finger just above the ridiculous sign when he notices I have not extinguished it.

"Not my rules, lady," he says. "Company rules."

The man smiles, and the car, which judging by the smell is merely an engine wrapped in foam, churns its way toward the north pole. I stub out my cigarette in the shiny ashtray and think of my father who has died.

How long has it been? Five years? Maybe even six. And now, it is only the old magnet of death which draws me near.

Good God! Telekinesis. Magnets. Whatever next?

Perhaps I am my father's daughter after all.

My eyes rest again on the piece of paper, and I begin making words out of it. Why scratch out the "mo", I wonder. No s king. No sking? Why, there's nothing *but* snow up here. Nose king? What could the king of noses smell?

But this is what I do. This is what I am. An editor. I take things and rearrange them. I cut them. I add to them. And sometimes. Yes, and, well, once, just once, I was even thanked.

Of course, *he*, eventually, had to be cut. A good plot, I had supposed. They all had supposed. A fantastic structure. Structure—shape--can be so ... exciting. From a distance, of course. But that was always only half the story.

And he was only half a story. And a half a story is so, well, so underdeveloped.

"Hey, lady," the driver interrupts my happy mind. "You not on that crazy crazy plane then?".

"What crazy plane?" I reply.

"That one going all around the world backwards." He smiles into the rearview mirror. How happy can someone be? But then, I imagine he has a large family—five hungry children. The smile is strained, not by falsity, but by that eternal optimism which I have to assume has carried him this far. Well, good for him.

"Going around the wrong way?" I answer. "What do you mean?"

"That big plane," he goes on. "All those millionaires. They flyin' West. All the way to Hawaii. They gonna see about six or seven New Years."

"Talk about putting off the inevitable," I say to myself. The man crinkles his eyes as if he only half-heard me, but he does not speak.

"I don't understand," I say finally, and then remembered the man on the plane.

The taxi driver nods his head and his smiling eyes turn back to the darkness.

Actually, the man on the plane had been quite attractive, in a way. Of course, he was sitting behind me, and it would have been impertinent to look. But something about his voice. Not gravelly or smoky, but rough at the edges, making it distinct. Yes. Distinct. It was precisely the kind of voice you would not forget. Something you might hear on the television. And, after all, it was first-class--maybe it was a TV anchor. Somebody quite famous.

And he was telling, another, but not a pretty woman, I recalled. No. I had definitely remembered her. She had had a lot of trouble with a bag which was plainly too large for the overhead compartment. And there was some type of gift which had its wrapping paper stuck through the mouth of the zipper--it would never have closed properly.

People always try and fit too much in. They carry around far too much.

But, the man had said that for only \$2000, he could have bought the Neverending-Millennium Ticket.

But, he'd gone on and said he couldn't, because his wife had arranged a big party and if only she'd known, and everything else, then they both could have gone, I supposed.

"The flight takes off from Montreal," he had said excitedly, "just before midnight.

And flies West to Honolulu. Passing through *six* separate time zones; each one celebrating the perpetual midnight."

The taxi slows to a crawl. The tires slide for a second, making me feel I am gliding. The grip on my lighter tightens.

"Accidenty" the driver announces but does not look back.

In the murky night I can see several flares. Glowing cherries of snowy light which illuminate slow figures in long bright coats. There are only four or five cars in front, but the road ahead is clear, and they have only slowed for the view.

When it is our turn to pass the scene, a telegraph pole is seen sprouting from the front of the crashed car—the doors are closed. An ambulance door is open ahead, and a body lays under a tarpaulin on a gurney.

The inevitable and dramatic hand slips out from under the cover. And, as the gurney is pushed into the cab, I see the hand jammed against the side of the door. The EMS man does not see what the problem is, and he pushed and pushes. But the hand comically seems to hang on. The EMS man's head looks underneath the gurney, and I suspect he checks to see if a wheel is stuck. Then he gives a concerted push with both of his hands, and the gurney is suddenly lost forever behind the slammed red and white door.

And strangely, the words, "What a final insult" do not appear before me. But instead, I am reminded of the painlessness which is afforded us when we pass on. All worldly itches miraculously itched away.

"Dead," the old woman had said on the phone some thirteen hours earlier. For some reason, she sounded as if she had practiced this line or maybe even liked saying it.

Or maybe she had even said it so much she had to make it interesting for herself.

"Dead," she repeated. "You must come, missy. You must. He all dead." Missy!

And who was this woman?

And dinner in the oven. And unopened invitations to New Years parties on the hall table. And the extra space in the apartment now. And what to do with it. And thank god for diaphragms, of course. And, could she possibly be his *lover*. Surely not. Companion, then.

After all, what kind of a man was my father? The kind who loved "whiskey and information." Not people. That's who. Or, at any rate, the collection of information. A thinker. Not a doer. No, this woman was no lover of his.

And, if there were an award for the most gullible man in the world, then he would drown in laurels. Copper bracelets on wrists. Herbal. Natural. Tiger Claws. Crystals. Crop Circles. Loch Ness Monsters. Religions—any gods, big or small "g". Nostradamus, Time travel, Aztec Spacecrafts, Atlantis, Men from Mars. Women from Mars. And anything ending in –athy, including *ap*athy. And Houdini. And yes, Houdini, after my mother died suddenly, as everyone does. He'd loved Houdini. He even had a life-size picture of him in the bathroom. The famed escapologist with face contorted, as he stood with great policemen towering over him, wrapping him in chains. And how he too was going to "come back" and he'd make everything right. Madness.

A great aficionado of the "genius," my father. Emphasis on *aficionado* only. My father, the man who had heard how so many of science's great discoveries had occurred by chance: a bowl left over a Bunsen burner over night, two substances which had always been forbidden to be married, eloping, and of course, all kinds of fruits falling from all kinds of trees. I can recall, this maybe thirty years ago, how he would sit and stare at the most ridiculous things. Like wind blown leaves. Sitting on the porch and watching the leaves driven wild by the wind. I think he really and truly believed that if he tried and concentrated, he might actually be able to extract aerodynamic secrets from those leaves. Arcane knowledge which would make even the greatest minds shudder in disbelief that they had not "seen it all along."

"Everything is in everything else," he would say. "It's just a matter of elimination. You gotta really look through a thing. Look through it, around it, and work out just what it isn't first. And after you've done all that can you only begin, and, I stress, begin to understand what it is."

I pay the \$17 fare with a twenty, wait to see if the Hispanic man with the imaginary five children fumbles for change, and when I see that he does, I wave it off, and step out into the deep freeze.

I light a cigarette immediately for the illusion of warmth as well as relief and look at the building before me: a broken down old duplex. Thick icicles hang down from the gutter making the entrance appear like some great fanged mouth.

But, of course, that is only in fairy tales.

There is only one light working on the porch and it is the neighbors'. There is trash on one side of the yard, and this does not surprise me. "Never throw anything away," he would preach. "Never know when you might need it again." Then, after a pause, he would add, "That's what they do in Egypt nowadays. Throw everything on the roof. You never know. And those Egyptians. They been round a while."

Out of habit, I reach for the doorbell and press the button . For a second, I think I hear someone coming to the door. The ghost of my father!

But no. It is not a ghost, though the little round face which peers at me from behind the chain of the neighbors door looks as if it has just seen one.

"You Missy?" an old Oriental woman asks.

"I am his daughter, yes," I reply.

The old woman undoes the latch but does not open the door any wider. "It's all open next door," she says. "You go in now. It's all in there."

"You mean, he's ..."

"No, no." The door opens a half an inch wider. I can hear a television set in the background and purple light plays on the wall behind her. "They took body. They gonna call. Later, they call."

I puff on my cigarette, turn to discard it, but when I turn back her door has already

closed. I am alone.

The hallway I step into is narrow and the carpet is almost totally obscured by a great sea of letters, bills, and flyers. I put my suitcase down, flick a switch on the wall and go further in. There is a dining room to my left. Dusty, empty and sad--the table looks as if it had never been used, and a couple of the glasses on the sideboard are broken and lying on their sides. And that is decent crystal: I know that because I recognize a few birthday and Christmas gifts which I have spent good money to send. Such a waste.

The living room couch is missing a leg and leans like a pathetic beggar to the floor. The coffee table is also covered with papers, and dust is everywhere. I turn on a lamp and I see the stereo system I had sent with a glass still set on top of it. There is still a brown mess in the bottom, and a stain of whiskey, eerily shaped like a wrinkled finger, pointing to the floor.

As I leave the living room, and turn a light on in the kitchen however, a great white glare bounces up at me from the floor: it is spotless. Every sideboard is bare, but immaculate. Out of instinct, I open the refrigerator. Empty.

I move slowly through the kitchen, to the back, to the solitary bedroom with its surprisingly large bed hard up against the corner and facing the dresser upon which is illuminated a photograph of me and my mother. The bed is stripped to the mattress, and cold to the touch. A sheet of white ice.

On the bedside table there is a photograph of the three of us. I take a cigarette out of my packet but then realize there is no ashtray in the room, so I walk back through and into the kitchen. The phrase "chalk and cheese" buzzes through my head. It is as if two separate people had lived here.

It is when I see the five quarters and, more importantly, the tattered manila envelope on the kitchen table, that I pull up a chair, light a cigarette, and drag an ashtray toward me. I open the manila envelope and read. It is a letter. *Dear Daughter*, it begins.

Daughter?! The least he could have done was to use my name. Had he forgotten my name?

Dear Daughter,

I was going to begin with something melodramatic, like "By the time you read this etc.", but, knowing you or rather knowing what you used to be like anyway, I figured you'd want to me to just cut right to the chase.

I'm dead.

There's no need for you to send me anymore glasses. The stereo is almost broken, but still usable, I suppose. That was a nice gift. Last Christmas, I think. Of course, I was almost deaf by then. But, you weren't to know. But don't worry yourself. And, I don't want you to think this is some kind of guilt thing. The very last thing I want you to think is that. After all you've done for me. And, I'm going to try and keep this short. And I'm not going to go on and on about grandchildren or marriage or your career, which, judging by the glassware and the stereo and so on, is obviously going pretty good. In fact, all I want you to do, is to finish off a little bit of communication. You see, after I went almost deaf, well, there were a bunch of folks I hadn't finished talking to. You know, before I headed up or down. (Maybe I'll go sideways like I used to walk?) Just some people. That's all. I can't really say they're people you know at all. They're just some people I enjoyed for a while, I guess or enjoyed me, or whatever. Might have some of the numbers wrong. You know, cocktail napkins and all that.

So that's it.

You'll find the telephone numbers on the back of this page. Many thanks for doing this, and I'm sorry you had to come all the way up to this godforsaken place. I guess I understand why you never visited. Hell! I wouldn't have.

Good bye, then.

And Love, I guess.

I lay the letter down, then turn the page over, knocking over the small pillar of five coins. There are four numbers written on the back. Long numbers. Nobody from around here, then.

Tacked on the wall by the telephone, there is a number written on hospital letterhead. Reluctantly, I dial.

"Mercy Hospital," an annoyingly bright woman's voice answers. There is music and some laughter in the background.

"Yes, hello there," I say. "I am looking for my father."

"What's his name, ma'am?"

"I mean, he's dead." I say, suddenly and foolishly.

"Dead?" The bright voice darkens. "Well, I'm afraid ..."

"I mean, he just died. He ..."

"Do you need an ambulance?"

"No, I mean, he's not here," I say. "I guess you just took him away."

"This is Officer Luk, ma'am," a man says. "You say someone took your father?"

"No. I mean, well, he died. I'm his daughter, you see. I've come to, well, to bury him. I just flew in yesterday. From Dallas. And he's not here."

"Ah, then *Mercy* took him then?" the Officer says. "When he died?"

"Well, yes, I guess so" I say and look down at the piece of paper. In the top left hand corner is the name of a doctor. "Wait a minute. Is Doctor Keigh there? I've got his number. On this piece of paper. *Mercy*'s paper."

I hear the officer speak to the woman, then his voice is back in my ear.

"Ah. Yes, ma'am. He would have taken him. I'll hand you back to the switchboard, and they'll transfer you."

"Thank you," I reply. "Thank you very much."

A few clicks, and the phone is ringing and then a man speaks.

"Dr. Keigh, here." Another bright but deep voice bristling with confidence. Like that man on the plane. Again there is music in the background. What kind of a hospital is this?

"Yes, er, hello there," I say. "I believe you took an old man. Er ... from .. from 222 Exchange street, today?"

"Took?" There is a pause and I can hear papers being shuffled and a cigarette being drawn on. "Oh yes. Yes. What can I do for you?"

"I'm his daughter. I've come all the way from Dallas. I suppose I have to ...

"Yes. Yes," he said. "We will need you to come down here. Formal stuff. Papers to be signed. All that kind of thing."

"Right now?" I imagine the night. Colder, darker.

"No, oh no," he said. "We'll just hold him here for now. How about nine tomorrow morning?"

"Fine," I say.

"It shouldn't take long. And, well, I am so sorry for your loss." There is another pause. I hear the click of a pen. "I should have said that right away really, shouldn't I?" A short pause. "Look, I am sorry. We're having a bit of a party here and, well, I just wasn't thinking. Please, forgive me."

When I place the phone back on the wall, I suddenly notice how quiet it is. I cannot even hear the television from next door. If they still have it on that is. I spy a favorite brand of coffee on the sideboard. The refrigerator gleams inside but there is only a gallon of milk. It is 1%, however. My preference. Of course, these things could all be my father's preference. After all, I am his daughter. Can we not enjoy the same things?

There is an alley lit up to the side of the duplex which looks directly out onto the brick wall of a brand new neighboring property. I sit down at the kitchen table, and realize how depressing such a view must have been. The distance between the buildings could only have been a few feet-enough for two people just to squeeze by perhaps, if they really liked each other. The window, very cool to the touch, is unnecessary.

The phone cord stretches all the way across the kitchen, and I hold it between my legs as I read the first number. I begin to dial but stop myself. Just where is the 207 area

code? The east coast somewhere.

The phonebook in the drawer by the telephone gives me the place: Maine.

Maine? How does he know anybody in Maine? I don't even know anybody in Maine. I dial the number twice because I mess it up the first time. I am not looking forward to this, but a dying man's request and all that brings me through.

The phone rings twenty or so times without an answer. I hang it up and look at my watch. It is 8:35. Which makes it 10:35 in Maine. People should be in. Of course, they could be on vacation. And after all, it is New Years.

I go into the living room and turn the stereo on. Christmas music plays. I allow it, and go back to the table.

Calling everyone on New Years is ridiculous. They will all probably be at a party. Or will they? A friend of my father. How old would he be? My god! I have forgotten how old my father is. I light a cigarette as if this will ignite some answer. It provides me with a range. At least seventy. Maybe seventy-two.

The second number's area code is 909. Southern California. I dial, and after the fourth ring there is an answering machine. An older woman's voice. She speaks as if she is reading from a piece of writing.

"I am sorry I am not able to answer your call. Um, could you please leave a message after the beep, and I'll try and get back to you." There is a short pause, and then the words "thank you" hurriedly added are cut off by the long and annoying beep.

I hesitate. What shall I say? If you knew my father, he's dead. I am his daughter. Please call No. Why would she want to call? Who is she? A girlfriend? Surely not. And all the way down in California. Who do we know in California?

Again, my mind spins back through a faded address book in my head. A few cousins. But they were never close. We are Midwest people. Midwest, and we stay there. No lolloping off to Florida or Arizona when it dips below seventy-five. Except my father,

of course, but he went north. North does not count.

I do not leave a message and go over and put the phone back on the wall. My coffee is too cold now, and I instinctively look around behind me where, in my kitchen, there is a microwave. Here, there is an old bread bin and a few ancient tins which, upon inspection house nothing at all. I take a big sip, then fill the cup up from the kettle.

For the first time, I realize that the house is warm. When I had walked in, I had done so with the full intention of meeting someone, anyone. And, as a result, that person or persons would have the heating on. I check the thermostat by the doorway into the living room, and it reads sixty-eight. Perfect. In fact, there is really no need for my coat, no matter how thin it is.

I retrieve my suitcase from the hallway. There is a stale smell there too, which is has not yet reached the kitchen.

In the bedroom, I plop my case down on the bed, which gives easily, and when I sit on it, almost makes me want to curl up, right then and there. I take out a flannel nightgown, a bag of toiletries, a change of clothes and the book I am presently editing. I begin to set the room up the way I like it, realizing that I actually have to change nothing. The bed faces the window, and there is an ashtray on the bedside table already.

I light a cigarette then place it in the ashtray and lie back, kicking off my shoes which click as they meet the hardwood floor. I close my eyes for perhaps a moment, but soon my stomach growls. The food on the airplane was foul. How they get away with it is astounding. I suppose we are all supposed to be wowed by the fact that we can actually eat at 600 miles an hour without food flying off our plates. Of course a letter is called for, but I will never write it.

The kitchen beckons again. When I open the refrigerator door, I notice a small cake at the back, and I eagerly grab for it. It is a strawberry cake, though not a shortcake, and, as a small dab with my finger uncovers, my mother's recipe, I am sure.

And my mother. Whose final words were: "The milk's getting low." Which caused my father, then at sea in an ocean of "Afterlife Contact" books, to let out such a tremendous laugh that it may well have shattered all the world's whiskey bottles.

I slide the quarters to one side as I sit down to eat. The two other telephone numbers with area codes 305 and 509 bother me. I take three mouthfuls—the cake is delicious--but then feel sated, as is always the case with false hunger. I must remember to eat properly. Out of habit I take another mouthful as I push the buttons on the phone between my legs. I dial the 305 number, which I happen to recognize as south Florida. There are several rings and then a man answers.

"Hello, and a happy millennium to you," he says in a practiced and slightly drunken manner.

"Yes," I say, "this is Miss Mith here. Er ... I'm calling about my father. Is ..."

"Mith," the man repeated. "Mith. No Mith here, I'm afraid. You must have the wrong ..."

"No, look. Please." I go on. "I was left this number. By my father. He's dead. He just ..."

I could hear the phone being held away, and the man said: "I don't know. There's all kinds out tonight, I bet. Here, you have a go."

"Hello," said a woman's voice, very schoolmistressy.

"Yes, hello," I say. "Look, I'm sorry to bother you, but my father gave me this number to call, and ..."

"We don't know any Mith. You must have ..."

"I know this is ridiculous. But he's dead and ..."

"We're all terribly sorry about that, but there's not much I can do. Besides, we're having a party and ..." Then the woman's tone changes. It becomes lighter. Much lighter. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. This is Susan, right. Oh, Susan, Susan it's so good to ...

you old ... You've had us all fooled here. Now, when are you coming. Harold and I have ..."

"This is not Susan," I say, a little too harshly. But, before I can apologize the woman hangs up. I am upset with myself. For imposing on people. On New Years.

My cigarettes are in the bedroom. I place the phone back in its cradle and walk back there. I find the cigarette is neatly stubbed out, and I grab my package. I hope I have another pack in my bag, I say to myself, as I hear the wind whistle down between the buildings. It makes me shiver.

I find a bottle of wine in a cupboard but cannot find a glass until I remember the one on top of the stereo in the living room. I retrieve it, wash it out, pour a glass of wine, and light another cigarette. I put the strawberry cake back into the refrigerator, take up the phone again, and dial the last number. I toy with the five quarters, then leave them in a single column on the sideboard. The phone rings endlessly.

On the umpteenth ring, a little girl answers. She cannot be more than five, even though she speaks quite clearly and with great authority.

"Hello," she says. "There's absolutely no one here."

"This is Miss Mith, here."

"Hello, Miss Mith," the little girl parrots. "I'm Miss Missy and my daddy's right next door at a big party, and I can hear all the kinds of music and its loud."

"Is mommy there, darling?" I say, not believing the child to be alone, and thinking, but probably just hoping, that the party must be in their own house and the child is confused.

"Nope," she says. "Nope, nope, nope." Then I hear her put the phone down on a table and she shouts out: "Hello, anybody." A long silence. "Anybody for Mith. Mith. Mith." There is another excruciating pause, and I can hear, faintly, music which might be emanating from a nearby building.

"Hello," I say quietly, then a little louder as the child may well have just left the phone off the hook. "Hello. Missy. Hello. HELLO."

The phone is picked up suddenly: "There's no need to do big shouties," the little voice says. "And daddy's not here."

"What about mummy? Is mummy there?"

"Nope. Nope. Nope about mummy too. She went away. She went away to the big big field." Another pause, and then suddenly the girl says: "I have to go now. Phone bills can cost a lot of money, don't you know. Bye bye, Mith. Missy say bye bye. Bye bye. Bye bye ... forever."

I have neglected my cigarette throughout the conversation and light another one hurriedly. And, even though I am a thousand miles away or more--the area code is for eastern Washington state--I am fully prepared to storm over to the little girl's house and give her father what for. Imagine, leaving a child alone. On New Year's Eve! I mean, what about a sitter? I drain my glass of wine and quickly pour another. My mind fills with horrific scenes. The father, drunk, with a much younger woman in tow, staggers through the front door. Missy, has prepared a bouquet of flowers out of different colored papers which she holds up to him as if he were a priest. A bottle of something glints in his jacket pocket. The young woman giggles, then says, "Oh, darling" as, bear-like, the father lunges a little at the girl who then bursts into tears and runs upstairs. The young woman heads for the stairs but her arm is grabbed by the father who pulls her toward him.

"No, doan worry 'bout 'er," he slobbers in between slugs from his bottle. "She'll get over it. Her mother got over it." He wipes his mouth with his sleeve. "We all get over it."

And she, succumbing to him because it is New Years Eve and she would rather be with him than all alone, and reminded that she is nothing.

I look at my watch and realize that although it is only 9:45, I am tired. Very tired.

I remember Doctor Keigh's appointment, and then wonder where in the hell *Mercy* is.

I take my glass of wine into the bedroom, and then into the bathroom. The cabinet above he sink is empty when I open it, and I slowly begin to place my toiletries on the bottom shelf, as if I am going to stay for a long time. I realize this too late, but then wonder what is the point of taking everything out again. I take a long draught from the wine, and then run some warm water into the sink. My head is much lighter now from the wine, and with the combination of the warm but still refreshing water I cannot imagine why I did not do this the moment I arrived.

I slowly begin to undress, and find myself becoming heavier and heavier with each article of clothing I remove. When I am down to my underwear, I wander back into the kitchen for a little more wine. I do not probably need it, but I like having a full glass next to my bed at night. The notepaper with the telephone numbers bothers me. Four of the quarters are in a pile to the side. The solitary one sits atop the letter, holding down the page. I pour some wine, then suddenly, a flash of headlights which sweeps the alley for a second, makes me realize how naked I really am. I clutch the glass and my cigarettes to my body and hop back into the bedroom leaving the kitchen light on.

One more cigarette, I tell myself, and then that's it. I take off my underwear and put on my pajamas, turn off the overhead light, and open up my book to edit. The bed is wonderfully warm, the way it is when someone has been lying down in it for some time. And the great red comforter is a dream. After only a paragraph my eyes begin to blur, so I place the book on the bedside table and fall into a deep ocean of sleep.

Dr. Keigh will be a very handsome man. He will have red hair which I have never liked, but he will wear it very neatly, and possess a tremendous smile, which he will immediately apologize for when I greet him. "Out of respect" he will say, unable to cancel his smile.

"It's right this way." His finely manicured palm will usher me through a double-doorway and down a long white-tiled corridor. We will take the elevator down to the basement, and I will not be able to help noticing his eyes admire me from the opaque reflection in the elevator door. He will say: "I wonder if you heard about that Neverending-Millennium flight? It was all over the papers."

"Some people had mentioned it on the plane," I will reply as we pass a series of black doors with tiny windows which are darkened.

"I just wondered what they all do when they get to Honolulu. I mean ..."

"Why, they stop all the nonsense, I reckon," my voice will answer. "And then they come back the right way."

A large plastic double-door will be pushed aside and I will notice a drop in temperature as we enter the long and the wide white room.

"Now," Peter--he will insist on his first name—will begin as we draw near to the room. "He's going to look incredibly life-like. And ... well ... I just want to warn you about touching."

"Touching?"

"Yes . A lot of people ... well ... they like to hug and kiss. And, I'm afraid ... they're usually in for quite a shock."

As Peter will pull out the drawer where my father will be, he will brush my jacket with his elbow.

And then there he will be.

And I will say, and Peter will think: "It almost seems as if he is smiling."

"Yes," Peter will answer as if he has noticed this for the first time--which of course he has not. "Yes, it does appear that way, doesn't it. As if they know something we don't, as they say." He will draw the white sheet back, then stop, and say: "Oh, I mean, have you seen enough?"

"Oh yes," I cannot help but say.

And Peter and I went out to dinner. And afterwards we warmed Canada a degree or two with our love. And then we got married. And then we moved into our great big house. And then we had five children. And then we lived happily.

THREE FOR TANGO

November 30 Buenos Aires 1:59 a.m.

Some people talk to themselves when they are alone. Some people talk to themselves when they sleep. I talk to myself when I am with someone who is sleeping. In this way, I remove any interruptions or awkward questions, and yet I still maintain a rapt audience. I can only sound foolish to myself and that is always forgivable.

Tonight, or rather, this morning (it is one minute before two), my audience is wrapped, or partially wrapped in the bedsheet. The unwrapped part, a long slender right leg, a thigh sporting a copse of dark hair, a large right breast, and an arm which does not know where to be, are bathing in the dry blue waters of moonlight. Traci, for that may be her name when all parts are assembled, has the uncanny knack of leaving uncovered her most female of parts. I have noticed this all of the twenty or so nights we have spent together since August, and I have no complaints.

My name is Professor Alejandro Boruca and I teach literature at a small, but prestigious, private university in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. I have been happily married for twenty-seven years, and I have three children—two sons and one daughter. My sons, Philippe and Esteban, are twenty-eight and twenty-nine respectively, and my daughter, Felicia, twenty, is exactly four days younger than Traci (snoring, I think, now). My wife, Ovilla, is a beautiful woman of fifty-six who comes from a wealthy family in the city—landowners and so on. I am just fifty-eight. Yesterday was my birthday.

A strange phrase that: "Yesterday was my birthday." Have I really aged fifty-three years in a mere twenty-four hours? Perhaps I have.

That explains why I am so tired. Exhausted really. And it is not the heat. The air-

conditioner here is wonderful, if noisy. I must get down to the shops and order the new system. There was that Italian on the phone. "Centrale, senor," he had said. "You need Centrale. Even the good window units, senor. Well, they are still window units."

It was not a convincing argument really, but a strategy I had often seen employed at faculty meetings. "Computers are what we need," Dabato, our Chair—a nice man who will fail to change anything--had insisted. "Books are good, yes. But they are only books. Computers will bring us the world."

And who needs the world?

My bed partner stirs. Her arm finally finds itself an occupation. She lets her hand pull the sheet from over her face. A tangle of thick hairs emerges and then a shadowy face, with lips tasting the night. She is coming up for air.

In June of this past year, my wife and I took a trip to London. To be fair, it was partially funded by the university, as my wife promised that—from her connections—she would definitely be able to get at least one interview with somebody famous (a Fuentes or a Llorca, somebody like that) because they knew where they lived in the city. Had even met one of them once. Of course, she was lying, but that is one of the qualities which most attracted, still attracts me to her: her ability to lie without one grain of remorse.

