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The Wading

by

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The town was white in the afternoon. Dusty streets of flat roofs and pale thin trees, lay bleached and naked on the plain below the monument of the mountain. A narrow quay drifted motionless on the glass surface of the harbour. The beach was a golden slash, cutting the ocean away from the town. A tiny scar ran inland across the sea of yellow grass, a ribbon-wide dust track towards the wooded flank of the island. A single cyclist meandered towards the trees, a rolling scarecrow in a giant cornfield, his shadow a dark blob below him. He reached the tree line, his bicycle and body disappearing into the shadows. A clattering of wings, and a flock of pigeons rose like smoke above the trees, circled once in a wide sweep, and began to beat their way up the slopes of the mountain. A figure stepped from the trees.

Muller screwed up his eyes, despite his broad felt had. His shoes were scuffed, his trousers covered with powdery dust. His jacket, dark and thick, was slung over his shoulder, and his white shirt, buttoned at the neck, clung moistly to his back.

A half-buried stone caught his toe, and Muller pitched forward, the pebble springing free from the earth. Slowly he bent down, a hand on his knee. Muller's hands were sinewy and blotched, his fingers inordinately long and tapering. The jacket billowed out like a sail as Muller wheeled about and hurled the stone towards the trees. He watched it fly, licking saliva from the corners of his mouth. His lips were thin, stretched tight across his even teeth like white silk in the shadow of his hat. The dark eyes were concealed beneath heavy lids.

He pressed his hat down on his heat, resettled the jacket over his shoulder, and walked on towards the Vineyard. The cicadas had become hushed, and the crunch of his shoes on the track was loud. Through the missing windscreen of the wrecked car, half a mile away in the grass, Muller was silent, a small bent figure striding across the shimmering haze while the mountain waited for the evening.

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"In a remote southern part of the turning world, there is an island with a mountain draped upon it. A businessman, his suit too tight and his watch too heavy, is almost sure to see at one time or another: tired of the peanuts swamping him, he will glance out of the window – such a tiny window on so great an expanse! – and see the little fried-egg-on-a-pavement shape on the sea far below, just peeping out of a mat of clouds that stretch away northwards.

"Unless the sun is low, the mountain will look something like an amoeba seen through a microscope, very green and blue, and all too much like a blot to be worth pointing out to the person next to him. And even if the sun is melting into the horizon, the shadows of the mountain stretching across the flat sea like an angel's sundial, he might think it too small to be a real mountain. Perhaps a reef; perhaps nothing more than a trick of the light.

"But the mountain is most certainly a mountain: it pokes into the hard blue sky in all weathers and circumstances. Its steep cliffs are home to a hundred thousand white birds, clamouring for space on the rocks and in the sky. They dip and wheel all the day long, and when the sun begins to relent, and dives for the horizon, they stand, backs to their white wall, and screech through the night. They are very tiny against the mass of the mountain.

"About the island, as witnessed by the claustrophobic businessman, there is less certainty. On the three maps on which the island appears, it has been drawn as a neat circle, the point at the base of an exclamation mark: it nestles up against a larger island that no-one has bothered to chart, an ever-widening mass of land that forms the body of the exclamation mark, hidden under clouds all year round. It presents an unchanging façade to the little island at its southern tip: a vast rank of grey, hot mountains. Only one pass climbs into those mountains. On one of the maps – in a great curve over the larger island – a bored, perhaps disenchanted hand has scrawled 'Here there be thorn-bushes'.

"And so the traveller will fly on, recalling the amoeba blot nestling against the bronze wing of the dark continent to the north, the barren land shrouded in cloud and mist. For a moment he might think to ask a friend about the two lands he has seen.

"But the island, the neat little circle, has deceived the aerial traveller and the cartographers in their boats. For at certain times of day, when the tide and wind are just right, a tall person can wade to the Mainland – for that is what the mountainous dash, disappearing thorns and all into its eternal cloud, is called by the inhabitants of the island – with no discomfort. On some hot days, in the middle of the afternoon, it is in fact a very pleasant wade: the sand is soft, *velvety*, say the tour brochures.

"Then there is a certain breed of little fish with big lips that come to tickle the feet of the wader. The squeamish shriek and churn up the water in their rush to return to the island; but once one has acquired a taste for the touch of the earnest, busy lips, the slow progression to the Mainland is a lovely way to spend an afternoon. Of course, there is nothing to do on the Mainland, unless one is a collector of volcanic rock and empty tortoise shells, slightly blackened by fire. But the desolation of the countryside is softened by the promise of the return journey. The island is rightly named: Cape Formosa.

"That is how the island stands every day, how it is standing now, but this day it had about it an unusually smoky veil. The lines of the mountain were softened, shadow and light on its buttresses more pleasing to a romantic eye. Sounds too were muted – muffled by the haze. The shriek of the birds high upon the mountain drifted down as a gentle sustained creaking, like the door of an abandoned shed fidgeting in an evening breeze.