In fact, I can recall a specific incident, just last month, when I was asking what she wanted for Christmas. We were sipping our afternoon mate, and she blew her cup cool as she spoke.

"I don't want anything, my love. Really." Her lips together again. "Nothing at all."

Now that was a lie. I know what she wanted. What she wanted was for me to love her like I had loved her when we first met, and love her like I had even before then. That is the kind of lying I am talking about.

Needless to say, our trip to London was wonderful, and I managed to procure a great many books and lists of books to put before Dabato for the new school year upon my return. We never encountered a single author let alone anyone famous or even Latin American

That's something I like about London. It is so cosmopolitan. You can so easily become invisible. For all I know, the man sitting opposite us at the Savoy Grill—we treated ourselves on our last night—looked a lot like Llosa. But I could not be so sure.

I do not know how my wife explained everything to Dabato, but it has been several months now and faculty meetings and coffees we have shared off and on campus have never broached the subject. Indeed, he has promised a number of my book suggestions for the Spring term. You see, my wife, Ovilla is a wonderful liar—in the most truthful or rather forgiving or forgivable way.

Forgiving. I must stop using that word. I must find something better.

However, it was on the flight back that I really began to think of Traci—even though I would have to wait until August 15 to actually meet her.

The airplane had just taken off, and Ovilla was beginning her long journey through the *London Times*. We are only able to receive the Sunday edition at the university, and I have never quite got around to sending off that order form. Like the air-conditioning, there is always a fairly decent argument against it. "The *Sunday Times* is the only day of the week to read, my love," I will still say to my wife, Ovilla. "It recaps the whole week. And

besides, nobody likes being depressed in the week. Rather wait until Sunday. Then your argument can be that, 'Well, it's Monday tomorrow. Next week will be better.'"

My maternal grandmother kept herself alive to the age of one hundred and three with just such a philosophy, supplemented with exactly two liters of warm beer a day.

"Oh, my love," Ovilla remarked. "Look at this, here."

I put down my glass of surprisingly decent Chilean wine, put on my spectacles and peer at the newspaper. "What?" I asked.

Ovilla's index finger from her right hand taps the paper over a letter to the editor. I can still see, from that one finger that she is in possession of some kind of perfection.

Years ago, when she fought with her parents about spending a year in the United States, they had cut her off. Resilient as ever, she borrowed money from an uncle for the flight, and headed off to New York. I still remember her telling me how she had made her tuition, paid back her uncle and still had enough money for a car when she returned merely by being a hand model. "Yes," she told me, "I was paid \$15,000. And just for holding soap."

"Someone has written all about us, my sweet," the finger seems to say.

I adjust my spectacles and read the extremely brief letter:

Dear Sir, Of late, my husband and I have been practicing the safest of all sex. I wonder if there is anything one can do to remedy such a situation? How might one go about living a more dangerous life with one's husband?

Sincerely, O.A.

"O and A," my wife repeats. "Ovilla and Alejandro. That's us."

I reach out for the locks of hair beside me and twirl a few of them around my finger. The hair is long. Only when another car goes by with a horn blasting in the new millennium is she disturbed. My hand stays with her head as she turns away. I can feel the hairs becoming taut, so I slowly release them. Her right arm is again on the move. This time it is the beginning of a great bodily movement, as she turns ninety degrees onto the left side. Her right hand pulls at the sheet which rests for just a moment on her right side, then slides down out of sight. In a moment, she is still. And naked.

Foolishly, I attempted to seduce Ovilla as soon as we got home. In fact, as soon as we got into the cab to take us home, I placed my hand in the lap of her thin red summer dress, spread my fingers wide and drew them up the inside of her thigh.

"My love," she said. "Not here." Her elbow dug into my ribs. "Not in front of the cab driver."

We arrived home and my stupidity persisted. As she undressed for her shower I asked to join her.

"No, my love," she said closing the door. "I just want to get cleaned up. Not all dirty again." I heard the lock being turned.

And in the kitchen--our cook was not to return until the following day—when I reached behind her, and drank in her perfumed skin, working my hands up toward her breasts, she turned to face me.

"Now, look, my love," she said. "I need to get dinner ready. You hardly ate on the airplane, and you will suffer for it tomorrow."

Suffer for it tomorrow, I thought. But I am suffering now.

I retired to my study and took out my vengeance on a fine *puro*, cigar. By the time the room was filled with smoke, Ovilla rapped at the door, entered with a tray and explained that she was not hungry and would be going straight to bed.

The tray was put before me, and she placed her rather dry lips to my forehead then the door closed behind her.

I was indeed hungry and ate swiftly, then paced about the house, glanced at a few of my book purchases, began a letter to a friend I was not particularly fond of, turned the lights out and went to bed.

My wife and I have always slept in the nude, ever since we first got married, so when I slid into bed next to my wife, Ovilla, I immediately encountered her skin. She shifted for a moment, then turned over onto her right side. I inched closer to her, stretching my legs out wide until my right leg grazed her foot. I could feel the heat from her body as I drew ever closer. Then I too turned onto my right side.

My penis was some moments ahead of me, so I pulled it up and held it against my stomach. I eased myself against Ovilla's back and was about to put my arm about her shoulders when she leapt out of bed.

"No!" She screamed, then dragged the top cover and wound it around herself.

"But, my love."

"My love, nothing," she said. "I will NOT let it be this way."

She made a knot about her chest with the cover, walked over to me and held my face in her hands. "I love you too much, my sweet, to allow you to act in this demeaning manner with yourself." She stepped back and went over to the door. "Love, my sweet, is not merely a reaction to a discrepancy." She turned the door handle. "I am sleeping in

Felicia's room. Do Not disturb me."

When I was a child, my mother, like all other mothers of course, was forever begging the question: "Alejandro, just when are you going to grow up?"

Then, we lived a happy and isolated existence in the *campo*, about one hundred miles from Buenos Aires in a little village called Cuelladerio—near a tributary of the Plata. Time passed slowly in the fields and the lightning pace of the City barely reached us. Wild stories found their way down to us from those who took the *colectivo*, but we never ventured to the City.

"Everything we need is here," my father would say as he struck a match across his heel and surveyed his world from the porch. "We have the river, we have the trees, we have the cows, we have the sun."

By 1958, all we had left was the sun.

And it was in that year, Senor Tienterra arrived. He bought up most of the land-admittedly for a reasonable price—and my father became an *alquilado*, a renter. We were offered a *rancho* with some land for ourselves, but most of the work would be for Tienterra's pockets.

I was sixteen and had recently discovered girls. Of course, they had been there all the time, at the local school and in Cuelladerio, but when I saw Tienterra's daughter, Ovilla, for the first time, I knew that she was different. Not only was she the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, but she aroused me. It was that simple: she was the first girl I ever saw who changed me, affected me without even touching me, without even speaking to me. She was the first girl who made me feel incomplete. I *had* to be with her. There

was nothing else worth living for. Without her, I would always be half a person. I may as well have been blinded—what was worth seeing in the world if it could not be reflected in her eyes too.

All of these realizations came to me from just one glance. And, strangely, a glance not even directed at me

It was a little after noon, and the sun blasted the tiny square of Cuelladerio. It was market day and many of the stalls were throbbing with customers as voices rang out and bounced around the buildings selling fish and meats and corn and drinks. I stood leaning against the wall of the Café Rio—the only real Café in the town—and had just brought a *chorizo* up to my face, when a great black Mercedes-Benz—with tinted windows of-entered the square, drove once around, as if it were some great king seeking out its throne, then stopped directly in front of the Café.

The splendid vehicle had drawn quite a crowd of eyes, and when it finally halted a cloud of red dust rose up behind it. There was a click and then the door nearest to me opened.

At first, just two white patent leather shoes appeared beneath the door. Then, from above it, a chocolate cartwheel hat, at an angle which obscured the face, came into view.

Two old women who had been slapping *empanadas* into shape looked up from beneath dusty caps and guided their ancient eyes toward the car. The driver—a flabby man in a black suit too small for him—rushed to close the door behind the young girl, but with such force that an olive, about to become embedded in an *empanada* slipped from one of the old women's hands, landed on the foot of the table leg and began rolling directly

toward the girl.

The young girl, perhaps fourteen, revealed two exquisite knees—if knees can be exquisite—when her white dress stretched as she bent down to retrieve the olive. She brushed it off delicately, then blew on it and started toward the old women. But one of them raised a hand as if to say, Do not bother. The girl stopped, allowed a smile to grow on her face, looked about the marketplace which had, for all intents and purposes, come to a complete halt and then threw the olive high in the air.

I think we all looked at that olive as if it were some kind of explosive device which we knew would kill us all. But nobody moved: we had all somehow accepted our fate.

And when Ovilla's mouth caught that ridiculous red-eyed grenade, she held it on her tongue for a second, perhaps to reassure everyone that she had caught it, then swallowed gently and proceeded into the café.

In the distance there are fireworks. My bed partner remains still. I am jealous. I wish I could sleep like that. When I was young I could sleep until noon. Of course, I was not a professor then, not a husband, not a father. I was a young man without responsibilities with very forgiving—excuse me—very understanding—no—very loving parents. The world spun for me, and, if I missed anything, I would merely wait a day until the it came my way again.

It took me some time before I realized that the world does not spin of its own accord, but because people, some people, are pushing it. Of course, I do not mean to get into trouble with magnetic theories, or god forbid, Science, but if one wants something these days (unless one is young and loved) one usually needs to, at the very least, press

one's shoulder to the millstone.

But, she sleeps on, as the world spins and the fireworks rocket us into a new century. I love a party as much as the next man, but I can not be so excited. After all, it is merely the passing of another harvest year, an hour, a moment, a second. In fact, it is not even a passing. And the new year will be, I believe, a very anxious one. These past ones has been so filled with discoveries. And knowledge. We managed to stretch our minds to the very horizon of our extinction. Just yesterday, I was reading about nuclear detonations—"underground" and all "supervised" the article emphasized (however that is done)—in India. But what was interesting was that they had interviewed some people from the surrounding area who complained that there were no longer any animals roaming the jungles of their region—one man claimed that he had walked forty miles without encountering the voice of a single bird.

Ovilla was sent away to school, at first in Europe, and then in Buenos Aires until she was eighteen. For five years I only caught glimpses of her when her father brought her in from the great estancia during her holidays at Christmas. Her father and mother went to live in Paris from June until August, and, I presumed, that is where Ovilla spent her time. Her mother, it was rumored, could not stand the temperature when it was below a certain mark.

When I turned eighteen, and with high school diploma in hand, I headed off for the big City to stay with an uncle: I was going to be a journalist. I would bring the wrold to Argentina. I would be assigned to Rome then Madrid then London, then Paris where I would be able to see Ovilla.

As I say, I never once spoke to Ovilla and although I had fallen for her, I ventured out with friends and discovered some of the world's great mysteries along the boulevards of Buenos Aires where the cafes were always plentiful, and the city, which lived by night, swallowed me up; and I went willingly.

Ovilla was never forgotten. And, in fact, when I was twenty I very nearly married a woman—some years older than myself—getting as far as the bus station to take her home to meet my family before she gave me the slip. I ended up alone on a bus, bound for home with no money with my heart in tatters. I had already bored the bus driver with my story and had turned my attentions to an older couple who nodded and smiled as best they could but looked relieved when the bus stopped and they got off.

My first love, I wondered to myself as I waited kicking stones about the road as the bus refueled and the driver's were changed—the first driver heading off on his motorscooter into the pampas somewhere.

My first and probably last love, I moaned. Like that motorscooter, just disappearing into the great grass never to be heard from again.

Where was all the goodness in the world?

And, just when I thought nothing could be worse, as I stepped back onto the bus, I discovered that I had lost my ticket. All explanations to the new driver were fruitless—he had known this kind of thing before, especially from the youth of today. No. I would have to wait for charity, he said. Or hitch a ride. I looked to the sky, and, as if to spite me, it darkened was swallowed by purple clouds and a great thunderclap announced the great downpour. I took shelter at the tiny roadside café and waited outside for some vehicle to pass.

And, it just so happened that a sputtering noisy mass from the horizon slowly edged its way toward the café. It was my grandmother, our local *curandera*, medicine-woman and she had collected all of the evil of Cuelladerio from the previous month and was taking it away to dispose of it in the ocean.

She drove an ancient truck which had croaked and groaned its way to the coast road for twenty years. There was no roof to the back of the truck because my grandmother never knew how much evil she would have to crate up, and she always wanted to have enough room. On some occasions the truck would be so top heavy that the whole of Cuelladerio was sure the old woman would end up in a ditch or even worse. But she never did, and the old woman and the truck which had slowly grew to resemble the old woman—dirty, dark, noisy and persistent—always returned, went to the only bank in Cuelladerio and deposited her money from the townspeople. For another three weeks she rested, calmly knowing that goodness would reign for a while, until she started to receive the summons from the town and began planning her route.

She had asked for my help only one time, when her regular carpenter had been ill.

"Now, remember," she had told me that day. "You must follow every instruction." She pulled out her tape-measure and tapped it with her finger. "To the inch, Alejandro. To the inch. Evil, he is very slippery. It is in his nature."

We arrived at the house where we were to remove the evil and were greeted by a mother and her two teenage daughters. The mother had a bandage on her left arm, and above her right eye, there was the yellowed remains of a bruise.

"It's in the back room," the mother said, ushering us down a darkened hallway with

a musty smell, but before we entered the living room, the woman turned and raised a finger to her lips for us to be quiet.

In that room, which was illuminated by the white sun from the window, a man, unshaven, sat with a newspaper on his lap. He was asleep and snoring, and there was the odor of a cheap cigar in the air. A small brown bottle lay on the floor by his feet which were bare with long yellowed nails. The five of us tiptoed past him and into the kitchen.

"Now," my grandmother surveyed the room with its great table in the center where bowls and saucers huddle together. "Where exactly were you standing?"

The woman positioned herself on the far side of the table against the sink.

"If you could," my grandmother went on, "please, show me, where your husband was"

"Margeritte," the mother said to one of the girls. "Over there. By the refrigerator." The young girl did as she was told.

"But he is much taller, no?" my grandmother asked with her hand on her chin. "Do you have books?"

"Of course," said the mother, and the other girl scurried back into the house. She soon returned with two faded phone books.

"If, Margeritte could, please stand on two of them," my grandmother asked and the girl obeyed.

"Alejandro," my grandmother said. "You will measure."

I knelt down before the Margeritte and noticed her legs were trembling slightly, and tiny blonde hairs held the light of the day and made them glisten.

"Which pot did he use?"

"That one." The mother pointed to a charcoal black skillet.

"Hold it, please," my grandmother asked Margeritte.

It was then my task to measure a square area around Margeritte which would include both her and the outstretched skillet. Then, I was to stand on a chair and measure the height which the crate would need to be. And, when that was done I was sent out for the appropriate-sized wood from the truck as my grandmother and the mother and the teenage girls sat and drank tea.

Of course, as soon as I started hammering the man in the living room awoke. He rushed in to the kitchen with a reddened face. But, as soon as he saw my grandmother, who stood up immediately, he turned pale, rubbed his chin, murmured something about going out and down to the Café and hurried away.

"You will have no more trouble," my grandmother assured the mother.

The crate was six feet four inches high and three and a half feet square at the base when it was completed. My grandmother then began inspecting it for gaps in the wood. I sat, my shirt drenched in sweat, and sipped a cold glass of juice as the teenage girls eyed me up and down. When they started to giggle, their mother sent them out of the house.

My grandmother patted the crate, then turned to me and smiled. "A good job, Alejandro," she said. "Now, through the back with it, please."

I took the crate which although awkward was light because it contained nothing but evil, and loaded it into the truck. We always took the evil out the back door, when there was one, because it could leave no trace in the house. The mother settled up with my grandmother, signed a document and the exorcism was complete.

At the end of each month, the local paper listed the evils which my grandmother

had removed, citing the name of the persons involved and the exact nature of the evil.

"It was not love, Alejandro" my grandmother consoled me. "Not love."

We sat inside the café drinking *mate*, and my grandmother counted out some bills from a great thick fold.

"A very evil month, Alejandro." She said, then laughed. "Perhaps I should start crating up love, no?" She looked into my eyes and saw beyond the woman I had believed I loved. "You would be my most regular customer, no?"

She pushed the money across the table then, when I reached for it, she placed her hand on top. "Love is something that never changes, Alejandro. If it is true, it will always be as wonderful. True love is the one constant in the world."

"Even when people get old?" I asked her.

"Especially then." She leaned over to me and whispered. "But, true lovers never get old." She cackled for a moment and then closed her eyes. "The right woman, Alejandro, will only become that which you desire when you truly love her."

Ovilla appeared again in the tiny square of Cuelladerio in the Summer of 1972.

This time however she stepped out from behind the wheel of a Mercedes-Benz dressed in a pair of sandals and dark glasses. The town was preparing for the *Fiesta de Frutas* and the pavements were littered with crates of oranges, and apples and quinces, and she maneuvered her silkened legs about them and walked into my office above the Café Rio.

After failing in journalism, my father had spoken with Tientierra and gotten me a job for him, bookkeeping. I was to work for one year and save my salary—I would be

allowed to live at home and pay a modest rent—and, at the end, I would be enrolled in a university. My father wanted Law, my mother Medicine—either would have made them happy. I was to choose Literature, but kept that from them for two years. It was only when a friend had visited and bought along an article for my parents' eyes from a small paper in the City where my name, amongst others, was shown beneath an advertisement for *El Gato Montes* (The Wildcat Bar) presents Poetry by

"Aha," Ovilla said as she waved to me over the head of my secretary who immediately ushered her in.

Ovilla held out a hand which then cut my heart in two as I shook it, sat down across from me and lit a cigarette.

"We meet again, Alejandro," she said.

"I don't understand," I stammered as I finally located an ashtray for her outstretched hand, the fingers of which twisted a used matchstick which was also my stomach.

"I wore that ridiculous hat of my mother's. You stood," she got up and went to the window. "There," she pointed with her cigarette. The sun ignited her body. "Your eyes were like great marbles. You had a piece of sausage in your mouth. You had not finished chewing."

She returned to the other side of the table and stubbed out the cigarette she had hardly used. "I've never forgotten that."

Our eyes locked for a moment, but then I felt obligated to speak.

"What can I do for you, Senora Tienterra?"

"Ovilla," she insisted, placing the world's most beautiful bottom on the edge of my

desk. "My name is Ovilla and my father wants to see you. Up at the house."

"Could he not telephone?" I wondered, stupidly.

"Yes," she said. "But I came instead." She leaned over the desk so that the top of her thin dress fell open. "I hope you do not mind."

So, one day in July, I was driven out to the great estancia Tientierra to discover Ovilla's father and mother were in West Germany on business, and that the whole house was empty.

My legs are stiff. My throat is dry. All this talking. And almost a whole life. Well, the important parts. The highlights. Again, of course.

There is a voice.

Not Traci. Traci is asleep. I lean over her shoulder and listen to her breathing.

Smooth and ordered. The room perhaps. But rooms do not speak. The cicadas bleating out the night's heat have caused this. It is late. I am tired.

The voice again.

"And love," it seems to say. Or I say. In fact, I do say because I repeat what I have heard.

"And love."

What can it mean? A ghost? Here. Ridiculous.

I step off the bed and go to the window. As I approach the air-conditioner, it starts up. It frightens me. Fool!

I turn back to the bed. The moon has moved, so now the body there is no longer blue, but lost in that middle darkness of a barely lit room. Rooms can never be totally dark

because, after a while, one becomes accustomed to the dark. In time, one adapts to the dark and finds the light from that dark.

"And love"

This is something else. I am standing, naked in a room with a woman, with an air-conditioner, with a digital clock. Yes, look, the clock. 2:23 a.m.

Now, 2:24 a.m.. There can be no ghosts in such a room. Ghosts need an old house. Ghosts need something to be dead so that they may live.

I am alive. My wife is alive. Traci is alive. Who can be dead? "And love."

My course schedule for the Fall semester included a general literature course. On September 15 there was a rap at the door to my classroom, and the window in the door was filled with the face of a young woman. I gestured her in, and she handed me a piece of pink administration paper. The men in the front row all turned with interest, the women in the class graded her—a C+ by the looks of jealousy.

"Professor Boruca?" she said.

"Certainly," I replied in English, then reviewed my grade book. "And you are...?"

"Traci," she said choosing one of the six seats that the men have offered her.

"Traci Fuller. I'm late, I know, but."

She bit her lip, and I fell madly in love with her.

"Take a seat, senora Fuller."

I will make her my special student, I said to myself as the class ended and the

uneducated throng rumbled past my desk even more unhappy about its next destination.

But Traci stayed. Traci and her wide blue eyes and long hair and ample chest remained.

"I'm an exchange student." she informed me as I fiddle very professorially with my briefcase and acted uninterested. "But I understood most of what you said."

"Good," I said. "What part of the United States are you from?"

"Oklahoma," she chirpped, then added. "Where the corn is as high as an elephant's eye."

How wonderful, I then thought, to be from such a place. A place where elephants and corn could be so connected.

How long had it been since I had seen an elephant?

"That is from the musical," I smiled. "We have a theater here too. It is really very good."

"Yep," she said with that perpetual smile. "Well," she held her hand out. "I just thought I'd introduce myself. Back home that's the way we do it. My papa taught me.

Always offer your hand. And always look someone in the eye."

I shook her hand. It was strangely rough which did not match her pinkened cheeks and the great soft folds which her blouse hid. "That is sound advice," I said, although I rarely looked people in the eye. I glanced up briefly at Traci, however, smiled and reached for my briefcase.

I shall take her to Cafés in the city, I announced to myself--my thoughts almost audible with excitement--as I wandered through the hallways to the faculty room.

I shall take her to the theater. We shall see Oklahoma!

I shall take her to the zoo. We shall see elephants together.

And we shall eat corn. We shall eat corn and see elephants.

Dabato interrupted my thoughts and also stopped me from spilling coffee.

"You are distant, today, Alejandro," he said, handing me a napkin for my mess.

"Yes," I reply absently. "Yes, quite lost." He smiled politely. "Poetry, Juan. You know. Us poets. We get lost sometimes."

A poet? Yes, I had such aspirations once. I did not, however, publish one poem. I never really finished them. Poetry is so difficult. So impossible to write something without missing something. My days of reading at *El Gato Montes*. That was nothing. That was the alcohol. Anybody could have gotten up and said anything and the people would have cheered. Good friends are always bad critics.

There is a jar of water by the bedside, and I fill a glass from it. Even the sound is refreshing. I drink the glass down in one then light a cigarette.

"She will only become that which you desire if you truly love her."

Do I love Traci? Did I love Traci? Can Traci ever be loved?

My sons, Esteban and Phillipe are handsome men, and Felicia is as beautiful as her mother. They will all find love, I am sure.

They had all shown up for my party—my wife's doing. And they all brought their respective other halves. All equally beautiful.

We ate under the pergola of the upstairs patio where only splashes of moonlight were permitted through the vines. The night was still and the insects were kept at bay by the torches and our housekeeper and her two daughters running about with cans of

insecticide.

"I'd hate to have my birthday at the end of november, Papa," Esteban said, then fed his girlfriend, whose name I had forgotten, a long stick of celery.

"And why is that?" I asked as I offered my wife some wine, and she covered her glass with her hand.

"Well," he continued, "for one thing it's far too near Christmas."

Phillipe chimed in. "And, you can't expect people to buy you presents all over again, so soon, Papa. Can you?"

"It's neither winter nor Spring, Papa."

"Phillipe!" my wife hissed as she tapped her plate with a knife. "Esteban!"

"I think it's very sad," Felicia, my friend, said. "I feel sorry for you, Papa." She placed her hand silkily on my shoulder.

"That's very kind of you all to think of me so," I said finally. "I must begin to take notes of all the wonderful things my children say. So that when I am old and rickety and making out my will, I will know exactly who deserves what."

My son Phillipe—always short of money (I thought he was working)—spoke up.

"It's not that, Papa," he said. "It's just the truth, that's all. November 30 is a rotten day. It's so ... so ... in between. Neither spring nor winter."

"Yes," Esteban agreed after he disentangled himself from his girlfriend who seemed unable to utter words. She only giggled. "It is the sad truth, Papa."

"Truth." I began in my professorial tone, to mocking but raised eyebrows. "Truth, sad or otherwsie, is hardly something I should expect the young to be getting involved with. Now that is far too ..." I looked to Ovilla with her chin resting on her hand as if I

was a prize bull, and she was wondering just how far she would be willing to go in my purchase.

"And old people?, my love, what about them?"

I turn her face toward me. Her eyes flutter open, and my mouth begins to form the word T-R-A-C-I. But as my tongue mines out the words, I hear something quite different. I hear the word Ovilla.

"Ovilla," I say. "Ovilla, my love. Ovilla."

My wife looks up at me. The risen sun is sharp and the wrinkles about her eyes deepen. She raises her hand to shield her eyes, and I can see that her hands are worn, and there are a few veins showing now. I can see she has life. Young skin hides so much.

"What is it, my love?" she whispers.

"Yes," I answer as my old lips close upon her young cheek. "It is your love."

REGARDS, THE BALCONY

November 30 Paris 5:59 a.m.

I would like to state quite clearly that I did not volunteer for any of the following; no thing and no body would acquiesce to such grievous duty. Even though when I was first approached, about a month ago, I may have appeared, in my own way, bright-eyed and eager, I assure you that it was only a momentary cocktail of vanity and birthday excitement.

It all happened this fine november morning when ...

... a little before the sun, and as I was enjoying my two hundred and eleventh birthday, I was descried by a writer--or, at least, a reporter of things. I cannot, to be fair, tell you what he or she looked like, but needless to say, I am unable to prevent you from squeezing appropriate limbs into some kind of presentable package, and without too much difficulty, I hope, dressing up this writer in appropriate clothing--perhaps a light cotton shirt or blouse and a well-used pair of trousers or a skirt--an old friend of some kind. Whatever the apparel, just make sure that it complements the warm Parisian sun under which this writer was walking when I was ... discovered, for lack of a better word.

In retrospect, of course, I realize that I was selected by this writer purely because, after two hundred years of anonymity, I had finally attained a kind of stardom. I had become something much "more" than I had been. Indeed, there was even an area cordoned off around me, and so it was no miracle at all that this writer's attention was seized. It is a strange thing, the magnetism of an accident site. Sometimes I wonder if people don't just give such places the once-over to reassure themselves that they are not somehow a casualty.

I have been allotted a few more lines, in lieu of the day of my birth, in the vain hope that one day, should our paths cross, you will, at least, be able to say, with fingers on chin perhaps, "Ah ... that's where" But, recognition is all I deserve. Unlike the lady of

this tale I have no real heart to be admired. I am merely marble and iron; merely the mother of the idea.

After she had said, Oh, darling, what a wonderful view there is from the balcony, I love you, my dearest, Ms. Sarah Cartridge leaned back dramatically as if admiring a painting. Then, with a surge, she held her imaginary husband's head in her small, white hands and cocked her head to one side. Calmly, she drew her hands back until they rested on her own cheeks and then closed her eyes.

A second later, she let one of her hands hang by her side and then slowly raised it and began walking out through the French windows behind her as if leading someone. Of course, my sweet, she said, you have to come out on the balcony.