"The smoke in question was curling up from behind a row of four wind-blasted oak trees. They were – and are, although now they are three – oaks in name only, these squat blocks of grey wood, man-high, bent almost double by the wind that blows (it is estimated) for 295 and a half days of every year. Indeed, the island's children had long since come to the sensible conclusion that either Robin Hood and his Merry Men were all two feet tall, or else the Sheriff of Nottingham did a quite terrible job of hunting down the green outlaws; for who could possibly hide among oak trees? The older Locals, as the native inhabitants are known here, sitting in silence and wreathed in the smoke of their malodorous pipes, oblivious to the stories their grandchildren hear, shrug and say that the oaks, as with most things the foreigners brought and hold dear, are disappointing.

"But as if out of some duty to their species, the little trees have stood for a hundred years, refusing to die, yet always unable to flourish against the bombardment of the winds. Their emaciated branches clutch a few twigs which in turn hold on to some two dozen bleached, parchment-like leaves.

"Today these flapped pathetically over the column of smoke that rose into the still air over the Vineyard, like the ghostly deep-sea fish the men sometimes catch and toss onto the glaring decks of their boats.

"Open fires are unusual upon the island: the vegetation on the upper slopes is too lush to burn, and the wind that rips across the beaches and lower flats, home to the sprawl of houses that make up he Vineyard, the white of the egg in its blue pan, usually tears any small flame off at the roots. It was therefore quite clear to all who took the time on this day to look at where the smoke was coming from, that the old spy was off somewhere behind the Oak Ridge burning his secret files again."

Muller had not found it a satisfying description of the town. The article's tone was hysterical, its information sketchy. Nevertheless as he had turned the glossy pages, and felt the small thrill of seeing a photograph of his stool at the bar – in a magazine read all over the world – Muller had rubbed his chin and wondered why they had not got a real writer to do the job *properly*. Someone like Harold Robbins, for instance.

He been unsettled by the crudity of the motives betrayed by the intense focus on young Bee in the article. *We shall never forget*, read the caption. Bee stood before a bronze bust of his father, his eyes half shut, caught in mid-blink. The other picture showed Bee's thin body bending over a dog, his hand a blur, a sudden retraction from snapping teeth. Bee hated dogs almost as much as dogs hated Bee. *Man's best friend,* read the caption.

"Didn't know Steven had a dog," Regina Bee said. "Thought they didn't get on." The slow examination of her son's quotes in the article resumed, her swollen knuckles running gently over the text as if she was blind and trying to remember the face of an old friend.

Muller set his felt hat more firmly on his head, wiped the sweat and grit from his neck inside his stiff collar, and followed his shadow into the town. He looked up from the road, to the approaching line of ragged buildings and faded shopfronts that marked the end of the high street. To his right, the track down to the bluffs above the beaches curled away; to his left the brown fields petered out. Two figures darted and floated through the haze away in the last stretch of open ground. Bee and Mercedes, playing their idiot game.

A small Local boy, hands clasped behind his shirtless back, stood off the road watching the figures closely. His shoulder blades stuck out like stunted wings, and his head seemed finely balanced on a neck that was too thin to support its weight. One of Bee's countless cousins, Muller guessed, who took turns in keeping a vigil at the side of the field in the hope that they would be invited to play. Muller nodded. The boy watched him, uninterested. He walked on, readjusting his jacket on his sweating shoulder. He glanced at his wristwatch. It had stopped. The afternoon was slowing down in the heat, retarded by the glare off the pale land and the hushing of a million insects. He put his hand in his pocket and tightened it around his switchblade until his fingers ached.

The *Happy Dragon* was dark and cool under its tarpaulins, and the great ragged banana tree that squatted outside the door seemed to confirm the promise of damp shelter. It was not the biggest drinking establishment in the Vineyard – that was the uncomfortable Maxim's in the Long Street, frequented by aspiring civil servants – and it was certainly not the most homely: its rough whitewashed walls, a haphazard arrangement of planks, panels, a few bricks and a great many rivets, sloped down from the ragged roof like the sides of an igloo. The ceiling consisted almost entirely of old canvas sails. They were not waterproof, but rain was a distant memory, and they hung limp and white as Muller approached.

It was a secret pleasure of Muller to enter the *Dragon* on a day such as this. It had few of the comforts many would expect from a watering hole with a small but loyal clientele: the solitary television mounted on a cabinet by the bar had not worked for almost a decade and the crisps and cigarettes available from the temperamental vending machine were inexplicably soggy. But to Muller it made more than amends for these minor shortcomings by housing the most excellent and reliable air-conditioner. The great machine sat vibrating and roaring against the wall, dials set on the darkest shade of blue and the highest number away from 1. Deep inside its coils and grids drops of arctic water collected tantalisingly on icy tubes.

Muller pressed his face to the grate of the machine and closed his eyes.