She stood on the marble, warmed by the dying sun. C'est magnifique, n'est pas? she said in a French accent that was never going to improve. That is not to say that it was poor. On the contrary, sometimes Ms. Cartridge would be able to convince some of the (admittedly new--and therefore more timid) waiters in the hotel restaurant that she was a woman from the south, from old Cap Ferat perhaps, just in town for some shopping; to see a production.

It is best, Ms. Cartridge continued, if you close your eyes and breathe in. Paris is a city for the blind, you know. I was always taught that, my darling, and there is no reason why you should not think just the same. But you must close your eyes, my love, the eyes will always deceive the nose; they are constantly sparring.

In a second, Ms. Cartridge's eyes were open. Perhaps, she thought, perhaps I am being too schoolmistressy. I should not be. I do not wish to appear so, so bossy. Love should never be constricted, commanded. Love must flow, and flow freely and alone.

She went on talking in a smoother cadence, her free hand pointing out museums, shaping arches, outlining parks, naming places that they "absolutely" had to visit.

"Absolutely" was Ms. Cartridge's favorite word. It tried, and she allowed it, to

much out of character for Ms. Cartridge to use it in a condescending manner, for she stood only five feet three, and weighed one hundred and two pounds--the same weight she had been since she had turned seventeen, thirty four years earlier. In order for "absolutely" to bear even a cousin-like relation to rudeness or impudence it would have to be delivered from a much greater height than Ms. Cartridge's and from an equally commensurate mass.

But of course, we will never have time to do it all, she said before turning back through the French windows. What a pity, she mused, that one can never do it all.

Back inside, she had led her husband, whom she had christened Robert, to a chair where she sat down, and then suddenly said, Oh, what a fabulous idea, my darling. Champagne! How absolutely wonderful. Why didn't I think of it. Oh no, my love. Let the room service...oh, my sweet. All right, but hurry back. Every moment away from you

Ms. Cartridge did not, however, act out this pantomime. She merely imagined his leaving--imagined him tiptoeing out of the room so quietly as though he had never left. This ability she had acquired from her many visits to the Victoria Dining Room at the Dorchester, back in London, where, if she were to drop a fork, as she often did, another one would magically appear seemingly without the presence of a waiter. In a moment, she knew, her husband would return as quietly as he had left.

The honeymoon suite that Ms. Cartridge occupied had not always been the honeymoon suite. Before the second world war it had been three single rooms. The hotel had served as a hospital during the bombing, and there had been, at one time, as many as thirty-five men in each of the rooms, all squealing in that unadjustable agony on pathetic blankets on the floor. Ms. Cartridge was my release from that agony. There had been many others who had tried. Thousands of lovers had stood upon me, proclaiming that impossible admiration for one another. It was only Ms. Cartridge whom I welcomed,

though. She was the only one who was always true.

In the room now there was just one bed; a huge, canopied affair and a host of uncomfortable-looking chairs that were never used. There were three powerful fireplaces, and exotic furniture usually populated the whole suite. Occasionally, however, the furniture was changed, as was the case when Ms. Cartridge appeared for her annual honeymoon. The owner of a hotel, a short, gray-bearded man, Monsieur Delgarine, knew of Ms. Cartridge's eccentricities, and would ensure that the room looked as English as possible. He had a sneaking (and correct) suspicion that although Ms. Cartridge enjoyed her jaunts to the continent, she required a little island of Englishness to accompany her, to return to at night. Ideally, he thought, it would be best if just a small slice of Paris were to pay yearly visits to Ms. Cartridge at her London house, or her estate on the Sussex downs.

Ms. Cartridge was a wealthy woman. She had been the sole heir to a manufacturing industry started by her grandparents. Ms. Cartridge had never been interested in the business, and with no sons to take over, her father had arranged for a board of trustees and a brigade of accountants and lawyers to take command. Ms. Cartridge received a large income, which was placed in her account each month. Her bills at the Clairelle, where she honeymooned, were taken care of, and she held accounts—though mainly unused—in some of the finest capitals throughout Europe.

Despite this fortune, Ms. Cartridge was surprisingly unaffected. She spent very little on herself. Indeed, the honeymoon was one of her largest expenditures. She was, in fact, more than generous when it came to gratuity. Indeed, many of the staff at the Clairelle vied for a chance to serve her room or her table.

Thus, this particular afternoon when the room service boy, terribly new and nervous, came into the room with the champagne and glasses and caused one of the glasses to overflow, Ms. Cartridge merely smiled, removed a fifty franc note from her purse and placed it in the hand of the young man.

Oh, you say the most wonderful things, darling, Ms. Cartridge said as she sipped her champagne. It's just a dream. An absolute dream of a dream to be here with you, darling. I want these moments to last forever ... of course they will. I know they will. They have to, don't they.

In time, the golden bubbles grew tired of their ascent to the top of the glasses. In time, the champagne became warm and dead. In time, an hour later, Ms. Cartridge quietly opened her door and left the unfinished bottle and the glasses outside to be collected. Ms. Cartridge very rarely drank more than a few sips from her champagne. "It's not really a drink, you know," she would apprise any waiter or bartender. "Really it's not. Just so much laughter. That's what it is. Just so, so much laughter."

At half-past five she called down to Louis, the concierge, and asked to be put through to the dining room.

"I think that we shall be going out to eat tonight, Mercin," she said to the Maitre D.

"I think it is a beautiful night for being outside, don't you?"

"Of course," Mercin said, as he had been saying for the last thirty-four years, "of course, you are correct, Madame. I cannot think of an evening when going out has been more appropriate. It is the best thing to do."

They were all extremely kind to Ms. Cartridge at the hotel Clairelle even before they had realized she was a lady of such kindness, and therefore, such importance.

It was nineteen-sixty-one when Ms. Cartridge first came to the hotel, exactly one year after her parents had been killed in a plane crash while traveling in the Far East.

Louis, if you were to ask him, would tell you how a bedraggled young woman had come running in out of the rain, out of that cold november night clutching a small bag, asking whether or not the honeymoon suite was occupied. Louis, noticing immediately the starriness in the young woman's face, told her that the suite was free, and would her husband mind signing the register. "Oh, he is not here yet," Louis had been told. "That

was fine," he had replied. He would have someone get her bags and take her up himself.

Later on, when Mr. Cartridge arrived he would only be pleased to send him up.

When it was quite clear that Mr. Cartridge was not going to appear, Louis notified Monsieur Delgarine who, as is usual with the managers of old and respectable hotels, made a few discreet inquiries. When it was discovered that Ms. Cartridge was a well-to-do lady, he took her under his wing. She stayed, the first time, for a week. She always booked a table for two whether she ate in the restaurant in the hotel or outside. All of her room service orders were for two. Only certain waitstaff could serve her; only those who Delgarine knew would make no "mistakes," as he liked to term them.

It might have been easy for Ms. Cartridge to become an object of ridicule amongst the staff at the Clairelle. But this was not the case. Whenever pressed about the appearance of her husband, she would speak so confidently that the uninformed listener might think his arrival imminent.

Mercin suggested a small, romantic restaurant, the Jardin du Rode, on the Rue Sobineau, just a short distance from the cafes of the Boulevard St. Germain. "It is a marvelous evening for cafe au lait after dinner, Madame," he said, and he proposed a new place that a cousin of his had just opened. There were many fine Impressionist prints that she might enjoy looking at. "An especially fine Boudin, and several Cezanne's," he had told her.

Ms. Cartridge took three dresses out of her closet. One was black, one red and one blue. She had never been under the impression that she was beautiful, and whenever she bought herself a new dress or garment, she would enter the shop with this knowledge at the fore.

"I do not wish," she would tell the shop assistants, "to appear any more beautiful than I am. I would just like to purchase something comfortable, something that does not offend."

Ms. Cartridge had always been plain. Even when the braces had come off on the eve of her sixteenth birthday, her teeth still retained an unkind crookedness. She had a small, rather pointed nose, and a pair of uneventful hazel eyes, slightly too close together. Her hair was brown, and she, against the desire of her hairdresser had always kept it short. A rather long neck was, therefore exposed. Her one attribute was her smile, which she wore, surprisingly, most of the time. It was the kind of smile that seemed to draw the whole of her face toward her mouth. It was the smile of an old person.

The black ... too funereal, she said to Robert, whom she had seated on the end of the bed. It's a honeymoon, of course. I cannot imagine why I brought it along.

She lifted the red dress, held it to her body, admired herself for one "foolish" moment in the long standing mirror, then spun around to the bed and smiled. A little too much, darling, don't you think? I mean, for our first night out...I'm glad you agree. She hung up the red and the black outfits. For a second-- perhaps the wonderful smoothness of the red dress had inspired her--she thought back to Andrew. She had worn red for him, daringly. What could I have been thinking, she thought. And the black. The black outfit with Alexander. Oh, Alexander. But Robert was different. Robert was distinguished, she told herself. Robert was ... was more. The best.

Look at him, Sarah, she said, look at him there in his tails and exquisite bow tie. He has tied it himself because that is the sort of person he is. He is the sort of person who has been tying bow ties all of his life. No hat or cane, however. That would be too much. No, just him, with, yes, with graying hair. About forty-five, but eyes of a twenty-year-old. A world traveler. Yes, he has been to at least as many countries as I have.

They had met there, on holiday. At the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro? Along the river Kwai? At Baden-Baden, at the tables? No, never a gambler. He could never be a gambler. She had heard of cousins losing everything in stock markets and at the Victoria sporting clubs. An explorer? Ridiculous, she thought, and stepped into the blue.

Delgarine was in the foyer when Ms. Cartridge came out of the elevator. He greeted her, kissed her hand, and asked her the inevitable questions in regards to her stay. She replied, always appreciatively, and thanked him again for the lovely flowers he had sent her when she arrived. She added that any new friends she might win in the ensuing year she would, without a doubt, send to the Clairelle. "I will force you to add another wing to this old palace," she said. Once more, however, as he did every year, Delgarine warned Ms. Cartridge of the old balcony. "I was even thinking of replacing it," he told her.

"Goodness no," Ms. Cartridge replied patting his hand. "And besides, a frail old thing like me, Monsieur Delgarine. I am as light as a bird."

Delgarine opened the door for her and immediately hailed the hotel limousine. In fifteen frantic French moments she stood in front of the Jardin du Rode. The Maitre D, Lobare, a rotund man with an over-large black mustache headed toward her and, having received definite instructions, led Ms. Cartridge to a secluded table for two, toward the back of the restaurant.

A bottle of champagne along with a silver ice bucket and stand arrived within seconds, and the two glasses were carefully filled by Lobare. He notified Ms. Cartridge that Delgarine had purchased the bottle for her and wished her many congratulations.

"You know," Ms. Cartridge said, "if I wasn't too wise I might get to thinking that Monsieur Delgarine was not a little in love with me." Lobare laughed as a waiter should, deposited two menus and disappeared: the restaurant was very popular, and there was already a crowd gathered about the entrance.

Ms. Cartridge, although she had been schooled (finally, after her first few years under private tutelage) at one of the finest all-girl schools nestled in the Surrey countryside, was not particularly sophisticated. She had not been a very bright child. Her mother, an orphan, had insisted on a private tutor at the house. It was not until Sarah was

twelve that her father had finally managed to convince her mother that boarding school was the correct path. "And besides," he had added, "it is only the next county over, should you wish to visit."

Sarah Cartridge's private tutor, Mr. Ruck, had been an Oxford don. He lived in a cottage in the same village adjacent to the estate of the Cartridge family. He welcomed the job as it would provide him some money for his trips to Greece and Italy (he had been a classicist), and afford him a carte blanche in the estate's library, which contained many fine editions. Sarah's father, rather forced into the family business, had at one time entertained the idea of being a poet and had, over the years, never fully released himself from the literary world.

Mr. Ruck had tried very hard to reach the plain girl, but without success. He had been a teacher of the non-traditional school, and he was surprised by Sarah's lack of interest in the game-playing approach to the world of literature he adopted. Ruck had thought her to be a musician. Perhaps that was where her talent lay. But the few concerts that he had taken her to resulted in additional failure, as she showed little interest. Once she fell asleep. When he asked her why, she replied that she was just tired, and it was nothing that a short nap could not cure.

Ruck tried teaching her painting, dancing, singing, poetry. Nothing. He was at the point of giving up. He did not enjoy teaching pupils who showed no signs of heart, of an "inner capacity", as he put it. But there was once an outburst, a tiny conversation, one that would keep him tutoring, one that would make him wonder about Sarah for the rest of his life. It seemed unimportant at the time, Ruck had thought, but, it was so out of character for Sarah; she would never volunteer anything--always so reticent, so unassuming; a receiver. It was not so much that she was unhappy, however. On the contrary, she had a persistent smile, was never taken ill, was extremely amiable, never spiteful. But one got the impression that she was never really doing something for herself. There is something

rather disturbing about a person who always puts herself after others.

It was a very warm August day, probably the hottest day of the year. Ruck had decided, since the music room where he did most of his tutoring was such an oven, that they should take a walk by the stream that ran through the estate. They had been walking along the stream path for a while, Sarah, walking at her casual, indifferent pace, Ruck plodding behind, when suddenly she stopped and turned to him.

"Do streams have friends, Mr. Ruck?" she asked, shielding her eyes from the sun. "I don't follow what you mean," he answered.

"I mean, not real friends or friends that you can play with...but any friends? I mean, do the rocks mind being moved about and rubbed and all that? I'm not sure I would like it at all." She looked down into the water for a moment. "I should much rather be absolutely unaffected."

"Rivers," said Ruck, a little bewildered, "rivers are their friends."

"No they're not, Mr. Ruck. Rivers are just bigger streams. And don't say lakes either because they're just big round streams that don't go anywhere."

"What about the sea?" offered Ruck. "Yes, that's where all the streams go, you know."

Sarah sat down on the bank. Her feet dangled over the edge, just above the slowly moving water. "Does this one go all the way to the sea?" she said. "I mean, this little one here?"

Ruck sat down on a stump and wiped his brow. "I think so. Yes, I'm sure it does. It goes right into the English channel. I'll show you on one of the maps up at the house."

Sarah thought about putting her feet in the water and then turned to Ruck. "You don't mind, do you? If I put my feet in. It's just that I feel I absolutely have to."

"If you want to" Ruck said.

"I want to help it, you see," she said as she lowered her feet.

"I don't quite understand."

"I suppose its very difficult to understand a stream," she said, letting her feet swing under the water. "I mean, just suppose that it didn't want to go to the sea where it would get all messed up and, well, not be a stream anymore. I mean, are there any streams in the sea, Mr. Ruck?"

"No. There's just the sea. It becomes the sea, you see." He laughed a little at his small pun, but Sarah, before resuming her silence, smiled sadly at him, so he thought, with all of the knowledge of the universe in her eyes, and said, "Yes, and that's absolutely the whole problem."

For dessert, Ms. Cartridge ordered a lemon sorbet and a demitasse coffee. The restaurant was, by then, filled with conversation. She looked about her. There were parties of two, leaning like old trees into each other, a rather rowdy party of six men in the corner, two old ladies, and the back of a man on his own. She wondered if the man was sitting alone because her view of the second half of the table was obscured by a partition. She could have, if she had wished, just gotten up and peered around the corner. But, not wishing to quench her curiosity, she insisted on imagining. Was he as wonderful as her husband? Of course not. Suddenly she felt uncomfortable, thinking of other men when she was on her honeymoon. What could have brought this on? This had never happened before. She was saved from foolish thoughts when the enormous Lobare appeared with a smooth dome of lemon sorbet and the coffee. There was also a liqueur on the tray to which she paid no attention until Lobare placed it next to her coffee.

But I didn't order any liqueur, she said, a little frantically.

Oh, it was a gift, confessed Lobare, from the gentleman over there. He pointed a large hand to the man whom she had been investigating. The man turned, nodded to her, raised a similar liqueur glass and toasted her. He was a large man, about forty-five, with a

tight and tan face. His gray hair was short, and he was dressed in a black dinner jacket with a fine bow tie.

He told me that it is excellent for the digestion, Lobare added.

How marvelous, Ms. Cartridge exclaimed, bringing her hands together over the table, how absolutely marvelous to have someone so interested in one's intestine. Do find out who that man is for me.

He is Doctor Neige, Lobare said, and once again, hearing his name called out, disappeared. With uncontainable curiosity Ms. Cartridge beckoned the man over. He got up, slowly, wiped his mouth, placed his napkin carefully down on his table, and walked over.

He stood well over six feet tall and she thought him absolutely handsome.

I must say, Ms. Cartridge began, that I thought it was most awfully rude of you to be sitting all the way over there and thinking about my intestine.

I assure, I did not mean to offend you, Madame.

Cartridge, Ms. Cartridge said, Sarah Cartridge. You may sit down.

Doctor Neige spoke superb English. There was only a quiver of French in his cadence, and Ms. Cartridge was both surprised and impressed.

Of course, I suppose you doctors know all about intestines and everything, she said. I am very grateful for your kind offer, but I have to disappoint you. I am absolutely the healthiest person you are ever likely to meet. My intestines are constructed of solid iron.

Whatever gave you the impression I was a doctor? Doctor Neige smiled confusedly.

But Lobare said you were a doctor. He said

Ah-ha. Dr. Neige smiled. I am a scientist. I'm a paleontologist. I am a doctor, yes. But only of science.

Only of science. I would not belittle science so much ... er ... Doctor

Doctor Neige held out his arm and gave his name. Ms. Cartridge's hand was swallowed by his rough palm.

I must say, you have the smoothest of hands, Madame Cartridge. I am afraid that my hands are quite like stone.

Do you do a lot of traveling, Doctor Neige?

I have just returned from Africa, actually. This is my first night back.

Did you dig up anything interesting, Doctor Neige?

Please, call me Robert, Madame.

Ms. Cartridge had been quite successfully bringing her liqueur to her mouth without spilling any from the tall thin glass, but, upon the announcement of Doctor Neige's first name, a few drops fell to the table.

The small cafe that Mercin had suggested was a short walk from the Jardin de Rode. Doctor Neige escorted Ms. Cartridge there on his arm and they took a table just outside the cafe where a thin breeze cooled the warm evening. The walls boasted some fine prints and Ms. Cartridge was taking them in.

Have you ever been to Kilimanjaro? Neige asked Ms. Cartridge as he stirred his cafe au lait.

Yes, I have. I was there in eighty-five. On safari, as a matter of fact.

Neige smiled.

Oh, it was all quite civilized. The accommodations were very up-to-date. I'll never forget the sounds at night though. That was the one thing they couldn't change. I mean, I'd be lying there in expensive sheets, reading a find old book, with an electric lamp on, and air-conditioning keeping the temperature like old London.

Did you do any hunting?

Oh no. Ms. Cartridge finished her cafe. I could never kill anything, Robert.

Neither could I. I had a lot of chances to. I spend most of my time crawling along the beds of ancient rivers and streams. Not very exciting, I assure you.

Oh, I don't know, Robert. I am very glad that you so obviously enjoy your work. By the way, are you particularly famous?

Not particularly. I have my name in a few textbooks.

And modest too, thought Ms. Cartridge. What a find!

There was no one in the foyer at the Clairelle.

What a pity, she said to Robert, what a pity. I wanted to introduce you to Monsieur Delgarine. He is the owner, you know. I so wanted you to meet him. I suppose he can meet you some other time. Now, I absolutely promised you a nightcap, and I am true to my word, Robert.

I am as nervous as a sixteen-year-old, Ms. Cartridge thought as the elevator hummed them up to the top floor. I must be calm. Robert is so calm.

This is quite a suite, Sarah, Robert said as he entered. I did not know that you were a millionaire.

Oh, I couldn't afford to stay here all the time. I only come for a few days. Just a few days every August.

This suite definitely calls for some champagne. Close your eyes, Sarah. Can't you hear the walls?

Champagne? But, Robert, it's ... well ... it's after midnight.

Hotels like this never sleep, Sarah. And it is my first night back in Paris.

Champagne is the water of France. Allow me a taste of our national drink, at least.

Robert headed for the door, then turned quickly, and walked up to Sarah. She looked so small in front of him. Slowly, she let her hands reach up to his face, and for a second she held it. It seemed as if they might kiss, but Sarah whispered, Don't forget the

champagne, Robert, we must have the champagne.

When Robert had gone, Sarah immediately opened the French windows and stepped outside. I could feel her small feet warming my surface where she stood. She closed her eyes, breathed in and then placed her hands on my facade. Some flakes of old black paint came off in her hand.

They should take better care of you, she thought. You are a special place.

She began to think of the numbers of lovers who had stood where she did. She began running her hands along the railings. Then she sat down and traced one of the curlicues with her fingers. She managed to squeeze her hand through the circle of iron and started to twist her hand slowly. More and more paint came off on her wrist. Then she placed her other hand through another curlicue and pushed her face up against the railing and focused on the slow moonlit passage of the Seine. And at that moment, with that indomitable hopefulness clinging to her face, I decided to release her, to let frail Ms. Sarah Cartridge fly, to make everything complete and absolute.

PRINCESS PREPARATION

November 30 Uganda 6:59 a.m.

The two girls, Songa, nine, and Nda, ten, sat back to back under the great baobab tree with closed eyes and hummed their gentle song about the river and the jungle and the sky, and how they had all eventually become friends when they realized they were all sisters.

Songa had on her new blue dress which was not new because it had come from a little girl in London--a little girl, Songa would never know—who had dirtied and torn it on purpose because her mother had not given her enough money for a second ice cream. Nda also wore a not new dress, but hers was yellow. Its history, quite unknowable to her, as it always would be, was however quite different: a young woman, from a small town in Ohio, had finally parted with it to an international charity, the police having recovered it from the local lake.

When they got to the part of the song where the sky cried for forgiveness, and the jungle and the river had smiled and all was forgotten, Songa opened her white-blue eyes stopped singing and said: "I think Princess Preparation is such an ugly name."

Nda, who had continued to hum stopped as well and replied: "All ugly things are beautiful when you see them upside down."

There was a short pause. Not because Songa was thinking about what Nda had said because she had believed her, but because she was still a little worried.

"They always say the princess, she is coming though," she said.

"They told everybody." Nda nodded her little head. "Everybody was told."

"D'frein's a liar person," Songa said and stretched her arms up to the great baobab and scratched an imaginable itch for it.

"Yes," Nda agreed, turning to her friend. "I hope I will never have to marry him." She smiled then, and the two girls giggled.

"All men are liars," Songa said. "And D'frein may be all men now."

Nda held out her hand to her friend who took it in hers and squeezed it. "Perhaps," she said. "But he isn't really a man."

"All boys then," Songa concluded. "Yes. All boys are liars."

There was the sound of something approaching through the shredded green cloak which was the jungle. The two girls could hear footsteps and vines being pushed aside. A whistle accompanied the sounds and Nda and Songa knew it was not a lion.

D'frein appeared. He wore a pair of dirty red shorts which were far too big for him, but he held them up with a make-shift belt made from twisted vines. There was faded lettering on one side which read, Nike. He had a great stick in his hand which was as tall as he was, if not taller, and he raised it to the girls when he saw them, and they turned back to back again and closed their eyes.

D'frein was eight years old and had been with the girls for some two weeks now.

He sat down and lay the stick across his crossed legs. He wore a great smile which rounded his face into a great shiny ball. "And there is a village."

The two girls jumped up excitedly.

"And you have seen this village?" Nda asked.

"Only from the cliff," he said.

"But why do you walk so slowly?" Songa said as she shook his tiny shoulder. "You nearly frightened us."

"It may be yours," he said to the ground. "But I am not sure." He thought for a moment then added, looking up, "It may be mine."

The two girls brushed their dresses and rubbed the backs of their patent leather shoes on their calves. Nda straightened Songa's hair with her fingers, smiled, and then waited for Songa to do the same to her. When she smiled they both looked at D'frein.

"Take us there," they said together.

"But I saw nobody walking. No cattle. No pigs. Just huts."

"Take us!" they demanded.

D'frein had left them an hour earlier, but it would take them a lot longer to reach the cliff because the girls always liked to look at all of the flowers. They just touched and smelt them though, never plucking and wearing them in their hair as they would have liked. Nda had done this once, but then Songa had advised her that the flower would only die if it stayed on her head, stayed making her as beautiful as the sun. So she replanted it as best she could, at the foot of the plant, near to its family.

It had rained heavily the night before, but the three of them had found a dry hollowed out tree trunk and had spent a relatively dry night. The jungle was steaming now, as the sun melted the great fronds and the vines and filled the jungle with a thin mist. It was going to be as hot as the day before, but the rain meant it would be cooler for a while: they could make some good progress.

If it were not for the cliff, the jungle would have stretched out right down to the plain. But it ended, and quite a steep scarp slope, heavy with steaming bushes and some trees, lay before them. D'frein raised his arm, and the girls stood behind him and looked along it, and down to the plain. There was the river, almost empty, winding its way through the plain, and by a small outcrop of trees, several huts could be seen. Brown humps really, seeking shade under a tree or two.

"See," D'frein said. "But no people, I think."

The girls started toward the edge of the cliff. "There will be no people when we see no people," Songa said. She held her hand out to Nda, and they cautiously descended through the bushes, each of them taking the lead at different intervals. D'frein followed at a small distance behind.

He had told them he wanted to do this from their first day together. "Mostly the attacks are from behind," he had said as the three of them had crouched behind the

overturned truck.

And the truck was leaking gasoline. The girls had been attracted to it. It was a nice smell they thought because it was better than the smell of the bodies. And there had been bodies everywhere. The girls had lost count of the number of broken villages they had wandered through.

And besides, the gasoline kept the flies away: it seemed like the only thing that scared them. And so it was good.

And the three of them had all met under that truck by chance. D'frein had been wandering for over a month by then. He had managed to keep alive by stealing food from the villages which had been ravaged, and always staying close to the river for his water.

Nda and Songa had been together for a little over two months. Their village had been taken at night.

But, they were the lucky ones. On that particular night, they had been down by the river where it was cooler. Songa's father had drunk too much and her mother had been fast asleep, knowing he would not beat her if she was asleep. Her father respected sleep, at least. And she had crept out past her snoring mother and her father whose face was like a child because his eyes were closed: when they were open he was always devouring something.

Nda had wandered into Songa's village in a bloodied outfit, two weeks earlier. At first, Songa and the whole village had thought she was a ghost or a demon of the forest or, worse still, a forgotten twin returned from the grave. All twins were killed at birth. Twins were the baddest of all luck.

But Songa's mother, noticing a small bracelet dangling from her spindled arm, realized she was from somewhere else, somewhere far away, and she had taken her in and kept her as one of her own.

Of course, Songa's father was furious: another mouth to feed and so on. But, when, after she was cleaned up and had eaten and shared in a large bowl of goat's milk, he could

see that she was beautiful. She would fetch a fine bride-price.

From then on, he treated her as his own daughter. Even allowing her to accompany him on a hunt, which was unheard of.

So it was with thoughts of marriage that the two girls occupied their minds and words, as they sat by the cool of the river. And that is where Songa taught Nda the song about the river and the jungle and the sky.

And then a great cry had rung out. They had turned toward the village, but, seeing the flames they had stood still.

An elder who had been making his way down to the river--it being nearly dawn--rushed toward them. The girls had laughed and pointed as the old man stumbled toward them almost falling. But when he drew close they could see the horror in his eyes, and the blood pouring from a wound in his cheek.

"Run!" he screamed at them. "RUN! RUN! And don't stop until your hearts burst!"

And they had run. All along the path by the river. They had run until their little chests heaved so quickly that they could barely draw a breath.

They had gone, perhaps a mile, but then decided to head back into the jungle. Surely someone would follow them down the path. The jungle, the place with no paths and every path, as Songa's father had taught her, would be the only place to hide.

And then the great storm had come. The rains. But the rains were not due for another month or so. But the rain, the girls thought, would wash away their footprints: nobody could follow them.

And they could survive. They had listened to the boys in the village. How to sleep in trees; which roots to eat; which berries to eat; how to heal a tear in the flesh. And Nda had not been idle when she had gone out with Songa's father. She had seen how the jungle was just a maze of directions, a complicated map of where things had been and where they

were going.

And besides, they knew they would soon be rescued.

After all, the Princess was coming. And the people from the sky had been in the village for over a month. And the very thin white woman from France had spoken to them all. And the fat English man too, and all the others. And they had all said what they were doing. And as they told the children, they cupped their beaming faces and smiled out from under dirty sun hats. "Princess preparation, children," they had said. Then whispered again, trying to make it all the more enchanting. "Princess preparation."

"She is coming to help all of you," the French woman had said. "She will bring a lot of love. And vaccines too."

"And vaccines make you better," the Englishman had said.

"But we are all well," Songa had announced.

But she spoke to speechless faces who merely shook their heads and smiled, and carried on getting ready for Princess preparation. Whoever she might be.

"And fresh water," the French woman added, pointing to one of the great blue and plastic barrels which had "H20" written on the side. The Englishman, stepping forward, pulled a black felt tip pen from his breastpocket and added a further two zeros, so it read H20 00.

"You see," he said. "This new year. This is a very good time. A great new age for one and all."

"There will be more water then," Nda said as she traced a finger about the two new zeros. A hundred more waters?"

The Englishman smiled at her, but said nothing.

And afterwards, the girls had wondered about the name of the Princess, and how silly it sounded, and couldn't it have been something like Inada--their name for the light that the moon gave off when it allowed all the living creatures to see at night, so that they could

live too.

So they had watched the Frenchwoman and the English man who had assembled everyone in the center of the village. More people would be coming they said. And everyone had to be in the right places.

The chief had looked on confused, but smiled whenever his eyes were broached by the Europeans. He had been the first one to be positioned, and he sat in a chair that the Englishman had brought. It was a chair that directors used. And he had felt proud sitting there and had watched how the Europeans wanted everybody to stand.

"This will be the hospital," the French woman had said to Songa's mother.

"Hospital?" she had replied. "No, no. This is not a hospital. This is where the food is brought. Before feasting."

"But the tables are long," the Englishman had said. "It looks like a place where you could lay a man, even."

"But it is for the food," Songa's mother insisted. And some other women joined in the protest with her, raising their hands to their mouths and then pointing to the tables.

The Englishman removed his hat and wiped his pink head with a white handkerchief. "Well," he said looking despairingly at the French woman, "it will have to do." Then he returned to Songa's mother and said: "But where do you go then? When you get sick?"

Songa's mother turned and translated the English and all of the women laughed.

"Look here," the Englishman said, "what's so funny?"

"You go wherever the sickness takes you," she said. "It does not matter where you are. Wherever you are, the sickness, it is there."

There were three Dutch doctors who had been in the village only one night. And there was a man from Spain, a chubby woman from Italy, two Russian students and three American and British camera crews who had followed the arrival of the princess even though it would not be broadcast until after the fact: security was the of utmost importance.

And, as the Africans had told them, "One voice finds many ears."

The organizing of the families had been a disaster as well. It was, of course, because of the great number of different wives for each household. The chief looked on admiringly as his people were shuffled about. The women did not mind so much, but when the Englishman came to Songa's father who sat smoking with his long brown legs crossed neatly, he slapped out at the trousers.

"Hey," said the Englishman. "Look, you've got to move."

Songa's father eyed the man, looking at him as if he were an animal not worth the spit of poison at the end of one of his spears, and then lay back with his arms casually laced behind his neck; he could have been a man at the beach.

"Look," the exasperated Englishman said. "This just won't do." He looked to the chief who was himself lighting a pipe. The chief nodded, waved a finger which seemed to mean that there was no need to worry, that the man would toe the line when the time came.

Then there had been a great crash followed by the sound of a truck backfiring. The Dutch men rushed around from their truck just in time to see a great barrel of gasoline drop off the back and spill out onto the earth. The children, surprisingly, rushed up to the green of the liquid, and knelt down, stroking the rivulets, and then raising their hands to their noses. None of them put any of it in their mouth. They had learned that from the many times before. But, as two of the Dutch men righted the drum, the children covered their arms in gasoline and jumped around excitedly: for a few hours, they knew, until they had to wash, that the flies would not bother them.

They all remembered the gasoline and the nice smell it had, but now it rivered its way toward where they were huddled. They knew it could explode but they were too frightened to move. D'frein said the soldiers would not burn the truck and that they were safe. He did not know, of course. But they could not go anywhere, so, the girls thought, it

was best to believe him.

This was some forty miles to the north and the east, where most of violence had been. Of course, Nda and Songa and D'frein did not know that: all they knew was that every direction had been death. But south seemed the quietest.

"How do you know it is south?" the girls had asked him.

"I know," D'frein had whispered. "I remember a school class. If the sun dies to the left, then walk backwards to the south.

There were several soldiers among them, although their uniforms were in shreds, and their boots had holes in them. But there was one man who stood out because of his voice which the three children imagined was so hurtful, as if he were punishing each word that he released. Some of the words sounded as if they were slowly stretched from the rack, and others like the bark of a fierce and cornered animal, warning whoever was near that it had nothing to lose. And it was no tongue the children had heard before; a mixture of Bantu, French and English, because some words were understood but not whole sentences. And whenever he was approached, the first words the children heard anyone say to him were, "O Captain."

And yet he was not a booming man, this Captain, this torturer of words. In fact, he was shorter than many of the men who stood lazily leaning on guns, smoking. And his clothes were no different from any of the others, except for his hat. This was green with a thick blue band encircling it, just above the rim, and the tiniest patch of feathers; red and white. But the red looked more like blood among the white.

The tribesmen, naked and dusty, huddled in a group with downcast eyes acting like frightened cattle, shuffling their feet one way and then another as each time they moved, one of the soldiers stood up from his gun, and acted like a great wall.

Several of the soldiers were ransacking the huts, as rugs and pots could be seen spat out of the low openings of the entrances. And though the children had not witnessed it, all

of the younger women had been removed earlier. They would be returned to the camp and fed to the soldiers there. The older women and the babies were all shot immediately as usual.

One of the tribesman, who seemed to be the chief, stepped forward. He raised a hand to the man called Captain, who looked away, and then slashed at him with a stick he held. The old man fell to the ground, but the beating did not stop there. Only when the stick broke did the feathered man, as D'frein, nicknamed him, halt his actions.

And it was then that he drew his knife, and, after drawing back the old man's head, he pulled his blade slowly across the old man's throat so that the blood seemed to spurt out in great chunks, as if it were finally set free from a prison and were celebrating.

The girls looked away at first, but then, when they heard the cries of the other men who were so casually slaughtered, they had to look on.

The soldiers, ordered into attendance by a sound from the Captain, slowly circled the fifteen or so naked mass, and then slowly began slashing at their bodies. There were four men with great rusty machetes, and four men with spears. The men with the spears prodded the group from four corners, blocking any chances of escape. Sometimes the spear stuck between a rib of a man, and he howled and fell. But the soldier always managed to extract the great stick with a practiced and efficient twisting motion.

The Captain looked on, then glanced at the sun, and when he appeared to receive some kind of permission from the great ball, and when the last of men were down on the ground, he turned abruptly and walked casually away as if he had just been a passer-by who had "seen all he needed to see." The men with the machetes then stepped into the imaginary circle of death they had created, and they began hacking at the joints of the men. The sounds of bone being splintered were accompanied then by only murmurs from the final breaths. The green shirts were covered in blood, and when they wiped their foreheads from the intense work, great clods of dried blood were left on their skin and became crusted into

their hair. But their blows were clean and swift: they had all become great surgeons of savagery

And they sang.

It was a sweet song, but one that the children had ever heard before. And it was rhythmical and smooth, only interrupted by the meeting of the machete blade with the bodies: but this sound of breaking bones was not unlike a chorus or refrain.

Their job was not haphazard, however, as they made sure that limbs from the same body never ended up in the same area. This was to ensure a confusion when the spirits of those men would return, D'frein told the girls later. When the spirit gods came to reclaim them, they would put all the wrong people back together, and, as no man was the same as the other, such a mixture would make him useless: useless for revenge on the Captain who was, of course, a spiritual man.

There was a dull thud when a leg landed on the side of the truck, and then fell down to the grass behind the two girls: Nda's calf was grazed, and some blood spattered her shoes. D'frein clamped his hand across her mouth, his hand then moist from her tears as Songa kicked the flesh away and into the grass where the flies began to feast.

D'frein signaled to the girls to cover as much of their bodies with the gasoline, and then rubbed the blood from Nda's calf. His fingers had been rough but Nda's tears had softened them somehow. When Nda could see that she was not bleeding, they allowed themselves to be consumed by the jungle.

At the foot of the escarpment, the two girls waited for D'frein. He picked his way carefully through the thick brush. And he did not smile at the girls when he saw them, but trudged past them, maintaining his pace. The girls, somewhat tired from their too-speedy descent followed behind him, and he glanced back occasionally, and then did smile, having

taught them the correct way to travel through the land was at a moderate but consistent rate.

The floor of the plain simmered before them when they broke through the final few trees at the very bottom of the scarp slope. D'frein rested on a rock and waited for the girls. He sat cross-legged with his stick across his lap, and his head bowed from the sun.

The girls appeared with their hands behind their backs.

"We have brought something for you," they said.

"Show me," D'frein answered, looking up. "I have wondered why you are so slow.

The sun."

"We have thought of that," Nda said as she went up to him and pulled out a makeshift hat of four great leaves with their stems tied together. "Here," she held her hand out.

D'frein inspected the hat, then pulled at its top. "What is this," he said, "that holds it together?"

"My hair," Songa answered, stepping forward. "And I have always had the strongest hair"

D'frein hesitated, then placed the hat on his head. The girls held back snickers, and then Nda said: "You are like a king of the jungle now." She then turned to Songa. "And you agree, do you not?" she asked.

"Oh yes," she agreed. "The jungle could not be more happier."

"But what will you wear?" D'frein asked, getting off the rock, and adjusting his hat.

Songa removed two pieces of cloth, one yellow and one red, from the only working pocket of her dress.

"We shall wrap these around our heads," she said. She handed one piece to the Nda and began to cover her head. When they were both ready, they followed D'frein across the baking plain. The village, not visible from the ground level, then seemed more distant, but the girls followed D'frein who, they presumed, had marked his memory with rocks and desolate trees. Indeed, as they passed by such items, D'frein paused in mid-stride just long

enough to tap the place with his stick; it was a gesture of thanks from him, that something so lifeless could guide their way.

A bird flying overhead might have wondered at the sight below it: a triangle with red, yellow, and green for corners bobbing its way nonchalantly bobbing its way across a dried and golden plain. But it was not so strange; it was just the green of the jungle, the amber of the straw grass and the red, the blood of the people.

Suddenly, D'frein stopped and turned to them.

"You know there will be all dead," he said.

The girls looked to each other, then back at D'frein and nodded.

"Yes," Songa said. "But we will see."

"Maybe ..." Nda began but did not finish.

It took a half an hour to cross to where the huts began to take a shape. They had been walking in the river bed, and the girls had been slow. Several times D'frein, turning to check on their progress, caught them picking up rocks, washing them in the trickle of the river and raising them to the sun.

"They might be jewels," said Nda defensively.

"And what then?" D'frein asked, taking only a slight interest.

"And then we will all be rich," Nda said. "And we can all ..."

"Go away?" D'frein finished the sentence for her. "And to where will we go then?" he went on. "To the city? To the place where the bad come from?"

Songa pulled Nda up, and they came up to where D'frein was. His head was down, and he was turning a rock over with his stick.

"You have some gold?" Nda asked.

"No," D'frein answered slowly, a little embarrassed. "I thought there might be a snake"

"There are not the bad everywhere" Songa said as she and Nda continued past him.

"And what makes you so sure?" D'frein asked as he again took the lead.

"Because of the Princess Preparation," Nda replied. "She could never be bad."

"And she is golden too," Songa added.

D'frein kept walking, then finding a shallow part of the bank he clambered up and turned back to the girls. He offered his stick and together they both scrambled up.

"There," D'frein pointed to the nearest hut.

A gust of wind, apparently summoned by D'frein's word, gathered dust into the air and they all had to hide their eyes. But it brought a smell and a sound too. The smell of fresh death, and the sound of the feasting flies.

"We should call out?" Songa asked D'frein.

"You can shout that loud?" D'frein said, not meaning to joke.

"HELLO!" Songa called out. Then Nda joined her, and was quickly followed by D'frein

Their voices seemed to calm the wind, but no voices were returned to them.

D'frein stopped shouting first. "What are we doing?" he said to the girls.

He repeated this several times before the girls stopped in unison. "We are being polite," Songa said. "Even if nobody is home, it is the good thing to do."

The first head had no eyes and was scarred red and bloody by the sun and the carrion. The mouth hung open and an amazingly fine set of teeth glinted in the light, only occasionally spotted with hungry black flies. Strangely, the cheeks were contorted in such a way as to suggest a smile. D'frein moved the head with his stick. It rocked, and he could see a long and elaborate earring dangling from one of the ears. The other ear was missing.

Songa and Nda made their way into the center of the village. They examined the work of the Captain and hated him more and more with every step. How can we stop him? they all thought.

D'frein walked about the whole village, and had tried to find something familiar. But this village was one of a thousand just like it, just like his. Twenty families, perhaps, hugging a river which was wet enough to quench their thirst. And only bodies of men. There were some pyres. For the very old. And the women usually. A few charred bones sat among heaps of ash and unburned wood.

In the center of the town, the two girls sat atop a jerrican which lay on its side.

Nda's heels knocked out a slow beat as she swung them. Soon, Songa joined in. The can was almost empty and the girls created a strange heartbeat for the village.

D'frein came running. "Aye! Yes!" he shouted, then frowned when he saw that it was only the two girls.

"I thought you were ...," he did not finish, but merely dug his stick into the ground. He looked as if he might begin to cry, but he raised his head quickly and spoke with authority.

"We will need wood for the evening," he began. "We will gather wood. And then some food." His eyes scanned the huts. "They may have left something."

"And we must get ready." The girls spoke as one.

"That is what I mean," D'frein said. "We must get ready for the night."

"No," they said, sliding off the can.

Nda knelt down and peered through the hole in the can. "There is plenty here," she said excitedly. "We will have enough."

"For the fire," D'frein said innocently. "Yes. That is good."

"No," said Songa, as she approached D'frein.

She was an inch or two taller than him with her shoes on and she took full advantage of this, to speak over his head. He leaned on his stick harder as she spoke, but he did not argue.

"We will need to get ready for Princess Preparation."

"But she will not come," he persisted.

Songa raised her hand. "You can be so sure?" she said, looking over, through and about him.

"How can you know?" he asked. "How can you know she will come? And how can you know she will choose here?"

"Because we are here," she said. "And we are worth it. Yes?"

He looked up into her eyes and saw that she was right. She was right because there was no other way it could be.

He bowed his head, almost in deference, and then sloughed off to one of the huts.

"We still need food," he said with still one ounce of defiance.

"Of course," she said. "The work will be very tiring." She turned to Nda who sat smiling, with one arm wrapped around the jerrican as if it were a prize pig. "And we only have the day. I feel it will be tomorrow," she added, breathing in the plain and beaming."

Nda slapped four decisive beats out of the jerry can, as if to invite the magic.

And it worked.

And so they began.

D'frein had found some kola nuts and some dried up but edible plantain, and the girls had discovered two goatskins, both half-full of water. As far as they were concerned it was a feast.

"I will not touch the heads," Nda said firmly, as the three of them sat in the shade one of the huts provided.

"I will gather them," D'frein volunteered.

"You must not use the stick," Songa commanded. "They will be all muddy and they will be blinded. And then they will not find the Captain."

"But they have no eyes," D'frein argued.

"They will get them back," Songa said. "Like the song. Everything will be returned.

Like in the song."

"Yes, in the song" Nda said excitedly. "In the song, the sky cried because she was so happy that the jungle gave its tears to the river."

The two girls each put a hand to D'frein's shoulder. "You have been so strong for us," Songa said.

"Keeping the lions from us," Nda added.

"Keeping the snakes from us," Songa said.

"Keeping the bad from us."

D'frein looked up. There was a small piece of plantain stuck between his teeth on the right side. He was trying to lick it out with his tongue, and, at the same time, imagining the song, remembering the song that he knew by heart but which he had never truly understood.

Then Nda moved her hand up to his head and stroked his forehead gently. Songa moved closer, until her left knees were touching him. His tongue hooked the plantain, and he glanced at Songa and then at Nda.

"The Captain is a religious man," Songa said finally. "This is the only way."

It was easier to assemble the heads by the jerry can to which they all often returned to rub their hands down with gasoline, each time scattering a storm of flies. The winds and the sun had taken away the freshness of the death, but they still needed the gasoline.

D'frein had a system of carrying the heads by the ears. Of course, sometimes, ears were missing, as with the very first head, and he had to grasp the sides of the forehead. There was a lot of dried blood there, and the neck had started to leak after it was carried, so his legs had become a little spattered with blood. He had tried walking, holding the head out in front of him, but several times he had almost tripped.

The girls, with their arms doused in gasoline had a system going whereby they would

only gather right arms, then left arms, then right legs and left legs. There was no use trying to separate them all just yet, Songa had pointed out. The best thing really was four separate piles.

There were seventeen bodies in total, and not all the limbs could be accounted for.

The girls checked and rechecked.

"Still three left legs missing," Nda said.

"Two right arms," Songa announced. "And one left arm."

The sun had begun its descent, finally, and a few tentative clouds had begun to appear on the horizon. The wind had picked up too, so that there was always something floating in the air, or a hut doorway flapping. Occasionally, each of them, though they would not tell the others, had been spun about, and for a second, they each had felt like graverobbers.

"Maybe some were burned by accident," D'frein put in.

The girls, their dresses bronzed and red with dust and blood agreed, and they sat down in front of the five piles.

"The bodies will take two," Songa said. "They are too heavy."

It had been hard work, and they were all exhausted. D'frein leaned back and closed his eyes.

"They will be here in the morning," Songa said. "No resting, please. We will start again soon." She looked to the west and saw the sun tired too from its blasting. "We have two hours, perhaps," she said finally.

Normally, moving bodies around was difficult because when tribal people were dead they carried with them all the good wishes of the family they left behind—a body that was the same weight as when it was alive, Songa pointed out, could not have been very missed. But, these bodies not only had the good wishes, they had nowhere to hold onto, no way to move them.

"These must have been the most loved people ever," D'frein said as he labored to roll a torso to the center of the village.

Many of the bodies were within sight, thankfully. It would have taken an eternity for the three of them to complete the task if they had been scattered or if they had all been attacked in their beds.

"We will just have to do our best," Songa conceded, when Nda asked about matching the bodies.

"A leg is a leg," D'frein said, his little face glistening with dust.

Songa looked about her striking the air blackened with flies. The legs in a great jumble. The arms with fingers all outstretched, reaching. The heads, mostly face-down, almost shameful.

"We will do our best," she said. Then she took her hands off her hips and, while the others looked on, she began to build people.

"They can't all be here in the center," D'frein said after a while. "It is not natural." The girls stopped and looked at what they had made.

Awkward creatures stared up at them. Most of the heads were eyeless; the day's carrion had all been gourmets.

In their hurry, some of the bodies sported long legs and short arms. The children had tried to be consistent, but with the falling sun and the clouds gathering from the east: mistakes had been made.

Moving some of the bodies, of course, ruined the creations. But it had to be done. Songa reminded them all of the film people, and how they had tried to order everything and how that had been so silly.

The sun had almost set. D'frein had lit a fire, and was feeding it as Songa and Nda surveyed their village.

"It is too dark," Nda said, wiping her forehead.

"What is to eat?" Songa asked D'frein.

He hesitated then said: "We have not used all of the water."

They divided one plantain which Nda found in a hut in the dying light, and sucked a few kola nuts which had been forgotten. They tasted like gasoline, but it was to be enough.

After awhile, they all fell asleep. The two girls slept back to back, and D'frein lay above their heads, his stick clenched in his left hand, protecting them all from the Captain and the night.

And then a great wind. Greater than the day before. And the hum. And the sun. And dust. And the flesh flapping. Bloodied faces speaking empty words. The village had become alive. The wind made the legs move. The arms even seemed to be raised. D'frein and the two girls were terrified. The spirits were here. They had come to collect. "But it's daytime. Morning," their faces silently conveyed to each other.

But they had to shield their eyes. And in the distance they could see shapes moving. Green shapes. Green and black shapes, pouring like dirty sand out of the sky.

"Hey, you there!" An English voice boomed.

"You there! Don't move!"

A huge man with a soft black cap, approached. His rifle glinted in the morning sunlight like a great knife.

"Are there any others?" he said when he was ten feet away. He did not look at them though, because his eyes were everywhere. They lifted rocks, they moved behind trees, they saw through huts, they sought all the Captains of the world.

"Others?" Songa wondered aloud. The soldier was close enough to touch now, but they all drew back when he reached out.

Other soldiers appeared, and the English soldier's arm commanded them about the

village.

"What are you looking for?" Songa asked.

"Are there any others?" the English soldier repeated.

"It's another bloody massacre," another soldier called out to the Englishman.

"Get the nurse, sergeant," the Englishman ordered. "Get the nurse!"

Heads fell from their precarious positions on the dead bodies as the soldiers prodded them for life. "This is crazy" several of them exclaimed.

"What place is this?" the English soldier muttered.

And then she appeared. The Princess Preparation. For she was dressed in white, and she had long golden hair and a pearly crown. And she stepped gracefully down from the sky, and she had come to join the children.

The sun had risen completely above the horizon, but it seemed as if, with every step, it was the princess who was pulling it up and out from that far place. And Nda turned to Songa and D'frein; their mouths too had become great caves of light.

KNOCKOUT: A FAIRY TALE

November 30 Russia 8:59 a.m.

Once upon a time, on a train in southern Russia, Lokya said to young Nickolai: "Only a *good* death will exempt you."

But the words came from a mouth shaped as the kindest of kindest of smiles, and the breath, upon which the words glided as boats upon the laziest of lakes, was as sweet as the sweetest of all things imaginable, so Nickolai was not afraid.

"A noble and graceful departure is the only acceptable excuse," she went on as the train had hummed through the night. "And I do not mean suicide, if that is what you're thinking. Illness, crisis, catastrophe, even tardiness will be looked upon by all, as a gross embarrassment." She had then patted Nickolai's arm and added, "And that is why, my darling, we have been up so long before the sun."

It had been with great regret that Astrachan, despite its forlorn gaping-mouthed factories of black industry, receded behind them. This was the destination, eighteen months earlier, to which Nickolai's parents had been headed when their plane had decided to fall from the sky.

The plane had spread itself out over such a vast area, as if it had wanted to prove that indeed, the sum of parts was infinitely larger than the whole. And the wreckage fallen thirty-five thousand feet from above. And how an unknown aunt and uncle had come to cradle the now seventeen year-old infant Nickolai (his sister, Vrangela, in Los Angeles). And the uncle had said foolishly, though no one was listening, "Gospodi! You never have bodies in these pictures. The plane, you see how it survives. In pieces, yes. But it is the men, the women who disappear. See, a tail piece. A tail. Broken, yes, but still it exists. It is only the things we make that can live forever."

That had all been two years earlier and was almost, but not completely, forgotten. And so, with the world being left behind at thirty-five miles an hour—the best the ancient and single gauge train which they had boarded in Astrachan could muster--it was trees which filled the window. They hugged and leaned into the tracks, and Nickolai felt the discomfort from the worn wooden seats. No foamed interiors, or even dirty but comfortable headrests. Nickolai was surprised that there had been little of interest to see, even though their first train had followed Russia's Mother river for over ten hours.

"I have known this sleeping beauty," he thought to himself as he stroked Lokya's hair, "for almost two years and yet I have met none of her family. That is strange."

"The *whole* family," he had pleaded with Lokya at the Astrachan station the previous night.

"You will not even be noticed." She had dismissed him. "Besides, we are almost there. There is no turning back, my young friend."

And Lokya had then paid the old woman, who seemed to grow out of her samovar, for their tea.

"And what do you think, once beautiful creature," she had asked.

"He is doomed," the old woman had said, smiling at Lokya.

"It is hopeless, yes," Lokya had said.

"And what a firm rock that is to stand on," the old woman had chimed in, as if she and Lokya were in cahoots.

"Hopelessness," Nickolai had repeated, then burned his tongue on his tea. "A firm rock to stand on?! What can you mean?"

And then Lokya, had taken him away from the old woman and said: "Hopelessness is the very bottom, sweet Nickolai. The best place for a foundation is at the bottom, you do not think?" And she squeezed his arm and led him on, and knew it was going to take something as alien as pain if she were to break the spell of love that held him captive.

Vrangela, seven years older than Nickolai, had been enrolled in the University of

California, Los Angeles, and had not returned for her parents' funeral. Nickolai had remained her one link with her homeland, and he had written a letter every month. But, in the past year, the replies had waned.

Indeed, the last letter, was actually contained within a Christmas card from the previous year. Nickolai carefully reached into his jacket pocket to pull it out. The letter had many creases and Nickolai had to smooth it out in order to read it properly:

Darling Little Brother Nickolai,

I cannot believe it: THERE IS NO SNOW. How beautiful it is to walk around outside in December, and soon in January. I think I must have spent half of my life locked indoors back home. How can you survive it? When shall you visit? There is so much to see here. Everything is here. Of course, there are men too. None of them have backbones like, Lein or Krusten. Please give them my love, little brother. And you can tell Lein that he is still the best of kissers.

How are you my little one? Are you still with Lokya? Try to send a photograph where she is standing a little nearer next time. All I can say is that she does not look fat. Does she cook? When shall you visit me, dearest brother? I miss you.

I am not lonely, however. There is a large Russian community here, and although most of them are the bitter kind, there are a few who have been able to adapt. I share an apartment with one other girl, though she is not Russian. She is from Boston, and she has invited me there for Christmas. I have never been to the East coast, and she has promised me a trip to New York as well. Her family has much money, I believe.

Please write to me over Christmas so that I know I will have something to look forward to when I return to the West. You sounded very worried about this reunion that Lokya is taking you to. Why is this? You have shed that coat of bashfulness have you not? At nineteen, my little brother, I had already been wounded by five men! Do not show any fear.

You have something of Father in you, though not too much I hope. I miss you, little brother.

You will have to promise to come visit with me this spring or whenever your school lets you out. I have forgotten the Russian system already--is it in June? And there is plenty of money from the wills. You must not hoard your money like mother. She was a fine woman, Nickolai, but she never lived. Write soon, my darling little brother. Write soon.

All of my Love to you, Vrangela Lokya moved in her sleep as Nickolai returned the letter to his inside left pocket, and then licked her small lips as if she were tasting something. Something in her dream.

She was walking along a barren and baking beach made of snow. Ahead of her was the hunched form of Nickolai pulling on a great steel cable which was attached to two enormous silver seats. The seats were joined and left a track of two thick trenches which, when the sea washed over them turned the water a thick red which stained Lokya's feet.

Every time she called out, the ocean crashed even louder and stole her words. Indeed, Nickolai seemed to be getting further away. Then a mountain of a dune appeared and soon even his footprints were gone. But the tracks, stained red trenches, led ever onward.

When Lokya reached the top of the great dune, Nickolai and his tracks had disappeared. Exhausted, she sat down, then looked out over the ocean which smiled greedily as it mopped up the shore with its laughing waves.

She smiled back at the water, then stepped back to where the place where Nickolai's track had ended. She removed a pin from her hair and, first, pricked the thumb of her right hand, and then her left. A black red bubble blossomed on each thumb. She lay down on the hot snow, and placed a hand in each of the tracks, closed her eyes and thanked the water for giving her strength.

Nickolai moved his arm around her shoulder and drew her closer. Her eyes fluttered open for a moment, then closed, then opened wide, and she sat up. "Give me a cigarette, Nickolai," she demanded.

"It is too early."

"No need then," she said, crossing her legs nonchalantly, and then pulled a cigarette packet out from her left pocket. She lit it, and blew a long seductive stream of smoke toward Nickolai. And, although he smoked, the early hour combined with the scent of the

cigarette made him nauseous. Lokya puffed happily away, but she did open the window a crack

"It's not too cold," she said after a while. "We will be able to use the whole outside.

That will be nice."

Then suddenly she jumped up and, pointing her cigarette through the window, she said, "Look, darling Nickolai. The sun. Isn't she beautiful?"

The Astrachan station had dripped long ominous icicles, but the trees which they then passed were free of such a burden, and even though they were, for the most part, bare, some perennials kept the sunlight from completely filling the compartment. There was hardly any snow either, just a few patches under the trees, and with the sun so brilliant, Nickolai found himself taking off his coat.

"One year," Lokya said leaning forward, her eyes all over Nickolai's face, "we had to do everything inside. It got so hot. So, so hot. It was like a sauna."

"It will surely be too cold."

Lokya said nothing, folded Nickolai's coat, and turned to the window.

"Why is the reunion not in the summer?" Nickolai persisted.

"Oh," she began, drawing long and hard on the cigarette, "because then nothing can be resolved. The summer is when things grow," she went on, "when things happen.

Nothing can ever be finished then. It is still ... coming."

"I don't understand."

"You will, Nickolai. You will." She sat back again and reached for another cigarette. "In time, my sweet. All in time."

Lokya took a hairpin, placed it between her lips and said: "It has to be like this because it is tradition." She took the pin from her mouth and put it in her hair. "And, if you don't like tradition, then we will have to break apart, young Nickolai. Snap in two." She turned to Nickolai and bowed her head slightly. "Now, is that what Nickolai wants? A

separation?"

Nickolai was silent.

"Good, good," she said and finished with her hair.

One hour and fifteen minutes later Lokya and Nickolai and their two bags alighted from the train at a very small station which, in fact, could only let off passengers from the last two carriages of the five. The station was neat and clean, however, and there was no ice under foot as they started toward the station door. No other person got off the train. In fact, Nickolai could remember no other passengers at all. And nobody had checked their tickets.

"You will discover every kind here in Leshigrad," Lokya said as Nickolai followed her through the station which was really just one room with benches at the walls and a ticket counter just inside the door. A white-haired man dozed in a chair behind the counter, and Lokya, stepping on tiptoe turned to Nickolai with a finger at her lips.

They had made it halfway across the room, when they heard chair legs hit the ground, then scrape.

"Oye! Oye!" The old man said, and chased himself around from behind the counter. He recognized Lokya immediately and threw his arms around her, squeezing her until her face turned red. When he put let go, he faced Nickolai, and looked him up and down. "So, then my Lokya," he said, "this is to be the victim, hey?"

"This is Nickolai," Lokya said. "Now shake Uncle Yevgeny's hand." When Nickolai did not move toward him, but gingerly held out his palm she added: "He does not bite. He has no teeth."

The old man opened his mouth to display its great emptiness. "It is a great honor to meet you, Nickolai," he said. His handshake was firm but not like Nickolai's sister's boyfriends who had always tried to break his hand.

"It is nice to meet you," he said, then stood back.

"I think maybe you will find us here, a little crazy in the heads," he said. "But, you will be safe with Lokya. She is a good girl."

"How is Anyana?" Lokya said excitedly. "They said in the letter it was her lungs again."

"All is well," she tells us. "There is nothing wrong with that woman's lungs, Lokya. She has been organizing for a month now."

"And we are the last?"

"Of course," the old man said and went back to his counter which he began to secure. "Of course, but now I can go and prepare."

"Won't the train be coming back through?" Nickolai asked.

"Ah yes, the train, it will come, Nickolai," he said as he picked up an old golden key, and reached for his coat hanging on a peg behind him. "And those who wish to get off, may do so. And those who wish to get on may do so. Get on. Get off. They will have those choices." He laughed after he spoke.

The three of them stepped outside, and were met by a battered droshky with two horses; one white and one black. A man, sat up on the top covered in a black cloak with a great black top hat on his head. He did not speak.

It was strangely warmer than it had been on the train, and Nickolai decided against wearing his coat.

"We are travelling in that?" he wondered aloud.

"But, of course, my love," Lokya said opening the door. "This is exactly where the tradition will begin. Or may be continuing?"

Yevgeny, after miraculously lifting their heavy bags up to the driver, had walked to the front and was patting and stroking the manes of the two horses, and exchanging a few words with the driver who nodded. Then he turned to Lokya and Nickolai and waved, and wandered off to an old green bicycle which lay against a tree.

"In you get," Lokya said, and Nickolai obeyed.

When she pulled the door shut, she tapped the roof of the carriage and with a crack of the whip they were off.

"Now, there's really only one person I must tell you about."

"Just one?"

"Well, Anyana, you must watch for, but she will love you. They will all love you.

But," she leaned in close to him, "you must not worry about Uncle Dmitri, he is as old as the Urals and we all believe he has gone completely mad."

"Completely mad?" Nickolai parroted as he fought, unsuccessfully, for a comfortable position, coming already to admire all people born in the times before suspension.

"Some of my family are in that direction," Lokya went on, "but you need not worry yourself. Most of them will just glance at you. And besides, you are beautiful, so they will not bother you. But, you must remember that uncle Dmitri's companion is not a real doctor"

"What is he then?"

Lokya sat back, and took out another cigarette which she lit. "He is, well," she watched the match as if it would give her the answer. "He is a hypnotist."

"Why does Uncle Dmitri have him?"

"Because," Lokya laughed a little. "Because he tells us that he is the one who will make him live forever."

The carriage hit a large rut in the road, and Nickolai's head hit the roof of the carriage. Lokya laughed then rubbed his hair. The road they traveled down was overgrown, and many branches brushed the side of the carriage. There was no snow to be seen on the ground, and with the sunlight it did not feel at all cold, even with the carriage window down.

In a little while, the road widened, and then the trees parted and a great long

pavillioned house with four golden domes, and row of grand columns stood in the distance.

A huge lawn, laked with melted snow, and with several large fountains stretched up to the house.

"Wow!" Nickolai exclaimed.

"Now, I do not want you getting all excited, Nickolai," Lokya emphasized. "This is the family home. Which means that it is not mine. I see your little eyes sparkle as if I were some princess. I am not. I am just, well, I am just ..."

"It's magnificent. It's something from a film. From a dream."

"Yes," Lokya finally leaned across him and looked out of the window and breathed it in. "It is not entirely unlike a dream."

The carriage drew up to a shallow but wide stairway and Lokya swung the carriage door open for them and they both crunched their boots onto the gravel. Two young boys, lanky and laughing rushed down as if to greet them, but merely halted and waited for the bags to be thrown down to them. In a second it seemed, the carriage had gone and their bags had disappeared through the great front doors which had been left slightly open.

Just as Nickolai placed his foot on the top step, a wildly clucking chicken burst through between the doors, and was then followed by another which squeezed out from the gap. They were quickly followed by a tall man with a thin blonde beard in a dark beret, who, in he instant that he passed, was able to raise his cap, greet them both, and not lose a step to the animals he pursued.

"That was cousin Ostov. He is," she hesitated before the door. "He is a ... distant cousin I shall say."

"He is not mad, however?" Nickolai smiled.

"No, no, Nickolai. He is fine." She hugged his arm. "But he always wants to marry me, darling. Do not worry," Lokya said as they stepped inside. "I always say yes."

The great hallway with large tables and a few distinct chairs lining the walls was

illuminated by several massive torches, high up on the walls. Nickolai could make out a few large oil paintings on the walls; portraits of a military concoction, with proud men either on horses or atop hills with great battles being furiously fought behind them.

"We have had a lot of generals," Lokya said nonchalantly, as she stepped forward, as if looking for someone.

The hall led forward to a large receiving room, then on to a grand living room furnished with large faded red couches with curled and golden ends. Many portraits hung proudly from the walls, and, at the far end, above a series of three fat bay windows with seats, were rifles and guns and even a shield or two.

"Lokya! Lokya!" a female voice boomed from deep within the house.

And, in a second from behind one of the doors, a great woman, all of six feet tall approached them.

"Anyana! Anyana!" Lokya screamed and opened her arms.

Anyana wore an emerald dress the bottom half of which was obscured by a red apron. She stopped in front of Lokya, placed her hands on her shoulders, then pulled her toward her great chest. Lokya disappeared into the folds of her arms. And, at this point, her dark brown eyes focused on Nickolai, and without leaving his person she whispered, but loud enough for him to hear, "So, this is the wounded one," she said. "The one who is sick."

"Hello," Nickolai spouted suddenly, then added. "Look, I'm not ill. I think there has been some kind of ..."

"Misunderstanding?" Anyana released Lokya and came toward him. Out of instinct he took a step backwards. "No," the great woman said, with her left hand raised to her chin, "No, there has been no misunderstanding here. I can see it, Lokya. I can see it. Perhaps, we can save him. Perhaps."

"Well, shake hands with Anyana, Nickolai," Lokya insisted.

And he did, and forced a brave smile. Surprisingly he found her hands to be

unbelievably soft. But, when he wished to let go, she held on.

"Nickolai," she said slowly. "Nickolai. A nice name. You are a good person, Nickolai. I can tell ... almost immediately." She turned back to Lokya, still holding his hand, and making Nickolai feel foolish.

"They said you had been unwell, Anyana," Lokya said.

"Unwell!" Anyana raised her voice, and in a second Nickolai's hand was released and she clapped her hands together. "Unwell! I have never felt better, Lokya, my darling." She cupped her hands around Lokya's face. "It is those who are really ill we must take care of. Now," she headed back to the door through which she had come. "I have chosen the room at the back, in the east, the czarina's" she said to Lokya, and then winked at Nickolai and added: "It is where many of this family have found their last hour, Nickolai. They always want that room for some reason."

"Because of the view," Lokya said.

"Of course," Anyana said suddenly realizing. "The view. How foolish of me. That must be why. How wonderful, Nickolai. Well, I must be going. The feasting will begin at noon, as always." She pulled a gigantic gold pocket watch out from under her apron. "And that means, you have only two hours, my loves. Hurry upstairs. Hurry, hurry. Hurry, hurry."

In a second she was gone although her voice boomed again in the distance.

"She is quite someone," Lokya said as she took Nickolai's hand and led him back out into the hallway and toward the right hand staircase. "And she's eighty-nine years old. It's incredible, isn't it?"

"Why did you tell her I was ill?" Nickolai asked as they ascended the blue-carpeted stairway which wound toward the center at the top. "I'm not ill, Lokya."

"Of course not, my love," she replied, squeezing my hand. "That is just a little game we play. One of the games." She paused. "Like the ring."

"The ring?"

"Oh," Lokya put her hand over her mouth and widened her eyes. "Oh, I almost let it all out, right then and there."

They took a right hand turn and started down a wide hallway with many doors. Each of the doors had golden handles, and there were intricate patterns of landscapes on each of them, each, as Lokya informed Nickolai, depicting scenes from the great grounds of the great house..

When they reached the far end, Lokya placed her hand on a silver handle and pushed open a large door.

"Our room," she said and ushered Nickolai inside with her palm.

The room was enormous. Four rectangular latticed windows covered the far wall, and an enormous four poster bed with a great ornate canopy with scenes of hunting embroidered into the material. Lokya jumped onto the great bed and lay back flat.

"Two czars died in this bed, you know," she said. Then giggled and added, "But they have since changed the sheets."

Nickolai walked over to the window and opened it. The sun was much higher now and light streamed into the room. A great lawn, bordered by very dark green, almost black trees, slinked its way down, met a line of old steps, then continued on toward a large folly. Beyond that was the gleaming Caspian sea. He drew his eyes back down to the gravel beneath the window where several men and women were carrying chairs to many elaborate tables, covered with blue and green and red patterned tablecloths which fluttered in the wind. Beyond the tables, four large posts lay like sleeping telephone poles, were being prodded and inspected by three burly young men in white shirts with their sleeves rolled up. They appeared to be arguing.

And there was music. It flowed, a rich sound, out from a room directly below theirs.

A strange mixture which made Nickolai think of happiness and sadness at the same time.

"What is that music," he said, turning to Lokya.

"That is our family music, Nickolai. We have several composers in the family." She stood before two enormous armoires and hung up her coat there next to all of her other clothes which had been placed there as if by magic. "It is happy, no?" she asked him.

"Happy. But sad too."

"Oh no, my darling. Not sad. Never sad. It must be your ears."

Lokya came over and stood beside him and peered outside.

"It will surely be too cold?"

"Never, Nickolai. Never, never," Lokya said then lay back on the bed where Nickolai joined her.

The vast pillows, impossibly comfortable took both Lokya and Nickolai to sleep in moments. And, when they awoke the room was as warm as the sunlight wanted it to be.

They were awakened by the ringing of a telephone, by their bedside.

Lokya answered, yawned, affirmed something and then replaced the phone in its cradle. "We have one half hour," she said.

As Lokya and Nickolai walked back down the corridor, it appeared as if their very steps opened the doors to their sides. Because, from every doorway, a man or woman, both young and old leaped out, pulling coats or gloves or hats, or buttoning sleeves. All waved, kissed, hugged or smiled at Lokya and gave Nickolai the kind of stares, Nickolai believed, only doctors passing hopeless patients would give: hopefilled hopelessness.

Anyana was at the foot of the staircase, and despite slapping the heads and shoulders of some of the others, she only held out her hands to Lokya and Nickolai and beamed a smile.

"And how beautiful you are, Lokya. How like your mother. Yes, like your mother. She was, they said, almost as beautiful as I." She squeezed their hands, then let go, and with a

swift turn where her long emerald gown grazed the marbled floor, she said: "Well, let us begin."

There were between eighty and one hundred people standing by the tables when Anyana came out with Nickolai and Lokya behind her. Anyana quickly clapped her hands, and soon all eyes were focused on her. Lokya and Nickolai stood along with the others.

"Ah," Anyana began, "How wonderful that all of you were able to be here." Then she paused, her eyes running through the faces. "But no, where is he? Where is Dmitri?" Then, with that booming voice she screamed Yevgeny's name." And, from nowhere, the creak of an old bicycle could be heard and Yevgeny, dressed in a faded army three-quarter coat and gray and torn trousers thrust into thick dirty army boots, ambled around the side of the great house.

"I am here, Anyana, I am here. I am old," he said as he got off his bicycle. "I am old, but I am here."

"I am old," Anyana announced. "You, Dmitri, you are baby. Now, be quiet."

Anyana closed her eyes and all the assembled bowed their heads. Nickolai only followed when Lokya nudged him.

"Let us hope," Anyana began, "to bring forth all of our troubles this day. Let us gather our thoughts and all of our woes and all of our wrongdoings and bring them to this place today. Let us not forget even one. All must be settled here today, as it has been and as it always shall be."

There was a moment's silence and then all heads lifted and Anyana barked out commands, causing everyone to scatter.

"I want that ring prepared by one o'clock, Ivan!" She shouted, and Nickolai turned to see a raised platform surrounded by the four posts being assembled. Four men were aligning four long poles which met twenty feet above the center of the platform. When the poles were fastened together a thick red cover was dragged over the top, making a strange-

looking raised tent.

"That looks like a ..." Nickolai began.

"It is just a ring" Lokya finished. "Now, come on, Nickolai. That is not something so spectacular. Come and help with the chairs. Remember, a stage is only a stage because an audience is an audience."

In front of the house, piles of chairs stood waiting in stacks, and several people were already carrying some over to the ring and placing them around. Nickolai and Lokya helped out and all seemed to work like clockwork under the watchful eye and the berating, though just, mouth of Anyana.

When there were no more chairs, Lokya and Nickolai went back inside to the kitchen where trays of food glistened and enormous gourds of wine and red jugs of beer with thick foam streaming down their sides were ready to be taken out. By half-past twelve, all of the tables were set with drinks and breads and cold meats and cheeses. Anyana inspected each table, making minor adjustments to each and then clapped her hands.

"Excellent! Excellent! You have all done marvelously," she said. "Now, all be seated and I will take those grievances from you that you have kindly decided not to have sent ahead of you. For some of you, the moment is now. NOW! It will be much harder to say them to me now for the book."

Anyana sat at the head table in a large throne of a chair, and a small line of people formed behind it. Each family member approached in pairs, and each handed over a piece of paper to Anyana, which was quickly read, duly noted in an ancient ledger in front of her, and then resumed their seats.

"What's happening?" Nickolai asked Lokya.

"Here," she said. "Take this." She handed Nickolai a piece of paper and a pen.

"Now, write down that your parents were killed. And that you love me."

Nickolai hesitated. "But why?"

"You do not love me?" Lokya was indignant.

"No. I mean yes, Lokya. Yes. But why. Why?"

"Because," Lokya insisted, "you must have some grievance to show Anyana."

"But, this is not a grievance," Nickolai protested.

The few who had, with bowed heads, passed before Anyana had now taken glasses and goblets in their hands, and Anyana looked up and pointed to Lokya. "You two, yes," she said. "You must, Nickolai. I must have something from you. Please, be good and listen to Lokya."

Nickolai grudgingly submitted and wrote down what Lokya had asked him. "Now, you must sign it to show that it is yours" she directed. He did, and she got up, took him by the arm, and they joined the line before Anyana.

As those who had already spoken with Anyana took their seats, some of them took up instruments and began to play. One man began lighting the torches which surrounded the tables, and a few had taken their glasses and plates and were choosing chairs by the platform.

"What did you write on yours, Lokya?" Nickolai asked.

"You shall see," she answered. "You shall see."

The sun was as high as it was going to get by then, and although there was a chill in the air, the numerous torches provided sufficient warmth to warrant this fantastic winter picnic.

When Nickolai finally stood by Anyana, Lokya stood on the other side. Anyana opened Nickolai's paper first, drew it close her and read it slowly.

"Ah yes," she said. "A definite illness. And of the very worst kind." Then she took Lokya's piece of paper, and read it quickly. She turned to Lokya.

"Yes, to be true," she said, "an illness quite the same."

She then looked down into her book and uttered a sigh. "It appears," she began that

you will be the last to go. At six o'clock." She turned her head and pointed up to a huge clock which tocked its golden hands about a great face of the sun. "And not a moment before"

Just then, Nickolai felt an arm on his and he turned to find the smiling face of a huge man with a forest of beard who stood with his companion, a man with the thickest spectacles Nickolai had ever seen, dressed in a morning suit with a ridiculous top hat which had a two small bullet holes through it: the companion was also bouncing.

"You are the one then, hey?!" the huge man bellowed.

Nickolai turned back to Lokya but she and Anyana had disappeared.

'I'm not sure you have the right ..."

"Come," the bouncing man held out his hand. "Come, my friend. We shall drink and talk of immortality."

Before Nickolai could help himself, he was half-carried, it seemed, to a table which was furthest from the others, where he was placed down between the two men, and handed a huge mug of foaming beer.

Nickolai nodded and raised his goblet, but half of it spilled out when it was chinked with the huge man's. The man with the hat sat upon the table and swung his feet below him like a child: he held a large piece of Swiss cheese in his left hand which he sniffed before he nibbled, as if to make sure it was fine.

"THEY," said the huge man, although it was more like a shout to Nickolai: "They will all tell you stories about me." He leaned in to Nickolai who could feel his breath against his ear. "Believe none of them. THEY are the fools. Now drink. We shall save you."

"Save you, save you," parroted the little man who had taken off his hat and was feeding some of the cheese to a mouse which had climbed from the hat the moment he had taken it off. "Absolute solution. Easy, easy."

"It will not be easy," the huge man said, then turned to Nickolai and offered him his hand which was strangely manicured, and yet at the same time callused. "I am Dmitri. They have told you about me. You may call me ... Uncle Dmitri."

"Lokya said ..."

"Ah yes. Lokya," he mused.

"Lokya, Lokya," the little man repeated then patted the head of his mouse who had moved on from the cheese and was bathing its tongue in one of the many pools of beer on the table.

"She is the one," Dmitri continued. "Lokya is the one. We have all been in agreement about that."

"All in agreement, agreement" the little man chimed in.

"I really don't understand, what it is you're try ..."

"You are very fortunate, Nickolai. Nickolai, where have I heard that name before?"

Dmitri squeezed the end of his beard over his great mug, and a small stream of golden liquid poured itself onto the froth. "You are the orphan."

"Orphan, orphan," the little man repeated, then demurred as Dmitri scowled at him.

"I'm not an orphan. My parents were ..."

"Yes, yes. We all were all something sometime," Dmitri went on. "I have fought in seven wars, did you know? I have killed seventy-four men. And two women."

"Three women," the little man corrected.

"I thought we were not sure about her?"

Nickolai, confused and not a little unafraid of these two strange men, attempted to rise, but a great arm wrapped itself about his shoulders.

"Now, my friend, I want to tell you something. It is not exactly a secret. But it is rather a small piece of magic. And it will help you today. And tomorrow."

"And tomorrow, especially."

"Why tomorrow?" Nickolai asked, accepting his situation and taking a large draw from his mug.

"Because of the wedding, of course."

"Wedding, wedding."

"But who's getting married?"

Dmitri let out a thunderclapped laugh and slapped Nickolai on the back. Again his drink was spilled, but, in no time, the little man, demonstrating incredible strength, had refilled it from one of the great flagons on the table.

"Tell him the magic," the little man urged. "Tell him the magic. Quickly." The music which had danced about the gardens from the open windows had ended abruptly. "They will be starting. They will be starting."

And it is here that Dmitri taught Nickolai how to live forever.

In order to live forever, one had to do two things: first, one had to assume that dreams and illusions were all part of life; second, one had to hire a hypnotist.

"It was so simple," Dmitri continued. "How can all of the alchemists and great men and peoples not see?!"

What did one do with the hypnotist? Nickolai had asked.

"It is simple," Dmitri had continued. You paid your hypnotist (in his case a hundred thousand rubles a year) as a perpetual companion. When you felt that the moment of death was drawing near, you merely allowed yourself to fall under his hypnotic trance which whisked you off to a heaven which you had constructed through previous sessions. In Dmitri's case, his house was located in one of the farther suburbs from the City of God. He had a telephone, however, and could contact angels and so on at leisure. He had an indoor pool as his heaven had the four regular seasons--perpetual summers were not to his liking—and a fine stable of horses because he had always loved riding.

"Ah, there you are." Lokya's voice, downily soft, made its way to Nickolai.

Dmitri stood up immediately, to attention really, and bent his giant form over to kiss her raised hand.

"Uncle Dmitri, I do not want you talking so much with my darling here." She stroked Nickolai's hair. "Do not be filling him with foolishness."

The little man scooped up his mouse to the top of his head, then placed his hat on.

This he then removed in a most graciously arced bow, balancing the mouse on his pate as he lowered his head. Lokya patted the surprisingly unconfused mouse, took Nickolai's hand and led him toward the great tent.

There were very few chairs left, but Anyana, who sat on her raised chair motioned to them to join her. In front of her chair was a walkway to the ring.

"Hurry." she whispered loudly, smiling.

Dmitri and his bouncing hypnotist were the last to be seated, and indeed, sat a little further removed. Dmitri put his boots up on a second chair, pulled a lengthy pipe from his jacket and proceeded to fill the air about him with great wafts of blue and sweetened smoke.

Anyana stood up, clasped the great book under one of her massive arms, raised her hands, and then proceeded to the ring. She unhooked the top rope, and deftly stepped with a great swish from her emerald robe, inside.

She stood in the center of the ring, opened the book and spoke.

"In this year of two thousands we have, today, seventy-five grievances to be decided." She turned slowly as she spoke and as her eyes met those seated, they lowered their heads in deference. "It appears ..." she licked her fingers and checked a previous page. "It appears that last year there were one hundred and seventeen. Good. We may be learning how to love a little better. No?"

The crowd muttered and nodded.

"What does she mean?" Nickolai asked Lokya.

"Shhh," she replied, having not heard his question. "I will tell you when we have to change."

At that instant the clock let out two thunderous clangs and everyone applauded.

"And, for our first grievance," Anyana's great hand swept around and then pointed to two figures who slowly made their way through the French windows in the center and came down from the house.

These two figures were not, however, of equal stature, because as they drew closer, Nickolai could see that one was in fact one of the men he had seen constructing the tent. His shirt was open and his thick chest was bared, and his arms were long and thick. What was strange, however, was that he wore upon his face a most bashful smile.

The second figure, dwarfed by the first, was in fact a woman who Nickolai estimated to be eighty—she was in fact ninety-three, and had made the journey all the way from Irkutsk on her own. She too smiled, but her smile was accompanied by a pounding sound which she made as she knocked her fists together: her fists, as were those of the man who entered the ring before her hidden behind huge and tattered boxing gloves.

There were, as expected, two buckets in each corner, each with a sponge. The old woman bent over and rubbed her face amazingly vigorously with the sponge, then turned and threw it across the ring where it landed squarely on the back of the young man: he had been facing the other way and talking with a friend.

The crowd erupted into laughter, and the young man's smile disappeared for a second, but then returned as the old woman, ever agile, raised her spindly arms over her tiny head in victorious proclamation. The crowd egged her on and was only silenced by Anyana's raised hand.

"Grievance number one will begin." She beckoned the two fighters to the center, then consulted her book. The old woman scrunched up her face at the young man and

jabbed her little hands at the air. "In the blue corner, we have Karina Delina Izabel Moruschka Fortinezko who seeks grievance from Ivan Capildeski for a remark he made on January the first of last year." She paused for a moment to remind the old woman that the fight had not yet begun, then continued. "Grievances, as you all know, are usually private and confidential. However, Karina wishes it to be known that hers are concerned with her age, and her ability as a lover."

The crowd laughed again, then fell silent.

"Having conceived twenty-three children, she demands nothing, but regarding her age, she says that she still feels like she is eighty!"

Anyana then spoke to the two fighters who returned to their respective corners, as she made her way out of the ring. When she was seated, she waved her hand and a bell was rung, and the old woman sprung to the center.

"How can you watch?" Nickolai said. "Someone must speak up. This is madness.

They are all mad. You, you are ..."

Lokya tried to restrain him, but he stood up and screamed out "STOP."

The crowd all turned toward him, even Ivan just at the moment when the old woman was about to deliver her first punch.

Nickolai was pulled down into his seat by Lokya, and all eyes returned to the ring. Ivan, however, when he turned back, found his jaw in collision with the old woman's right hand which, because she had mustered ninety-three years of power behind it and had thrown herself as high into the air as possible, landed a knockout punch.

Ivan, stunned beyond belief, was casually dragged from the ring as the old woman paraded herself, and finally had to be removed quite forcibly by the two young men who had helped construct the tent with Ivan.

And this particular bout was not unique. Nickolai watched with mouth agape as a whole troop of unusual couples made their way into the ring, stumbled around with no

knowledge of boxing, until finally a result was decided upon.

"You think we are crazy?" Anyana said to Nickolai as he waited for Lokya to bring him a plate of food. "We are not. You have just been standing in different shoes."

Food, song, beer, wine and tea was served throughout the afternoon. No serious injuries could be discerned although a bloody nose or two was not uncommon. And one of the bloody noses was a result of a man tripping and breaking his fall to the terrace with his face.

And, as is always the case with such events, the music became louder, the crowd became noisier. Everything seemed to be heading to some great moment. But when, at a little before six o'clock, Lokya tapped Nickolai on the shoulder, he was completely surprised.

"I will not get in the ring, Lokya," he said. "This is all foolishness."

"But you must, my darling. You must."

"But this is your family. I have no grievance. Cannot we speak with Anyana? She will surely understand."

Then, right at that moment, Anyana stepped into the ring and the music was halted and the people took their seats. Some who lay upon tables sat up. And all eyes focused on Anyana and her magnificent emerald dress. She held a huge wine glass aloft, and great hush filled the gardens.

"And now," she began, "we come to our final bout of the evening. Some of you may say the main event." She nodded to Lokya who, in turn, took Nickolai by the hand and lead him into the house. "We have among us today, a stranger. A young man who has lost his way. Who has lost his family." She paused and took a great draught from her glass—as did everyone.

Then, as was the custom of old ladies who drank too swifltly, she let out a great burp which, caused not a few dozing birds to flutter their contempt from the trees. One of them, a

particularly prominent sparrow even blurted out: "What kind of a lady are you?" To which the hypnotist's mouse added: "Are you, are you."

"QUIET in the back there," Anyana said to the birds who quickly moved on to a discussion of the weather. "As I was saying. For this final event, I will need all of your attention. So please, whatever you are thinking about ... and that goes for you too Dmitri, she added as his head had slipped to the side and his pipe was slowly making a small bonfire of his shirt and chest hair. "I give you then. Lokya and Nickolai. To settle their grievance."

As Anyana swung her arm toward the house, Lokya and Nickolai appeared.

Nickolai had been making a great fuss about his gloves, as he had never boxed. Moreover he was not a little concerned with who his opponent would be. Ivan and those other men would waste not a second with him. And even some of the other men, even Dmitri would be terrifying too.

Gingerly he stepped into the ring with Lokya and waited for Anyana to announce his opponent. Perhaps it was the beer, perhaps it was the atmosphere of the whole day, but Nickolai could only hear the sound of Lokya's name. And when, he turned to her as he was requested to do by Anyana, he could not believe his eyes.

Before him stood Lokya. But upon her hands she had a pair of bright red boxing gloves.

"You are mad. Crazy," he pleaded to Anyana. But she was deaf to him and stepped out of the ring.

In a second the bell sounded and Lokya grazed his ear with a left hook.

The crowd cheered. Nickolai could see Dmitri in the background, his fire out, offering up advice as he delivered massive blows to the sky.

"You've got to get inside," he was shouting. "Go inside. GO INSIDE, Nickolai.
GO INSIDE."

Lokya's fists were raised. Her face beamed out a sun of a smile. But Nickolai kept

his arms down. He backed away around the ring.

Jeers rang out.

"He's no good!"

"Hit him, Lokya."

"Hit the body! Hit the body!"

"Knock him down!"

"Knock him down!"

Lokya had scored a few hits, but Nickolai still refused to fight.

"I cannot hit you," he pleaded. "Please don't make me. I love you, Lokya."

"Love. You. Too," Lokya said as she hit him with a 1-2-3 combination.

Nickolai could feel something wet on his face. He wiped it with his forearm and saw blood. "I'm bleeding," he said. "You cut me. You cut me!"

"And I will cut you again," she said through gritted teeth.

"But, I LOVE YOU." Nickolai begged.

Such a situation, as you can well imagine, might well stretch even the greatest of writer's to their creative limit. And so, with that firmly in mind, rather ...

... luckily, passing overhead at an altitude of thirty-five thousand feet, there happened to be a fairy. Of course, all fairies have incredible senses and had even been known to have heard children crying from heights as high as seventy-seven and a half thousand feet! Besides this was no ordinary fairy. In fact, this fairy was returning home after the annual prizegiving for all the fairies in all the lands (where people deserved fairies) and was brandishing a new CD walkman which had been a gift from the Queen of the fairies for saving so many lives—this particular fairy had been the recipient of the *Happiest Ever After* award.

And, quite by chance of course, the fairy just happened to be between tracks one and

two, and although the gap was very short, the fairy could clearly hear that all was not well. So, headphones were awkwardly unhooked, cursed at ever so slightly, and a speedy descent was begun to see just what all the fuss was about.

Back in the ring, Nickolai had tired from his walking backwards and had even, as he would say, unconsciously, been hitting back.

There was, indeed, the hint of a hint of a smear of blood about Lokya's right eye.

But still she smiled. And she jabbed. And she bobbed. And she weaved.

The fairy arrived before the spectacle, coming to a halt for a moment on the beak of the aforementioned sparrow.

"Excuse me," said the fairy, "but what is going on here?"

The sparrow explained as best he could, and the fairy thought and thought.

No fear, he mused. I will take a chance and see if I cannot help this poor boy and girl to be married and live happily ever after even after they have been dead for a longish time—his previous record was two thousand years, after the happy couple had died after seventy-six years of married bliss!

So, the next time he saw Nickolai raise his fist, the fairy whacked his tail against his arm and Nickolai, to the relief and applause of the crowd which had grown restless-- the hypnotist was feeding cheese to the mouse again; Dmitri reloading his pipe; Anyana was yawning enormous yawns--and, in a second, Lokya lay on the canvas, her nose bloodied.

"A knockout! A knockout! Hooray! Hooray!" the crowd cheered and some jumped up into the ring and lifted Nickolai onto their shoulders before he had a chance to even see to her. Before he could think about anything.

And the fairy smiled through the pain of his great gift, knelt down next to where the tiniest spec of her blood was on the canvas, and rubbed and rubbed its tail into the blood until it had mopped it all up.

And although it may sound incredible to the reader, Lokya and Nickolai were

married the very next day. And they lived and lived until they died, and then they moved into a nice neighborhood on the south side of the City of God—but much more importantly, even further from nasty things like airplane crashes; and distant sisters; and love that cannot breathe; and all those sorts of things that fairies hurt their tails over.

GROVE OF NO BIRDS

November 30 Northwest India 10:59 a.m.

Buphra's head bobbed him awake as it struck the window. The bus in which he and his shiny new black leather briefcase traveled appeared to have a penchant for potholes. Every ten meters it seemed the great iron hulk would lurch from side to side, the driver screaming, then honking his horn and laughing as it righted itself. Several times Buphra had to hand baskets and plastic bags filled with godknowswhat to the old women who surrounded him as they cascaded down endlessly from the racks above his head. The women talked at an electric pace, as hot as the coming day, engrossed in their chatter and only occasionally looked to Buphra and smiled respectfully. They never once seemed to fear for their lives.

But Buphra smiled to himself: he had been away far too long. He was going to have to become acclimatized. He recalled Captain Aviery's speech of welcome.

"Fourteen years is a long time, m' boy," he had said as he clapped his arm around Buphra's shoulder and led him out onto the porch of the JAR bar. "But how is jolly old, anyhow?"

"Fine, sir," Buphra had replied looking out over the seething purple mass of night and buildings which was New Delhi—or rather, the Western part of the city.

Aviery sighed as he swept his great beer mug across the horizon. "Did you miss all of this?"

"London was not so different."

"But damn bloody cold, right?" Aviery leaned down and with his free hand he swatted something from his boot. He was in full regalia with golden epaulettes, red coat and great shiny boots. "That's why I can't go back, old chap." Then he added quickly. "Still, you can come and go as you please now, what? I mean, I hear old Sehru pays quite a lot for you ILC chappies."

"Have you ever bought a ticket?" Buphra asked as they went back in to the lounge.

"Good God, no," Aviery answered as they approached the bar. "Besides. What do I need, when I have all of this." His arm encompassed the great room they were then in, and the two ante rooms, from one of which the clicking of billiard balls was audible.

The JAR bar had once been the RAJ, an exclusive nightspot for British officers up until 1947 when, with Independence, everything British quickly sped into disrepair. Aviery had been a young man then, and, after a small inheritance he had decided to buy the Club, which then belonged to the city.

He was granted ownership, admittedly after several large bribes, but also because Aviery had always taken care of the locals and, one night when a very drunken officer was about to throw a young boy waiter over the porch "just to prove a point about Indian survival," Aviery, only in the bar by chance that night, had stepped forward and talked him out of it. That man had been Buphra's father.

The day he arrived to take the place over he saw that the three great letters R-A-J had been rearranged a joke and the word then spelled J-A-R. Aviery had laughed at this and kept it. He had pleased both worlds: there was still the RAJ, but it was backwards. "I don't know all about India's survival now," Aviery went on. "There's all this nuclear stuff. Chappies in the East say there's whole areas been bought up by the government. No animals. Great stretches of land. All jungle, but all bloody wilderness. Damn shame. Used to be such a grand place. Government's gone nuclear crazy. Even talk of funny earthquakes or something. Not bloody pukka, if you ask me."

Two drinks were set before Aviery and Buphra and the Captain carried on.

"This nuclear bit won't produce any victory," he said. "When I fought, it was *mano* a *mano*. You could feel victory then, my boy. Now, it's all, push button stuff." He paused to drink and then said: "You see, there's no room for mistakes now. It's all a bloody blinding flash. Too fast, Buphra. There aren't clocks fast enough. You need time to make

mistakes, old chap, so you can fix them for the future. At this rate, there won't be any future. Nuclear stuff. Well, it just takes all the chance out of everything. Life's one big lottery, don't ya know. Can't go changing that because then, well, we'd all really be up the Khyber. That's why your lottery thingy's doing so well."

The bus was five hours out of New Delhi when it finally stopped, seemingly collapsing by the side of the road. The floorboards creaked as it disgorged itself of passengers who made for the shade of the *dhaba*, and ordered platefuls of math's and massage tea and coffee.

"How far to Yahrana?" Buphra asked the driver who lay flat out under the shade of his lilting vehicle.

"Yahrana?" he scratched his head, then his chin, then his ear. "Twenty miles." He looked at Buphra strangely. After all, he was dressed in a businessman's suit. And even though he had loosened his collar and his tie was stuffed in his jacket pocket, Buphra still did not look like he belonged anywhere but in a bank in a city. "Why you want to go there?" the man asked as he scratched his legs.

"I have some important business," Buphra said, then felt foolish for sounding too above it all, so he quickly added. "Somebody's won the big lottery, and they haven't claimed their prize. I've been sent to find them."

The driver jumped to his feet his eyes gleaming. "Here." He pointed to the ground and danced about. "The lottery winner is here. Oooee! And you will need help, yes. Help to find him. And there will be a prize too. For me, yes. I mean, for those who help."

Buphra felt in his pocket for some coins. "Well, there may be some remuneration.

But the money is for the person who bought the ticket."

The little man's face dropped for a second, but then realizing perhaps that something is always better than nothing, he smiled and pulled at Buphra's arm. "Come then. We shall

eat. Then we shall find a way to Yahrana."

As Buphra was led to the *dhaba* where the women ate contentedly with the flies who feasted on what they let drop from their mouths, the little man shouted at them all about the lottery man and how he, Mahkmoud, had been chosen to lead him to the winner.

"Why can't we take the bus?" Buphra asked as he paid for two *jalebis* and handed one to Mahkmoud.

"To Yahrana?" he laughed, then licked a piece of the pastry from the corner of his mouth. "No bus can make it to Yahrana. The road is too steep. If it is still there even." He began to shout at the *dhaba* owner in a strange dialect which Buphra only half-understood. He did, however, understand the word for "motor-scooter."

"It is all fixed," Mahkmoud said, then wiped his mouth and held out his right hand.

"But, we shall need some moneys, of course."

Buphra held out some coins in his palm and Mahkmoud selected a few, turned and handed them over to the *dhaba* owner. He shook them in his hand, eyed Buphra and his Western suit, then nodded.

Behind the corrugated shack of the *dhaba* was a faded red motor-scooter.

Mahkmoud pulled it away from the wall where the grass had grown high and slapped the saddle.

"Good, yes?" he said. He sat on it for a moment, holding on to the handlebars and grinning and making motoring noises. Then he stepped off and offered it to Buphra.

"You know how to drive?"

Buphra had ridden on a motorcycle only once, when he had accepted a lift from a friend to travel to Oxford for the day. But that motorcycle had been gleaming silver and black with a thick padding and an experienced driver. The saddle before Buphra now had yellow foam spewing out of the back and the front tire seemed a little low.

The dhaba owner appeared from behind them. He held a plastic can in his left hand,

but his right hand was again thrust forward and open.

"You will be needing the petrol, yes?" He smiled showing off his few remaining and yellow teeth, and after Mahkmoud looked to Buphra, Buphra handed over some more coins.

"You will be back tomorrow?" the *dhaba* owner asked.

"I'll be back today, I hope," Buphra said.

The man shook his hand. "No, no. You will not make it. There will be rain later today. The road will be too bad." Mahkmoud took the can and began to fill the motor scooter. The *dhaba* owner continued looking at Buphra with his hand on his chin as if he were trying to place him somewhere.

"Who is it you seek?" he asked finally.

Buphra reached into his pocket and took out a sweaty piece of paper: the ILC logo was at the top and a typewritten letter followed. Buphra put on his glasses, and squinted—the copy was poor—then said: "Chatursati. I am looking for Chatursati."

When Buphra looked up to the dhaba owner his face had gone quite pale.

"You seek Chatursati?"

"Yes," Buphra said. "Do you know him?"

Mahkmoud who had finished filling the scooter handed the can back to the man who then spoke very quickly and in hushed tones to him. Mahkmoud repeated the name Chatursati, and turned to Buphra who stood feeling quite foolish. Here he was, an Indian, a Hindu, and yet he could barely understand a word of what was being said.

"It is Chatursati who has won?" Mahkmoud looked in disbelief, then scratched his ear.

"It appears so." Buphra waved the piece of paper in the air. "I've come to check, you see. The Commission must have a winner. The jackpot. It was so large."

"One hundred and eighty-five million rupees," the *dhaba* owner mused. "But Chatursati!" He hissed as he turned away. "Of all the people!"

"Who is this Chatursati?" Buphra pressed Mahkmoud.

"A terrible man. A terrible, terrible man. And already rich, I believe." He winked at Buphra. "Three sons."

"Three"

"Three dowries coming."

"And one daughter," Mahkmoud added.

The scooter, although low to the ground, covered the twenty-three miles to Yahrana in just over an hour. Buphra had to stop twice: once to tighten--by hand of course—the front wheel, and once to relieve himself.

The road, nothing more than a wide muddy path had begun a slow ascent and hugged the side of a hill. And, as Buphra stood there looking out, he began to make out the sounds of the jungle. The sounds of birds became the horns and the blasts of the city, the insects rang out an electricity through the trees and vines.

Buphra smiled. Everything was all so alive, he thought to himself. England had been beautiful—even in its obligatory rain—but it was not beautiful all at once. It was not, he searched for the right word, then settled with, united. Trees were beautiful, but they were not like the jungle here: here at home. Here, it was like the whole land was part of one great being—everything was connected, and when one thing moved it set a ripple through the land. One bird woke another, one tree telegraphed another.

Buphra swiped at the flies which circled his stream of urine, zipped himself up and headed toward Yahrana.

Yahrana was no more than a village. Indeed, Buphra had trouble believing he was even in the right place. As if these people had any money for lottery tickets, he thought. And yet Mahkmoud and the *dhaba* owner had known Chatursati.

Once, Mahkmoud had told him, he had owned a lot of land. Mainly from the

dowries. But he had been forced to sell. The government had bought thousands of acres of his land at a cheap price. They knew he had got the land from dowries which were illegal of course, and so, after threatening him with jail, he had surrendered and sold at a cheap price.

Why would the government be interested in such a place, Buphra wondered. He stepped off his scooter in front of a small hut of a building which had the Indian flag feebly fluttering in the intense heat.

An old woman came out to greet him with head bowed and palms pressed together.

Buphra did the same.

"Namaste," she said. Then noticing his clothes said in English: "You will be coming about?"

"I am from the ILC," Buphra said and took out a rather soggy business card for her to look at.

She peered at it, then smiled.

"The lottery," Buphra went on. "The Indian lottery Commission. I have excellent news." The woman continued to smile but Buphra did not know if she understood. "The winner is from this village. Chatursati. Where might I ..."

At the mention of Chatursati's name the old woman shook her head, waved her arms, mumbled something incomprehensible and turned to go back inside.

"No! no! Kharab! Nazar! Nazar! I know nothing."

Buphra followed her inside, but she scuttled into a corner like a crab and disappeared into the darkness.

"I am from the lottery," Buphra insisted. "I need to find Mr. Chatursati."

At that moment, Buphra sensed someone behind him. When he turned he saw a young man, about eighteen, who stood filling the whole doorway. Buphra noticed there was a scar of some kind on the side of his neck: a great looping old wound.

"What him?" he said in an awkward voice as if he had just learned to speak.

"Hello," Buphra said. "I am from the lottery. The ILC." Again he produced his card, but the boy merely glanced at it with empty eyes, and Buphra assumed he could not read.

"I have come to find Mr. Chatursati," Buphra persisted.

The boy opened his mouth for a second, then, as Buphra continued he looked to the ground and shook his head strangely.. "I have come to see him about his ticket. He has won "

"I Chatursati," the boy said suddenly, smiling in a foolish manner.

"Yes, perhaps," Buphra said. "But I maybe need to see your father."

Buphra could hear the old woman shuffle in corner. Then she stood up, and having recovered her composure nodded to the boy. "Take him, Copala" she said. "Take him to your father's house."

"May I leave this here?" Buphra asked pointing to the scooter.

The young man took a step toward it, then swung his leg over the seat. He looked down at the speedometer then looked back up at Buphra. "Take me?" he asked.

"Of course," said Buphra. "Is it really that far?"

The boy did not answer but continued his smile.

A few of the villagers had come out when Buphra had arrived, the scooter being such a strange sound—Buphra saw no other vehicle on the muddied and shanty little street. And, as he and the boy puttered down the only street of the village a few more came out to see what all the fuss was about.

There was a fork at the end of the road where two chickens were fighting. To the left the road slid away into the jungle, but to the right it reached up along the hillside and eventually disappeared around a distant corner. A cow stepped out into the path of the scooter as Copala directed Buphra to the right.

"Boosh!" Copala shouted at the cow then laughed so loudly that Buphra had

trouble keeping the balance. But they moved gently around the enormous beast which had stopped nothing and continued its munching of a never-ending clump of grass.

"How much farther?" Buphra asked after a while. Did the hill never end?.

Buphra felt Copala's arm on his shoulder said as his long right arm stretched and pointed to a large but dilapidated bungalow half-hidden behind great trees and vines on a terrace. Just above it was the top of the hill.

Buphra stopped in front of the gateway, and Copala slipped off the seat. Only one side of the gate hung on its hinges and Buphra followed Copala through the opening and down steps with weeds growing between them and toward the house. As they drew near, Buphra could make out the sound of a piano coming from the far end of the house.

"Does your father play the piano?" he asked the young boy whose scar was now completely visible. It was not a scar but a mark: a great zero.

"Not," he said as he stopped before the entrance where again a heavily weeded fan of stone steps led up to the door.

Copala noticed Buphra eyeing his mark and he went quickly up to the door, then turned and spoke. "Wait," he said.

"As you wish," Buphra said, and the boy disappeared.

Buphra unhooked his briefcase from behind the saddle of the scooter and surveyed the house. It was a typical bungalow style, and might well have been a plantation owner's once although there was no evidence of tea or any crops for that matter. Indeed, the only great quality was the view which the hill afforded. Buphra stepped forward and past a fountain no longer in use and peered over a small balustrade which ran the length of the house. The edge of the village was just visible, with the tiny Indian flag, and the road stretched down into the valley and was lost to the foliage. To the north and Buphra's left, he could make out the beginnings of the rising land which would eventually become the great peaks of the Himalayas.

"Come now."

It was Copala's voice, and Buphra turned and went past him into a hallway.

At first, he noticed a great cooling, though there was no whirring of an air-conditioner. And, as Copala closed the door behind him, he stepped further into the hallway above which was a domed window light. The floor was covered with burgundy tiles and musty ornaments and many photographs covered the walls. Buphra waited some moments and, when none appeared, he went over to the dusty black and white pictures which littered the walls.

The most prominent picture showed a young boy standing with a great rifle—about as tall as he was--with his foot proudly on the body of, what Buphra considered a rather small tiger. Or perhaps it was a tigress. Beneath the photograph Buphra could make out the date: 1950. And the words: Chatursati. First kill.

There was a strange air to the house, or, at least, the hall. It was as if it had suddenly come to a halt. Not quite as unusual as the *Mary Celeste*, but something of that nature. Everything appeared to have just gotten old suddenly. One moment it was full of life and the next. Not death, exactly. It was like it was holding its breath, rather than being devoid of the substance. At any second it would exhale.

"You are looking for my father?"

Buphra turned and faced a woman--perhaps twenty-five years old--who stood between two great open glass doors encased in an elaborate black iron lattice.

She was dressed in the Western style with a pair of loose-fitting faded blue jeans and a white Calvin Klein T-shirt. She was also barefoot which embarrassed Buphra because he had forgotten to take off his shoes. And yet, she did not seem unduly put off by his appearance. Her face actually made him feel quite welcome.

And there was one more thing, of course. Something which he had half-imagined every since the resonance which Mahkmoud's words had mentioned the "one daughter": she

was beautiful.

"Yes," Buphra said coming toward her. "I am from the ILC." He pulled out his card again and held it up for her. "The International ...

"...Lottery Commission," she finished. "Yes. Copala told me."

There was an awkward pause, as if she were deciding whether to take the matter any further, but then she spoke.

"My father is away at the moment," she said. "May I offer you some tea in the living room?"

"That would be most welcome," Buphra said and followed her through several rooms mostly filled with furniture which had white drapes over them. One room housed a great radio on a table with a hand held microphone. It crackled as he passed but Buphra could discern no voices.

"What's that for?" Buphra asked.

"The radio room?" the young woman asked. "The farm is so large. It is the only way to keep in touch." She smiled. "We have no telephones in the jungle, I am afraid."

Finally they arrived at the entrance to a room which housed the piano.

"Ah," Buphra started. "It was you playing the piano."

The young woman smiled, bade Buphra sit down beneath the great picture window which faced the valley and moved behind a bar to the left.

"My name is Holi," she said as she leaned down behind the counter and retrieved two Coca Colas.

"It is too hot for tea?" she asked. "Coca Cola?"

"That will be fine," Buphra said as he heard several ice cubes fall into long glasses.

"This is a fine house you have here," he said as Holi approached with the drinks and a small bowl of nuts.

She set the tray down, handed Buphra his drink, then raised her glass and finished it

in one mouthful.

"I suppose someone might believe so," she said.

There was a considerable silence which made Buphra believe he was here as some kind of offering to Holi. Or perhaps, he was here as her suitor. He would not have minded being her suitor, of course. She had managed to combine the innate Eastern beauty with the sharper, maybe not manufactured, but at least affected Western allure: he could not imagine anything exotic in South London, where he'd lived. Yes, somebody saying, Peckham is so exotic, would need to be watched carefully.

"Aha! There you all are!" A male voice from the doorway behind the bar.

A tall, well-groomed man, in his early twenties, dressed in a loud Oxford blazer, white tennis shorts and sandals made his way behind the bar and pulled out a bottle of whisky. Buphra noticed he wore a red glove on his left hand.

"Whisky and coke?" he said to them both.

"My brother," Holi said to Buphra, and then to her brother. "Tabor, this is Mr ..."

"Ganesh." Buphra smiled, then swallowed some of his drink.

"Mr. Ganesh. He's from the ILC."

"The what?" Tabor was dropping ice cubes into a thick green glass.

"The lottery."

"Yes. So wha ..." An ice cube bounced off the rim of the glass and glided over to Buphra's feet. He half-bent to retrieve it but he was put off by the sound of the whisky bottle which clanged harshly against the glass.

"It seems that father," Holi began, "that father has won the lottery."

"Yes," Buphra said standing, and regaling his speech. "We are quite anxious to hand over the prize. The ticket. I have come to see your father about his ticket."

Buphra continued and Tabor went and sat on the arm of Holi's seat. He drank swiftly from his glass and looked at Buphra over the rim. His eyes, which had been great

shining marbles of light, became darker, more serious.

"Of course, the strangest thing is the numbers themselves," Buphra went on. "I mean, they are not unusual at all. Of course, it's pure chance, the lottery. But, out of fifty numbers. Well, we've never known anything like it. Usually it's birthdays. Ages and so on. Days when important things happened. Happy days." He pulled out a piece of paper and read the numbers out loud. "0, 4, 9, 10, 13, 50." He shook his head. "I guess they mean something to somebody."

Buphra stopped talking as he realized he had lost his audience. Holi had turned her head toward the chest of her brother, and Buphra half-suspected she may be crying.

"I see," he said, "that you are just understanding the enormity of this thing." Buphra placed his drink down on the table, turned and bent over to open his suitcase.

"There are, of course, certain papers to sign. And we will need to verify the ticket, but I am sure that ..."

Suddenly there was a pounding sound at the picture window. Buphra looked up just in time to see a yellow tennis ball bounce away from the glass. In a second it was there again. And then there was a face. A boy, only ten or so, who tapped the window with his racket.

"Come on, Tabor!" he shouted, glancing only for a second at Buphra.

Holi stood up and went over to he window and opened one side of it. "Do *not* hit the window," she castigated the boy, who then dragged himself through the window and, smiling, came over and held out his hand for Buphra to shake.

"Good afternoon," he said in well-practiced English. "I'm Alexander Chatursati. I was born on the tenth day of the tenth month, but I'm not ten. I'm going to be twelve." He tossed a ball up in the air, but let it fall at Buphra's feet. "Don't you think I'm above averagely tall for my age," he added.

From through the window there was a great clap of thunder and, in a moment, the

blasting sunshine was blown away by the wind which then poured through the window setting off a series of reactions from those in the room.

Holi quickly went to close the window, Tabor moved to the bar and made himself another drink, and Alexander cracked a forehand against the wall to his left and caught the ball with his left hand.

"Alexander!" Holi said.

"Tennis and cricket," he said to Buphra. "I'm in the first six and the first eleven."

Because the far wall was almost all window, the rain caused the room to fill with a great booming sound, as if there were a thousand pairs of hands slamming buckets of water against it.

"It certainly looks like you're staying for dinner," Alexander said, and lay back on one of the couches with his legs dropped over the armrest. He held out his tennis racket and bounced a ball on it. Sometimes the racket hit the table.

"Oh dear," said Buphra.

"That's not a problem," Tabor said as he approached Alexander and adroitly snapped the ball away when it was in mid-flight.

"Hey!" Alexander protested. "Hey you! Give my ball back."

"No," said Holi. "There is no tennis in the house. Remember what father says."

"But he's not here. Is he?"

Tabor began to speak. "There's no reason to ..."

"Well," he interrupted. "Give me some whisky anyhow!"

"Don't be so ridiculous," Tabor said dryly, then took a great swallow of his drink.

Alexander swung himself up and walked over to the bar. "I drink it when you're not around anyhow!"

Buphra looked uneasily about the room and then out of the window. He did not like to be in the middle of such things.

"Look," he said. "I think I'll just head back into Yahrana."

"Can't now," Alexander said as he drank a Coca-Cola. "Road's washed away. Far too dangerous."

Holi came forward and sat next to Buphra. "I'm afraid he's right. You'll have to wait until morning."

"Will Mr. Chatursati be here this evening?"

"He may well return," Holi said. "He is sometimes ..."

"We have a lot of land," Tabor sat forward and swilled the ice cubes in his drink.

"He has to visit a lot of places."

"In the jungle," Holi added.

Again the radio crackled throughout the house, causing Holi to glance up at Tabor.

"Sometimes he's gone for days. Sometimes ..."

"He's been gone forever already today," Alexander added. He had pulled another tennis ball from the pocket of his muddy white shorts and was threatening to slap another forehand about the room.

Holi got up, and went over to him. He stepped back.

Buphra, with an idea, said quickly: "Perhaps, Mrs. Chatursati could ..."

"She's dead." Holi and Tabor spoke at once, and so speedily that it appeared as if they were programmed for such a question.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry." Buphra said and took off his glasses and began to clean them with a handkerchief. "I had no idea."

Copala appeared behind Buphra. He was soaking wet and leaking water all over the tiles.

"Copala!" Holi said, then remembering that Buphra was present smiled sweetly and added, "Copala, please take Mr. Ganesh up to ..." she thought for a second. "To the blue room. See that he knows where everything is." Then she turned to Buphra. "You will want

to take a nap, perhaps?"

"Well, I am rather tired," Buphra said, getting up. "But I don't want to put you to any trouble. I mean ..."

Holi looked to Tabor. "It is no trouble. Is it Tabor?"

Tabor looked up from his drink. "No," answered her. "No, I suppose not. And with the road the way it is." He too got up and held out his hand for Buphra. "Yes. Look, I'm sorry. Please stay. It will be good if you stay."

The radio crackled.

The blue of Buphra's room only added to the sadness of the house. True, the furniture was extremely ornate, and the bed was very comfortable, there was an en-suite bathroom, hot water, and, he was sure, when it did not rain, a wonderful view—he was directly above the living room, he had surmised—even if it was just a fog of thick rain at that moment. But there was something not quite right. Something missing. Not anything physical. All the comforts of home were present and accounted for. And yet the room felt decidedly empty. It was devoid of any life.

But Buphra was not a man in the process of buying a house or a man who wrote for a Home and Garden Magazine: he was a man who had been travelling since the small hours of the morning after a long night at the JAR with Captain Aviery.

So, as he lay his head down on the exquisite brocade of the softest pillow in the world his thoughts danced happily back to the previous night and Captain Aviery's annual speech about how he got the old JAR started up and all of the wonderful and strange people who had passed through its doors.

"Of course, back in the forties, before then too," Captain Aviery went on, "there were always a few odd ones. Times never seem to change, you know, chaps." He leaned behind himself and removed a great cigar box from a drawer. He handed several of them

out to the ILC group—one of many groups of new Indian captains of industry—and then lit each cigar.

Buphra puffed a little too furiously and went red, and then coughed. It was out of politeness that he had accepted Aviery's cigar, but he smiled his way through it, and Aviery recognized the nice man which Buphra was: a man not unlike Buphra's father who Aviery had rescued from the "cowardly hands of Empire" as he had come to label some of his fellow British officers.

"Of course," he went on, "all of that millennium stuff was a lot of rot too. Sure, it was a good excuse for a bit of a knees up. But really. All that palaver."

"But damn bloody good for business," Sehru chimed in.

He was a round man with a heart laugh and enormous fortune. The lottery had been his idea all along. Buphra had met him in London when he was making final arrangements with Camelot, the British lottery, and he had hired him despite the fact that Buphra had just completed his Bachelor's degree in English Literature.

"Don't worry about that," Sehru had told him over a fat lunch in a Soho pub.

"English Literature's just fine. Besides, I'm the boss." Buphra watched another great slice of dripping roast beef being forced into an already bloated mouth. "Credentials!" He put his fork down and in between chewing and picking his teeth he said: "You think a man can put his credentials down on paper? Rubbish! Here." He pointed to his eyes with two chunky fingers. "Here's where a man has his credentials. You could write anything on a piece of paper. Resume. Huh! That's just paper. And toilet paper at that!"

He laughed out loud and drew some eyes from the neighboring tables. Buphra looked around and smiled, then sucked on the straw of his Coca Cola.

"I see it in your eyes," Sehru carried on. "And you can't change that resume!"

And Sehru had been fair. All along. And at one hundred and fifty thousand rupees a year, Buphra had made no argument.

And he had worked for six months now at the ILC. Already they had amassed millions of rupees. Buphra found it amazing how even the poorest of the poor might well sacrifice their only pauses for the opportunity of buying a ticket. Indeed, he knew of beggars who pooled their resources to purchase a solitary ticket. Who knows what might happen if that ticket won—there would surely be bloodshed.

So far there had been twenty-three winners. Almost all of them had been Vaishya or middle class—the Brahmin, the upper class, saw the lottery as evil, and had tried to stop it, for the obvious reasons—movement within castes was possible only after death, in a new life. But this last lottery had been held over for thirteen weeks. The initial sum—a healthy fifty million rupees had grown to a ridiculous sum. And the people demanded a winner. If there was a winner, the people wanted him found. There had already been suspicions about the lottery—probably spread from the upper-classes—that it was somehow fixed. And while it was true that Sehru was driven about town and to his fine country houses in a great black air-conditioned Mercedes, Buphra knew the rumor was unfounded: the lottery was legitimate. And, if that was so, there had to be a winner.

A winning ticket had been purchased in the town of Kinaber, a hundred and eighty or so miles north west of New Delhi. And, the Kinaber station manager had received the receipts of all of the other people who had purchased tickets. In the Indian system, nobody threw their tickets away and always returned to the lottery station to check their numbers.

Buphra had witnessed this himself. Strained faces came in. The crumpled, sweaty pieces of paper held out ahead of them as if they were not worthy to carry them. The people believed, it was said, that by showing such respect this would somehow increase their chances of winning.

Chatursati had been remembered, not only because he had once been a big landowner but because since the inception of the lottery he had always chosen the same numbers.

"And," the man had added on the telephone to Buphra who was seeking Mr. Chatursati's address, "I know it was him because he always chose 4. That was the day of the month his wife died." He paused for a moment. "An accident of some kind. Perhaps even a suicide. But with Chatursati's money, anything can be anything."

"In my day," Aviery continued, "we didn't need a bloody holiday so much." He and Buphra had discovered a quiet corner and Aviery needed a rest before the "Pouring" began. "We just had parties and all the woman got skacked up nicely. But all this ..."

He looked about the crowded main barroom. There was a good mix of East and West. Some relatives had come visit Aviery and they made use of the dancefloor. The ILC with the great ball of Sehru stood about near to one of the several buffet tables which lay like animals quite some time after a kill. Occasionally, Sehru would lean back and scrape some jelly or sauce onto a cracker.

"I think time moved a lot slower then, you know," Aviery said.

"It's certainly moving too fast for me," Buphra answered, trying to find a place to put out his cigar. "I'll be twenty-four next year."

"An," said Aviery, "but twenty-four years, and all those rupees in the bank." He slapped him on the shoulder. "Not lacking any *lakhs*, hey what?!"

The "Pouring" was a tradition which Aviery had continued for over fifty years.

Every since India's Independence he had given away beer to the poor. This year he would need to fill fifty-three great mugs, and already the flagons were being prepared.

"It's not really very much," Aviery said quietly to Buphra as he, and the rest of the room watched the flagons being filled. "One always feels one should do more." He tapped Buphra's arm with his hand. "Of course, it's money they want. People think it's food." He shook his head. "There's plenty of food here. I dare say in England they have all the wrong impression. Harvests have been excellent for some time now. That's how you lottery

chappies are doing so well. Money. That's the most important thing here. Bloody sad thing, money."

"And what about love," Buphra asked, then wondered why.

"Love? What is love, my boy?" He sat back, drew on his cigar and then bellowed out a great blue cloud. "Of course, I have passed love a long time ago. I had my times. I had my wives. An Indian wifey too. She was the best of the lot. But she died. Typhoid. The English women. Too brittle. No bloody backbone. Never seen enough pain. No, my boy, love is something that too will pass."

"I didn't find English women brittle," said Buphra, remembering his several fumbled attempts at seduction. In one, he even succeeded in losing his virginity. In the only other successful one—if that was even the right word—she had lost hers. There had been many tears. And then, of course, the racial issue, and Buphra taken a vow of silence. And how cold the sheets suddenly got after she had left his flat, leaving behind a bracelet he would never return but would treasure.

"They're not brittle because they're in England, old boy. They're playing at home. You've got to accept a place first, and let yourself become a part of it. All this "Home Away from Home" stuff is no good. Survivors adapt to the environment, Buphra, and not the other way around."

Aviery stood up. The room was beckoning him forward to the flagons. He turned to Buphra.

"You don't have to stay for all this," he said. "You've got to be up anyhow, yes?" Buphra looked at his watch. It was after two in the morning.

"My bus leaves at six," he said.

"No trains?"

"No trains." Buphra shook his head.

"Trains are good," Aviery said. "They travel at just the right speed here. They stop

everybloodywhere. You can get a feel for a place if you stay long enough. Still, mark my words, and you won't go far wrong. Goodnight, Buphra."

"Goodnight, Captain," he smiled and saluted which always drew a smile from Aviery.

"You have been sleeping well?"

Buphra fluttered his eyes open and was surprised, happily surprised to find himself looking at the back of Holi as she drew back the curtains and allowed sunlight to pour through. Buphra hooked his arm around under his head, blinked several times and spoke.

"Yes," he said. "And now it is sunny. Perhaps the road will be ..."

"The road is closed," Holi said suddenly, then realizing her haste she approached Buphra with a knowing smile and added, "Copala has been down to the village. He says it is far too dangerous."

"But surely ..."

Holi sat upon the bed which caused Buphra to stop what he was about to stay.

"If you would rather stay in the village," Holi went on. "The old woman. I believe you met her at our post office. She has a room. In the back."

"Your father may return tonight then?" Buphra said, then remembering his purpose.

"He may well do," Holi said, getting up quickly as if sitting on the bed had been a mistake she had just realized.

Buphra sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stretched. Holi went over to his trousers and shirt which he had draped carelessly over a chair by the door.

"I can have these washed for you in no time," she said taking them up.

"But I have nothing else to wear."

Holi opened a great armoire and Buphra watched his reflection appear in the mirror. His hair was badly ruffled, and he wore no vest. He pulled the sheet up to his chin and drew his knees up to his chest.

"There are some clothes here," she offered. "Not too traditional, I hope."

Buphra felt unusual in his new clothing, but had to admit that they felt extremely comfortable. He had washed his face and hands, happy to find clear and hot water coursing through the faucets. It was strange, as he looked out over the then darkening valley, that in such a place he could find such comforts.

Alexander was alone in the living room when Buphra entered. He sat at the piano with his back to the doorway, however, facing out over the valley. Buphra coughed to attract attention, and Alexander swiveled around.

"I am hoping," he began, "that father will come soon."

"Is he often out in this kind of ..."

"Yes." Alexander plinked the piano, then looked up to Buphra. "You seem like a nice chap," he said. "When I get older, would you like to work for me?"

Buphra was taken aback by such a question and smiled, probably not unlike Copala.

"Well, I don't know about ..."

"You see," Alexander leaned forward as if divulging a secret, "I'll own all of this one day."

"But surely your brothers. Your sister?"

"No!" He stood up and his eyes narrowed. Buphra felt suddenly uncomfortable.

"They have their own money." He strutted toward the window and looked out into the graying night. "I am Papa's only real son. That's why he uses number eleven. I am eleven. You see, I deserve at least a sixth. Don't you think?"

"That's enough of that." Holi said as she entered the room. "Now, have you washed for dinner?"

Alexander moved silently to the door behind the bar. He raised an impertinent nose

to his sister and the left.

"I am sorry for my brother," she said as she sat and smoothed out her satin dress. It was a green dress, but as she smoothed it out, other colors appeared for a second in it.

Buphra sat opposite her.

"Would you like whisky?" she offered. "I mean, do you drink?"

Buphra nodded as she got up. "We're not a very traditional household here, I am afraid"

"I've been in England for several years," Buphra announced, and then wondered why.

"I've been there," Holi said as Buphra heard the cap of the J&B being opened. "I lived there from when I was." She paused. "When I was quite young. Until I was eighteen."

"I was at university there too."

"I wanted to be," she said regrettably. "But I had to come back."

She walked over to him, and he watched the dress change its color. "That's always a pity," he said as he took the glass from her. "Not being able to finish things."

"Yes. It is."

Tabor appeared in the doorway. He already had a generous drink in his hand. "I don't think there's any reason to wait," he said.

Holi, bit her lip for a second then said, "Tell cook we will dine at eight."

Buphra looked at his watch. It was a seven forty-five.

Tabor headed down the hall and Holi jumped up. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'll get your clothes for you. You don't want to wear all that at dinner."

Alone again, Buphra stood up and, with his drink, walked over to the bookcases which were sunk into the walls. In front of the aged and fine leather-bound books were many family photographs. The Chatursatis appeared to be obsessed with the past, he

thought. He only had two photographs of his own family. And there were very few of him as a child. And that was a pity, he realized as he looked at several pictures and squinted to see Holi as a child, and Tabor, and Alexander.

When he went to put a particular one down, he noticed that they were all in a specific order. Indeed, the bookcase which abutted the great picture window was the oldest. There was a large man in the center, obviously Mr. Chatursati, and Mrs. Chatursati, who held an infant in her lap. Mr. Chatursati stared with a beaming smile into the camera while his wife looked down to the child with one finger in the process of stroking the child's head: the caption read: Chatursatis, 1975.

Buphra enjoyed seeing Holi grow as he edged along the bookcases. In 1978, Tabor appeared and this time, and Holi was holding him. Buphra got as far as 1988, when he was puzzled by the absence of a photograph from 1987. The 1988 photograph contained only Mr. Chatursati and Tabor who stood, with his arm so tightly around his son that the pressure could be seen in Tabor's face.

"I have your clothes here." Buphra turned to Holi and took his shirt and trousers.

"That was very kind of you," he said. She smiled and took up her drink.

"I notice you're missing a year," he said.

"A year?"

"Yes. Those photographs. You're missing 1988."

"Yes," she said turning away to the bar. "That's when I went away to England. I was thirteen."

The dining room boasted no photographs but there was one family portrait behind the head of the table. The lighting was poor however, not unlike a billiard room where the table is brilliant and sits among the darkness. As a result, all of the faces looked rather gloomy.

There was a doorway open to Buphra's left and occasionally he could still hear the crackle of a radio. And, every time there was a sound both Tabor and Holi looked in that direction. Alexander merely stuffed his little face and reluctantly drank his water.

Delicious plates of food appeared from out of the darkness, provided by two whitegloved servers who uttered not one sound. The white gloves made Buphra wonder more and more about Tabor's red glove. And it was unfortunate that Alexander caught his eye because he immediately knew what Buphra was thinking.

"Anyone for tennis," he blurted out.

Tabor crunched hard on his meat and scraped his plate loudly.

"Alexander!" Holi said.

"Tell him, Tabor. Tell our man here what happened. Tell us why you wear that glove. Come on."

"I am quite sure," Holi stepped in, "that Mr. Ganesh does not wish to hear of such things."

Alexander held up his hands and started counting. When he got to nine, he stopped. "Now," he said. "What comes after nine? I wonder."

Tabor leaned across the table and raised his knife to Alexander. "That is enough," he said through gritted teeth.

"Nine's not enough," Alexander went on. "See." He held his fingers wide apart.

"Ten. Ten's enough." He then pulled a glass of water toward his face, took a big gulp.

"How many have you got, brother Tabor?" he bullied. "How many?"

"We have a guest!" Holi hissed at Alexander.

A sweet jelly was served as dessert and as it was placed in front of Buphra it gyrated before him, catching the light from the candles. But, as he watched it, he realized that instead of coming to a standstill, it continued shaking. Then he could see the wine in his

glass begin to slosh to the side. He reached for it, and felt the table vibrating.

"My god!" he exclaimed. "What is it? An earthquake?"

Tabor, Holi and Alexander continued eating as if nothing were happening.

"It is nothing to worry about," Holi assured him.

And, indeed, in a few seconds--hours for Buphra who had already imagined being swallowed up by the earth—the table, and then finally his jellied dessert stood still and delicious before him.

"Father!" Alexander let out a cry. "Father! What about father?!"

Buphra looked to the doorway expecting to meet the great beaming smile of the man to appear but saw nothing.

From a distant part of the house the radio buzzed into life again. Holi looked up to Tabor whose right hand slowly began to bend his spoon from the pressure of his grasp.

There was a lot of static at first, and then a faint voice, coming in and out.

"Holi! Holi!" A great voice boomed. "Holi! I need help. Send help! The trees!

The water! They are ..."

There was a lot of crackle, and then prolonged static. Alexander went to get up, but Tabor was behind him and held him down.

"What's going on?" Buphra asked, half-getting up. "Is that your father?" Buphra turned to Holi who was then consulting with the cook and the servant who had come running out. She seemed to be handing out prepared instructions, and they soon left the room, but not, Buphra noted, in any great hurry or with any special amount of concern.

Alexander went to get up. "You can't keep me here forever," he said, struggling. But, Tabor held him down tightly, and he would not escape.

"He sounds like he's in trouble," Buphra put in.

"Father has taken the bait," Tabor smiled gleefully at Holi who rushed around to her brother and kissed him on his cheek.

"Bait?" said Buphra. "What bait?"

"You will have to trust us," Holi said.

"Trust you? But there's a man. Your father. He's in trouble."

As Alexander had slowly been trying to work his way free, Tabor's glove had slowly come loose. And when Alexander bent over and gnashed his teeth into his arm, it came completely loose as he held it up in agony and held it with his other arm. The index finger on his right hand was missing.

Holi slashed at Alexander with the back of her hand. A blow so strong that Alexander toppled to the floor with a muffled cry.

Tabor turned to Buphra: "What about him?"

Holi looked to Buphra, as a judge deciding his fate. Buphra stepped back and then eyed the doorway. "I want you to trust us," she said. "Please. Please be still."

There was more noise from the radio. The voice increasingly desperate.

"Help! Holi! I need ... you ... I need ..."

In the background there was the sound of the trees, and great cracks as if the trees were all toppling around the frantic man.

The dining room was in the center of the house with a door in each wall: the outside could have been completely removed. It could have been a storm or a sultry afternoon. It could have been day or night, wet or dry. This was a room without seasons.

There was a bump to the right, from the kitchen Buphra had already surmised, and through it came the servant, pushing a tray with a great coffee pot and five cups and saucers. The servant began laying the cups before everyone, and even Alexander sat back, still now. Even smaller than he had seemed at first. His face hung low.

"We must not listen to anything," Holi announced.

"I don't understand," Buphra said. "A man is in trouble. Why aren't you doing anything?!"

"Murderers!" Alexander said, as the servant poured his coffee perfectly calmly.

"You want him to die! He'll die out there!"

"Hush!" Holi said. "He is out in the grove. That is a place where he should not be. Everyone knows that. That was his rule. Nobody in the grove. Nobody except ..."

"You sent him there. You told him ..."

"I," Holi let out a little laugh. "I, give *him* an order. Come now, Alexander. What can you be thinking of." Holi raised her coffee to her lips, then turned quickly to Buphra. "It is truly fine coffee, is it not, Mr. Ganesh," she said to Buphra who sat frozen to his seat.

"You're all mad," he exclaimed.

"Not mad," Tabor said, standing. Buphra sat back in his chair as he was approached.

"If anyone is mad ..." he pointed to the far end of the table where a great empty chair sat.

"If anyone is mad, it is he."

"Mad for going to the grove," Holi interrupted, wanting to stop her brother from speaking further.

"The grove?" Buphra asked.

Alexander began to whimper. He looked to his sister and then seemed to see something else in her eyes. Or to see a new sister. Buphra could only watch. Alexander blew gently over his coffee. "You said you'd meet him there. You said"

"Everyone has said far too many things, Alexander. Far too many."

The radio echoed eerily through the house, and was occasionally punctuated with a man's voice. A voice more desperate now. A voice growing more tender, more forgivable.

Buphra heard himself wondering these thoughts. What was wrong with this family? What would happen to him? What could he do?

Suddenly there was maniacal laughter from somewhere in the house. It was Copala.

"Go to him," Holi pleaded with Tabor. She then looked to Alexander. "Little Alex will be fine now," she said.

"And?" Tabor signaled Buphra.

Holi knelt down before Buphra and held his hands. She bowed her head, and when she looked up her eyes were red and her cheeks were streamed with tears. But she was smiling.

"He will also be fine," she assured her brother. "You will, won't you, Mr Ganesh?"

"I have no idea what is going on, Holi," Buphra said. "I think there is some great tragedy, but I cannot let that man be ..."

"Man!" She jumped up. Then, calm again, realizing that Buphra was just a guest, a visitor, someone who knew nothing of her family save a few photographs and casual conversation, she said. "I will show you this man." She held her hand out as if to lead Buphra somewhere. Tabor gave one more glance to Alexander, who hesitated and then followed his brother out of the room.

Buphra was led through the house to the back, the crackle and static of the radio seemingly louder, where through a back door they followed a stone stairway down to a small building wedges between two great trees. There was a thick padlock on the door and Holi looked about for something to break it with.

"I'm not sure we should be ..." Buphra began, but was only met by a scowl from Holi which seemed to say, If you love me, you'll do this.

Buphra discovered a loose stone beneath his feet and he pried it up.

"Here," he said. "Will this do?"

"Yes," said Holi. "Now, break it."

"Me?!"

"I can't hit so hard," she said.

After four blows the padlock slid to the ground. But Holi did not charge inside as Buphra expected. Instead, she inched the door open with her foot as if she were afraid of something.

Once inside she felt to the right on the wall for a switch. When the room exploded into light, Buphra had to blink several times before he could realize what was before him.

There was a great desk with a thick leather chair in front of it, several filing cabinets, a bookcase. But, what was more interesting, if that could be the right word, was what made Holi hold her face in her hands. Because, covering two entire walls were pictures, some large some small, some color some black and white of Holi. Holi as a child, Holi as teenager, even a picture which could have been taken that day.

Holi started to tear down the photographs from the wall, but soon she fell to the floor, the prints all about her, and began to sob violently.

"There," she pointed her elegant and shaking hand to the desk drawer. "You'll find what *you're* looking for in there."

Buphra gently placed the motor scooter back against the wall of the *dhaba*. The owner opened his mouth to speak, but when he met the look on Buphra's face, he kept silent and merely pressed his hands together and said only, "*Namaste*."

Buphra had managed to order a taxi, and in a half hour or so it labored up to the *dhaba* and a thin man stepped out. His few remaining teeth were particularly brilliant, and he wore a persistent smile. And yet he walked with a limp: his left foot was merely a stump with hard plastic at the bottom in the shape of a shoe.

He stopped the taxi short of the ILC, as he wanted to compose himself with a walk before he returned. They would all be waiting. Sehru especially. They would know something had gone wrong. They would demand answers. Buphra tipped the driver excessively, and then laughed to himself as he realized how foolish he had been. He could have tipped him the whole world and that would not have returned his foot. You couldn't buy back the past to pay off the future. And the future might have been for sale, but what price would have to be paid?

He leaned on a balustrade and looked out over the great river which glided thickly by. It had known all along what would happen, what had happened. He took out the small plastic holder which contained Chatursati's winning ticket—he'd bought it specially. Watertight as could be. Completely waterproof.

He smoothed the plastic so the numbers became clear, and he remembered everything that Holi had told him about their father. About her planned meeting. How, she told him, her father's lascivious eyes had grown when she promised herself to him again. And about Tabor and his wanting to play tennis professionally, "Like the Armritraj brothers," his seventeen year-old eyes had announced. And how his father had removed that finger in what he had told everyone a machete accident. Though they all knew. And Copala and the zero and how his father had branded him when he was so young. "A zero for a zero," he had said. "You are as good as cattle to me only."

Buphra had pressed her. "How could you know he would be drowned?"

And she had told him how Tabor had fixed the truck so that it would break down. The radio was with the truck. Her father could never walk back. He had to stay with the radio, with the truck. And the grove would be flooded. One good rain. And oh, how they had prayed for the rain. And, by chance—Holi had laughed strangely when she spoke this word—it had all happened. All fallen into place. By chance.

"But you won't speak," she pleaded. Then, quickly and with more authority she added. "You cannot speak. What would you say? That we had arranged the rain." She paused for a moment. "They would laugh at you. The monster is washed away, Mr. Ganesh." And then she had pressed the ticket into Buphra's hand and reminded him of the many strange packages in which fortune could be found.

How long I have been from home? Buphra wondered. What country is this I have returned to. What time is this, when such things come about? But perhaps that was how

things would be for a while. Maybe had been for all time. He thought back to his father being dangled over the balcony at the RAJ, and about how, what if Captain Aviery had not shown up that night. Or if Captain Aviery had not been brave enough to confront the roaring coward. Buphra's life had also hung in the balance too.

Buphra pushed himself upright and headed along the road to the ILC. The ticket, rested for a moment on the balustrade, and then a gentle breeze revived it and it flew up and then down, gracefully, to the surface of the river where it floated quite amicably. For a second only, of course, before it was swept back up and steered out into the middle where it joined with all manner of things Indian, and where it then, proudly proofed against the water, sought its fortune elsewhere.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE WORLD

November 30 South Pacific 4:59 pm.

The number 2 of the 2-0-0-0 which made up the millennium sign had to be at least ten feet high, and had been in place only half an hour before some island kids came by to see what all the mess was about. It was not as straight as the other numbers and looked noticeably tired and droopy, as if it had just given birth to the three fat zeros which followed it. And it had been no easy fucking delivery. The American and little South Korean workmen with their Japanese equipment and international attitudes had worked all afternoon, and with the wind, and the fact that the rock promontory was slick as shit, it was a miracle that none of them or those numbers had been swept into that warm but deceptive sea. Now that would have been something. Imagine, there you are, bloody floating in the sea, and the millennium just bobs right on by!

Still, not half an hour had passed and, the workmen now reassigned to lining up the thirty or so Hondas and Toyotas cars, the island boys had found a use for it. Dressed in their oversized T-shirts which those two automotive giants had given out by the hundred, stained red and brown with the beach, they were heaving the biggest hunks of lava they could get their hands on through the zeros. Mind you, whenever one of them missed, a great clang rang out across the beach through the palm trees to my cheap but not-cheerful hutted accommodation, and the kids screamed like hell and then bent down for more ammunition.

And even though it wasn't helping the article, I was enjoying watching them so much because they had no trouble, unlike yours bloody truly, blurring failure into success. Each time a hunk of lava crashed against the metal, those kids reacted just the same as when one of them made it through clean as a whistle.

Not all the zeros were the same size, though, for some odd reason. They grew increasingly rounder and fatter—an elephant could have quite happily stepped right through the end one. And, I suppose this was supposed to show how we were all progressing or

something—or just getting fatter! None of the kids had managed to get anything through the smallest zero. But then finally, the older one, I guessed he was older because he was the tallest, clanged a rock through, and the three others who had been all smiles, whitest teeth I ever saw, suddenly stopped everything. It almost hadn't made it, but the big kid jumped up and down, and hit the air with his fist. But, when he turned to his friends, they just hung their heads like they hadn't really wanted him to do it, even though I'd seen them egging him on the whole time.

Nobody picked any more rocks up, and the sky, rather suddenly it seemed, became that bruise color, as if somehow that tall and probably oldest kid had just punched the sun out. It was even a little yellow at the edges, like it was getting better but only looked worse.

I watched the kids troop off down the beach somewhere, heads still lower for some unknowable reason, except for the tall kid, who was splashing about in the shallows and kicking his legs at the others, then dropped my eyes to the Laptop screen and realized I had written fuck all in three hours.

Well, I had written something. But it had been crap. Good crap, I warrant you. But crap all the same. Something easy and cheap. Something understandable and right. Along the lines of:

What difference could one day make? One hour, one minute. One second even. And yet, the whole world was holding its uncollective breath. But it would be a sunrise like any other, any thousand, any million other ...

You see, that's what I had thought people might think of it. But then there was Drummond, my editor. Big voice, big mouth, big moustache, big bloody Melbourneite.

"Don't worry about the fucking TRUTH, for Christ sakes," the ex-almost International cricketer had screamed back in Sydney. "This ain't no ART piece, Marsh. Just write down what you know I want to read and get it the hell back here." And then he

had added, as he did on most of my assignments. "I would have bloody thought, even a bald, fat Queenslander could do that. No fucking worries, right?!"

The little fan above me whimpered and died: the power was down again. I had one cigarette left, and a spits worth of duty free vodka. I should have taken everybody else's advice. I should have gone to the *Helios*—the only decent or modern hotel on the whole damn island. I could have swung it. Well, I might have swung it, and then drunk about one bloody coke.

I raised the bottle and finished it. I could just picture those bastards now: the bastards from last night, all with their piss stain ideas, and their nancy-fancy leads. Hedges (as if the sod could have any other name) from *The Sydney* bloody *Times*, Arkinson from *The Canberra* friggin' *Post*, Pelth or somebody from *The Herald* God-almighty *Tribune*, and Rainer from the *Sino-Zeit* or something; a kraut anyhow. Of course there were others. Jesus, there were fifty, a hundred even, British, Japanese, a couple of frogs. But these were the guys I had got drunk with the night before in the *Helios* Main bar—although there *was* only the one bar. And I only did it because they shouted all the drinks, with their endless expense accounts. And only because I kowtowed to them and said I'd read all their stuff, and thought they all deserved Pulitzers, and then had to dance real quick and said, I meant Nobels. Guffaw. Guffaw.

But, oh no. Marsh couldn't stay at the *Helios*; no fucking way. Marshy, he had to have the "Island experience." No air-conditioning. A shower that was no more than a dribble, iffy power, and bloody bugs everywhere.

Let me see, what would an ex have said?

"Truth, Marsh? What do you know about truth? If you knew so much about truth, why'd you go screw somebody else?"

And I'd answer. Something like: "I could have lied about it. Lying about it would

have been worse." Nursing some drink at the time. Hiding behind the ice cubes.

"No, no, no." she might well have answered. And then added something clever and witty like ... "There's been far too much lying around, if you ask me."

So, our hero Marsh, all fucking alone in his room, and the world outside.

But our hero's room wasn't a room at all but a hut: a hut the size of a room though. It was in one of the ten or so huts which faced bravely eastward, bracing their brittle thatch against the constant winds which was great for circulating the air, but made the whole bloody hut like some animal at night: always something rubbing against something, like it was constantly scratching itself.

So, Marsh lights his last cigarette and looks at the blank screen. The cursor, blinking like some sexy woman he'll never ever be able to fuck.

And everything he had written. Oh yeah, he'd been writing. (Writing all his bloody life, if you want the truth—even Marshian truth. Hey, there's an idea. Remember that, Marshy. Marshian. Might be useful later. Or funny at least.) But it was all crap. It was all bullshit. All, yeah ... er ... derivative. It was nothing that had not been put down before.

Marsh, you see, he's this fat romantic. Even though he knows all of, and even plays by all of the rules, there's this part of him, this fucking cancerous growth of truth which he doesn't fight, doesn't see doctors about. No way. And he feeds this thing. Every second of his pathetic thirty-eight years on what's left of the planet,

he has pleaded with his immune system to let it proliferate. That's a good word. Sounds more than it is, or should be, like everything else. Grow, grow, grow my little lump he thinks, Let no thing disturb you, my love. Spread and encompass. Spread and encompass. Our hero seeks no cure for the world.

And what is the flavor of his truth?

Thirty-eight years old, and fat, you already know. Divorced, you didn't know but

receive no bloody prizes for guessing.

Children? None. Thank god! On assignment for *AWN*. *Australian World News*. A colorful bloody magazine, if you like lots of pictures and pretty crap writing. Eight years of reporting on anything Australian, at first. Aborigines. Travel. The Japs. Paul Hogan. Then, when *AWN* got nicknamed YAWN and ran out of ideas, it became anything on anything.

And then this fucking thing: the millennium.

Three day trip. Leave December 31, come back January 2. Snap a few photos and write the article, fax the article, e-mail the article--if e-mail worked. The *AWN* Laptop e-mail didn't work.

"You'll figure it out," Drummond had said as he handed our hero the tickets, and then added, "Sure you don't need two seats?" Muffled laughter around the office. But not malicious. No way. Drummond and the whole gang are right. I'm one fat bastard. In fact, the two-seat joke's more boring than offensive.

And I get paid well. It's good pay. It's just the work. It's crap. That's all. Not the lying or the deceit, but the fact that it's just so fucking seductive.

Before you know it, it takes over your life, and you're a fat ass who lies and gets away with it. Every time. Every time because you live it every day. Really. Just like the whole bloody world.

Take the day after Christmas, if you like. I'm at the office party. No date, of course. But there's plenty of women about, and drink, and food and all that. Drummond spares no expenses when he wants to have fun. The women are actually from some of the other offices in the building. *AWN* is just the fifth floor of the building. Drummond's single, and he only ever invites women then makes excuses to them--all the women in our office are married. And they bring their husbands.

And, well, if you need the truth; there was this one girl. Woman. All in blue, and

pretty drunk. Like our hero. Grateful for the window ledge where he could rest half of his ass, and not appear as paralyzed as he probably was. Although, Marsh can be pretty coherent, even when he's plastered—even mythical. This might be noticeable some time later on. When, say he's drunk, and "kernels of truth" slide out of his arse. Maybe they will constitute a whole paragraph? In italics, because otherwise it's just words.

Anyhow. Back at the party. And it'll be in the present tense because that's how memories are, or should be. Well, Marshian memories are in the present, so there!

"I used to be fat," the woman in blue says, then realizes what she's said. But there's a small speck of salad dressing in the corner of her mouth, and I don't tell her about it which evens the score. "Then I went and saw some wonderful people." She drinks again, then suppresses a hiccup. "Excuse me. Wonderful people. Whole new diet."

"I don't mind being fat," I say, even though I was lying and have tried every fucking diet in the world. No this, no that. No everything. No nothing.

She slaps me on the shoulder. "Well that's good," she says. "Good for you. I wish I could be like that."

"But you'd miss being fat though?" Part of her bra shows under her dress.

"Hey?" Her mouth opens, and I can see some potato salad on her back teeth; eyes all glassed up.

"I mean," I go on, though godknowswhy," you were happier when you were fat, right?"

A couple brushes by her, and as she moves out of the way; her elbow bumps my arm. When they have passed, she stays still. Her elbow now making a small home just under my ribs. That kind of drunk.

"I don't think I get you," she says and looks right at me.

"You were happier because you could eat what you liked," I continue. "You could exercise when you wanted. You had your own clock." I take a drink as I watch my idea

swim around in her eyes like some drugged dolphin. "Now, you've got this diet thing," I go on, taking another swig of my drink, swishing the ice around the bottom of the plastic cup like this is important to me (which it is, by the way) "and somebody else's holding the stopwatch."

Her arm taps my arm, and that smile starts to find itself all over her face. It was just in her eyes, but now her whole face is lighting up, like it's getting bigger but not any larger. You know the kind of face though—it's the kind of face that brings those odds of sleeping alone tonight right back to evens.

"You know, you're right," she says. "You're fucking ... excuse me." She blushes. "You're absolutely right."

"And, you see," I add. "If some bloke. Like you're dating someone now, right?"

"Yeah," she says then adds quickly rubbing the rim of the plastic cup under her top lip, "but he couldn't make it tonight."

"And he thinks you're beautiful because you're thin, right? And, I bet he tells you how pretty you are. How you've got a great figure. How you've got a great ..."

"That's right," she starts that nodding thing. "That's the sorts of things he says."

"But it isn't you." I say and shake the ice in my glass as if this will conjure up more vodka and then finish it all with a crunch. "It's somebody else. And don't think I've got anything against thin people. It's just that some people should be fat, and always regret it."

And, an hour later I am back at her place, legs in the air, toes up, toes down, toes every which way. And it doesn't mean anything. Because?

Because I decided to stay the night, and in the morning, she's looking at me like it's gonna take some talk show host to remove me from her bedroom.

That's how it is with truth. She's a beautiful woman who wouldn't fuck you unless you lied. And then you'd be fucking somebody else anyhow.

But that's okay, our hero says. I don't mind that. Or rather, I shouldn't mind that.

After all, I got to see her truth; like her little moans and whimpers when our hero ... well, acted heroically: it was like she was letting go of the world for a moment and letting herself drift into space or out onto a lake. (Of course, our hero *is* the lake, so he can't drift).

And, of course, when the work week starts up again, she will always wait for another elevator when she sees me and all that, but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all because ... because ... (see how modern heroes fumble about) then there's this Millennium thing. And there's Drummond. And then the Marshian is off and up at thirty-five thousand, eyeing up the stewardesses (should be "flight attendants" but he ain't interested in them). And forgotten all about it. Forgotten everything but the memory, that is. Wait a minute?

So, fat, balding (well, widow's peak our hero will admit to) guy, thirty-eight, imbued with uncanny knack of discovering other people's truths through his own dishonesty ...

Suicide is not an option because he is just as scared as the rest of the world about extinction—not of White tigers mind, but his own. Drinks too much, and eats too much to substitute. No drugs because of the Death thing, and he knows he'll just want more and more and fucking more. Sound familiar? And ...

And?

And a blank screen: a whole and opening paragraph deleted. And the blinking cursor still winking. Blinking like; "I know something you don't. I know and you're stuck in the shit." Because, the fat guy thinks; it all really comes from that cursor anyhow--look how it just ate up all those sugary lies you just pounded out and how no cursor ever diets. Words like:

Dawn.

And then, of course, seeing d-AWN. And trying to work AWN into the birth of the new millennium. And birth. And what was the fluid called? Ambiotic. Amniotic—sounds like amnesia. Like we quickly learn to forget from whence we came. Ambiotic. Ambivalent. Ambi-guous.

Fuck!

The keyboard is a puzzle then. Twenty-six letters with an infinite number of combinations. But, it's like the fat guy is sitting with his father, over some geometry or algebra or any problem: "The answer's right in front of you, son," the good man who achieved nothing, save for coping with a wife's early demise says. "You've just got to keep looking." And, that afterthought, as the fat boy's face wanders off the page and out through the window onto the playing field where friends, thinner but still friends all the same, chase a ball around realizing there's an infinite number of ways to kick that ball, and a zillion places to kick it, but they still need fucking goalposts.

And there's no more distractions. Back to swaying fronds and balmy air and no air-conditioning. No more REAL out there on the shore. When the boys were playing, our hero could hear their words. A kind of English, but there was something more melodic in their language. Like they had found a better use for it. Unlike our hero. He, who has favored the word fuck every paragraph of his ... bloody ... life.

And why?

Because it's so definite, so powerful. Like "Fuck You" which is particularly brutal because it is so final. The "You" causes this—especially when the words are spoken as two. Fuck. You. Like there's no escape.

And yet?

"I'd love to 'fuck you'," is different. Especially from a woman. A wife?

Yes. Our hero had experienced that. A woman. His wife-to-have-been had used such words when they had first met. Drunk, of course. And who'd want to escape from this?

And, two happy years of experiments, leading to one unhappy year of results, which, having been checked and re-checked by the "wife" and her forensical friends concluded in

divorce. Because?

Our hero had cheated. (And not just once)

And why?

Why does the world spin? That's what he had said. Perhaps, with something sweet before it like, "Honey ... why does the world spin?"

The inevitable slap, the tears jostling for poll position behind the reddening eyes, screwing up suddenly into old age and wisdom. The look of complete disbelief, as if shethe-wife never realized that the mantle of marriage is constantly moving, scraping. Tectonically.

"Marriage" or hero's father, the geographer, had in-gin-stilled, "is a war of attrition.

Africa and South America used to be married. And now look at 'em! Just gotta weather the storm, that's all. Expect an ocean to appear, but make sure you keep the shipping lines open. Otherwise." That knowing pause filled with the shallow wisdom loneliness sells for two bucks. "Otherwise, ya just keep driftin'."

What kind of scraping is hitting, dad?

But then, as he was dying in that hospital bed with the paint peeling off the red ceiling like old blood from the "really bad cases" ironically *up*stairs, and his thin bone-white hand (because it was just bones) with that spectacular death grip on our hero's, he had admitted, rather wonderfully in retrospect (the best way to view the world, by the way) that it was his first time being human, and would that count for anything "up there"?

Our hero had never struck his wife, however. Because? Well, because, he had become rather good at being human, and knew from the Trojan war to O.J. Simpson that "hitting wasn't the answer". If you hit, our hero philosophized, "you lost something. You gave something up. Even if it was only energy." He summarized, "Much better to take the hit. Receive the blow. You might learn something from such a gift." Like, "How to duck the next time."

So, here is our thirty-eight year-old man: man because he complements the two, true but false, requirements perfectly. He has had sex numerous times. And he knows how to drink alcohol a lot and well. Well, meaning, without falling down. Without making a fool of himself. Without making a fool of himself. Or a bore/boor, like the *Trib* bloke last night.

"Thas terrible," that tall man all the way from Chicago had said when he heard of the fat hero's plight about the cheap accommodation, the lack of air-conditioning. "I couln stanit," he manages, spilling ash on the only plush carpet in the whole hotel.

The five of them had been drinking for six hours: it was, after all, New year's eve. In the "Main" bar at the *Helios* run by the little Greek man, Andreas, who flitted about making sure everything was "Okays"—his little but fucking endearing expression. But, as midnight passed, and the fireworks ended, and the men who were rowdy slumped off to bed, our hero remained. Remained with the core. The highest paid, most celebrated journalists—all of them over fifty. And filthy drunk. Drunk in the ancient manner, where wisdom was revealed, (where passion was locked out by reality's key?). This group was more prostate than prostrate, our hero had quipped to himself. Then, realizing that he too, at thirty-eight had secretly ordained, at recent female intersections, that amber had begun to take on a decidedly reddish rather than greenish hue.

The rowdier bunch had all been young, of course. In their twenties and *early* thirties. Most of them from glossies. They had begun drinking at lunch and never stopped. But their revelry was sophomoric, for by two-fifty (the time of the next few paragraphs) in the a.m., they were gone.

So, the five men sat in a square of pairs of overly suntanned leather chairs and couches. A large round coffee table held folders, a few cameras, many filled ashtrays, and six or seven empty glasses of various sizes: they had been drinking beer for the heat, but

now, with the cool of the late evening, brandy was championing their breakfast. So, the *Post* guy started:

"Besides," he announced breaking a half-sleep silence. Short gray hair at his temples. Big money family. Oxford "No worries" University. "I think we do all of our best work with a hangover." He raised his glass to the orange light above the table and swilled the ochre liquid around in it. "I remember a time in ..."

The bar at the *Helios* was kept open, even though it was gone three, because it was a "new" hotel, and the Greek, Andreas, had been overawed by the presence of so many foreigners on this little island. Who would have thought, the little man probably wondered, as he toyed with his moustache, that such a small place would be so important just because of its location?

The island would be the first piece of land to receive the first ray of sunlight from the new millennium. That was all. It did not seem so clever, Andreas might have thought.

Why did such things matter the mind of men?

The Japanese had all gone to bed right after midnight as well. They had been disappointed when the supplies of J&B had run out, but soon the Fijian bitter had lulled them into a state of dozy relaxation, only interrupted by frantic dashes to the bathrooms to make more room for the foul tasting stuff.

And so, amidst this broken scene of half-awake men, it was our fat man who then posed the stickiest of questions of the evening:

"What if it's cloudy?" he had said suddenly.

A bomb. A great silencing bomb had gone off. Eyes blinked open. They all looked around at each other, hoping one of them, with a direct link to a prophet or meteorologist would help to keep their gaiety to the excess to which it had climbed. No one said anything. Drinks were finished off quickly and hands reached for bottles, but the symposium waited.

Something out of this world was needed to right the ship. Something out of this world. Something Marshian, perhaps? And so ...

... it was the fat man who saved the day Maybe the whole millennium?

"The forecast called for a real scorcher," he blurted out.

Sighs of relief, visible in the chinking of glasses, and the acceptable lies about "having heard the same report earlier" and, under the breath, "How-could-I-have-forgottens."

The German bloke, despite all his talk about the potency of German beers was quite happily plastered on the Fiji bitter which he had stayed with, mentioning something about a wounded liver that brandy might interfere with, and had said that his birthday was May 8 and that he would be fifty-five years old in the coming year.

Nobody paid him any mind, but then he started in about the war and how it was all so awful, and he felt really bad. There was apparently a local bar out by the airport, the War Club or something, which had a real Nazi flag on the wall--some, unsuspecting staff member had advertised this when he and a whole bunch of English and Americans were signing in.

"And even zough," he went on, though only the fat guy was really listening. The other three had slumped deeper (if that was possible) into their armchairs, but their beers were tightly bound to their hairy fists. "Even zough there is no vay. No vay in the vorld I cout have anyzing to do vith it ..."

"Why's that?" our fat hero asked, his brain not mathematical at that time of the night, day.

"Because of ze war," he said. "On May 7, 1945, zey gave up." He swigged his drink. "Zurrendered." (Surrendered should start with a Z. Zo final.)

"Kaput," the fat hero added.

The German looked at him for a moment--he was not trying to be funny. "Ja," he

then said nodding, then looked down into his empty beer mug. "Kaput."

"You know, I've always wondered about the last days of things, like wars," the fat hero dreamily mused.

"Ja," the German nodded. Perhaps. His eyes, heavy with something heavier than sleep, had convinced our fat guy that he meant no harm, had done no harm, could *never* have done no harm.

And our fat hero was, really, talking to himself then (or all of Humankind), but he continued on with his small but, what he considered, poignant paragraphs. "What bad luck to be killed on the last day. I mean, I'm sure they've made movies of it, or poems or something. Yeah, there was some famous poet killed right at the end. Baffoon or somebody? I mean, you'd never really know how it turned out, for one thing.

Like tonight. Somewhere, well, I bet in a load of places there are people dying. Not people who don't care or who don't know what time it is, but people who've been dying for a while. And they're thinking, will I make it? One more night. I bet tonight gives people a lot of hope. People like that. Like maybe there's some bloke and he's in a great big hospital and all anonymous, and the nurse has come in, but she doesn't pull the curtain all the way, and if he arches his neck, even though it hurts like hell, he can read the clock on some great big building. And it's eleven-thirty, then eleven-forty. And he knows he's dying because he overheard everyone whispering when they thought he had passed out again. And, he really wants to make it. Maybe just to see if it happens. Because then, in some way, he, helpless and pathetic and almost dead, has still, somehow, managed to *do* something. He made it."

Fattie stopped. A few gentle snores were emanating from the four noses: they slept like children and the Marshian thought how wonderful it was to see such great things succumb to slumber. So, undeterred and with an audience of only the world and himself he finished his little happy harangue.

"I read somewhere in a short story about some guy in Russia, some old bloke, who always traveled with a hypnotist. He paid him something like a hundred thousand dollars or rubles just so that at the moment he was going to die he could be hypnotized into believing in a heaven with angels and God and all that. Come to think of it, that's a small price to pay for immorality or whatever never ends."

So, our hero sits at his computer screen and types another beginning: his forty-eighth.

A dawn like any other dawn? Perhaps. Just an enormous ball of hydrogen turning into helium perhaps. Just a chemical reaction. Just something blinding we cannot look at. Does that make it ...

He stops. Rethinks. Remembers the morning itself. What, three hours later, now six hours since?

The Japs were working through the night: they had to. And Marsh had been awakened by the great trucks; they had rumbled down from the tiny port where God knows how, they had come ashore, and started unloading cars, at around five. Scaffolding by the ton had been arriving since long before Marsh had got there; he had seen it *piled like broken skeletons of defleshed gods*, he had written before allowing his cursor to chow down calorifically.

The beach which was not being used in the "shoot," as it were, had become a great garbage dump. In fact, the owner of the little "hotel" and adjoining huts had told Marsh how he didn't even recognize the place; and he'd lived there all of his fifty-six years.

"They come" he started in his English which was pretty good, "all since the Christmas. First day, they bring big sand mover. One man, he an American, a moviemaker,

he run about and screaming. He want to pay me to take down my huts. He say they were in the way. But those huts been there thirty years or more. How can he say that?"

And the Marshian had just nodded, having heard it all before.

"And the beach, she was moved. And they clear all the stuff from it. All the rocks and wood, and the stuff come from the sea. All gone. That not like it should be, Marshy. The beach. she comes from the sea, it part of sea and it part of land." And he had shown the listener the ruined beach and ocean with his eyes.

And, after six days, and by the time our hero had arrived there was a certain smell in the area. The garbage from the workers, some islanders too, it had to be admitted.

"Revenew. Revenew," the man had said. "That man they call director, he come and say, 'Look at all the money you get,' I say. 'What money?' And he say, 'My men.' And I say, 'I have no men. I have a wife, three daughters (which is no good), an old father, but no men.' He walk off all mad like and shout at all others."

But the smell. Marsh had been to the South Pacific a lot before. It wasn't all Rodgers and Hammerstein, but there were very few actual garbage dumps.

"And the man director," the man went on, "he say why we got no big place for rubbish. And I say, coz we don't make enough rubbish for such a place. And he say, and he point, and his phone it ring a lot, and he say he can't stand it. And I say, Why not you bring place for getting rid of rubbish? He go all silent, but his face get bigger, and then he not speak to me no more."

In fact, Marsh had noticed something quite unbelievable when he arrived at his little hut.

A Burger King wrapper was clinging for dear life to the edge of the front of the hut. Now, Marsh knew there was no Burger King on the island. And much later there were serviettes, and those plastic forks. And then Styrofoam cups. Marsh had watched them scamper across the beach in front of him like playing children—only these children were

orphans.

And, of course, all the cars had to be polished a thousand times. And there were actually professional polishers, about three working each car; they had been flown in after the American director realized the islanders did not understand what he meant—they had never needed to polish anything to make it look better. And, of course, sand would blow up from the wind off the sea. And, Marsh could just imagine the director wondering how to solve that one. And he had pictured some great English king sitting in a great throne trying to stop those waves from falling.

Some things you just couldn't stop, right?

The Japs actually all took pretty much a backseat: short well-groomed guys with the blackest of suits on. Two of them actually took off their shoes and Marsh had seen them out in ankle-deep water talking and laughing. Until one of them reached into his pocket and pulled out a cellular phone. His head bowed and he nodded a few times, then hung up and spoke to his friend. And they both ran back to the shore, trying to avoid splashing their suits, and retrieved their socks and shoes.

That was nice, Marsh had thought, and even wished he had snapped their photograph. Two Japanese business men running through the water in suits holding up their trousers before sunrise: that might have meant something, to somebody, somewhere.

And then the great moment.

Not really a moment though. More like, like

... someone coming out of a fever; their glassy and blurred eyes opening to a world of lights and darks at first: there was nothing ... then

Of course, it was light long before the sun came up, which made our reporter start to wonder. Start to get ideas? Maybe. But the article would now take a shape. A sunrise didn't just happen; it was a long drawn out process of focus. Yeah, that was it: focus. The night before had been moonless. Where *did* the moon really go? That darkness had been,

not a blackness though, but a very deep blue really. And it was cloudy. That's what had prompted my question, though I had learned that this was always the way days began on the island at this time of the year.

But, around four or so, the blue lightened. Something like gray for a while.

Of course it wasn't dark at all. Really. The great American director was rushing about amidst a grove of great lights as I sat in front of my hut and watched the great carnival. He would climb up ladders, look down on the cars, then look back over his shoulder to the east. A white line had begun to appear on the horizon, and to the south where the shoreline had been just a darkness, palm trees and bushes divulged their outlines. Great fronds began to sway in the light, like the light had brought the wind, or rather the wind had blown in the light.

Our hero, the fat guy, our reporter, the Marshian, I slapped at my laptop keys. Words were misspelled, nouns were poorly chosen, adjectives loomed and were shot down onto the page, then removed by the great cursor, then re-added. I wished I had a video camera, then undid that wish. A video camera was no good. Then, it would all have come out differently because it would have been a false experience. I had to get it down then. Right then and there because, never again, would I experience that at that time.

Later I would be in Sydney, perhaps, and watching the video, with my fat paws waiting to pounce on the helpless keyboard. But then it would be different. Then there'd be an old pizza box. There would have been siren sounds from police cars. Fire trucks. Ice cream vendors. And hookers. And there'd be electricity bills. And old milk. And dirty laundry. And Hustler magazines. And unfixed lightbulbs. And dusty rubber plants, and too small rooms, and noise of ALL colors, and all those other things which make humans so ... so wonderfully inexact, so deserving of infinity, even if it is just to eventually get it right.

And so ...

It was simple. We had just turned 20. And twenty ushered in twenty-nine, and that

was thirty. And thirty was ... death. Or the death of youth which may as well have been the same. Until thirty we all prepare for LIFE. But, after that, it is a great long process of "putting our affairs in order." But by then, by now, we were PREPARED. We'd buried children, built space stations, burnt toast, bought truth. Floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, hatred, disease, famine, and war were no longer distant cousins, they were our brothers, our sisters, and our fathers and our mothers. Who could be lonely with such a clique? Who could be defeated?