"Is bloody piss hot." Giuseppe Marconi, proprietor, barman and often sole occupant of the *Happy Dragon*, clambered up from behind the bar. His plump face had the crushed and puffy look of sleep. He smoothed his large and anachronistic moustache over his mouth with plump fingers and gesticulated at the door.

"I walk three foot out of here, you find me dead like stiff," he said and began to polish a glass against his shirtfront. "You see my boy?"

"With the Bee boy."

Marconi nodded slowly, and Muller stretched his hands out before him across the grille. His fingers trembled on the vibrating machine. The air-conditioner began to rattle softly. "I tell him the *klont* is bad news," said Marconi with vague desperation. "I say, 'Why you be friends with that bad news?'" Muller's eyes drifted to the small window at the end of the room. Outside a suggestion of a breeze had sprung up, and the palm fronds that hung limply from above were starting to flutter. A car growled slowly past, its wheels crunching on the road. "And the air, still broken because why, because he must now go and play with the ball and the *klont*."

"The air feels good to me," Muller said softly, and moved silently to the bar. The long hand of the cracked clock crept down the face, and he watched it subside towards its nadir. Marconi rubbed listlessly at an imperfection in the surface of the bar between the two men, looking at his handiwork through one eye at a time.

The wind was blowing now, whistling down some hidden ventilation shaft and tugging at the canvas roof, lifting it in teasing suggestions of billows. Marconi went to the air-conditioner, approaching it with obvious distrust, and bent over it, wiping his hands on his trousers. "Off..." he whispered purposefully. Gingerly he fingered a dial and turned it. The machine subsided and cut out, giving a long rattle as it did so. Marconi grimaced and held his hands over the grille as if trying to gentle it. "Shit, shit," he muttered. A fine spray of sand rushed against the window, and palm fronds flailed silently on the other side of the glass.

Muller glanced at the time and walked to the window. The sun was still beating down, but there was a wildness in the world outside, a mad revolt against the attrition of the heat. Dust swirled down the street towards the oil refinery that towered over the Vineyard's central district. Two ragged gulls shot by, propped up on skew wings, helpless against the wind. The wind was better than the hammering sun earlier, though Muller. And it would be tough to land an aeroplane in. Maybe they wouldn't come after all.

Marconi jumped as the door flew open, slammed into a hat-rack and rebounded shut again. The door opened once more, tentatively this time, and Harry Orange stepped inside.

Orange's sunken eyes darted between the two men, and Muller stretched out a hand. Orange shook it quickly. It was hot and clammy.

"I should never have done it." The old spy crumpled into his stool and ran his hands through his thin grey hair. Muller regarded him silently. "They're just memo's, you know, inter-departmental stuff, from forty years ago. Who would care, right?" Muller sat unmoving as Marconi wagged his plump finger.

"You play mister big agent, John Wayne, Al Capone. Now chickens come home roosting, I think."

Muller stood up and moved through the dim room towards a little porthole sunk into the wall behind the door. The glass was imperfect, distorting the two figures that slowly approached, but Bee's walk was unmistakable, the loping effortless gait he had watched so often. Mercedes rocked from side to side gently. He remembered shooting an orang-utan that had walked like that.

"I'm not going to listen to that hooey," Orange was saying, his voice weak. "I was a goddam spook, Sep, for Chrissake. A spook. I got spook papers." Muller had seen them, piled in neat boxes in Orange's garage, thousands upon thousands of scraps of paper fifty years old, when the Cold War was hot and Harry Orange was somebody.

"It'll be fine." The light from the porthole bathed Muller's face, making his eyes large and dark. Orange looked scared.

"You'll put in a word for me," said the old man. "You speak their language."

Muller looked at Bee, the smooth face warped into a gargoyle's grimace by the glass, his legs bowed and distended. "It'll be fine," said Muller.

The door opened once more, flooding Orange and Marconi with light. They looked old and pale in the glare, hunched over the dark bar like coffin-bearers. They turned grimacing into the light. Into the *Happy Dragon* stepped Steven Bee and Mercedes Emmerson, the *klont* and the retard.

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Muller often stopped to watch them play. He had never gone to the dusty clearing for that sole purpose, but perhaps returning from Mrs Bee or a mid-day stroll to ease the ache in his knees, once the newspapers had been read, he would watch them for half an hour simply because there was nothing better to do.

Between the *Happy Dragon* and the ruined Felix Brewery that loomed behind it – a fire-blackened hulk with two crumbling walls offering scant shade to lizards – there stood a long disused water tank with one side removed by vandals. Muller had placed a rough but not

uncomfortable log on the floor of the tank, and here he could sit, cool in the echoing darkness that made the glare outside all the brighter. Bee and Mercedes could not see him even if they tried to, which they did not.

The game was crude, a soggy leather ball and a rough bat providing their sport. The ball did not bounce above knee height; the bat could generate no more power than a thick plank; but Muller was content to sit resting his chin on his hands, keeping a secret count of runs, balls, errors. Watched by an ever-present child on the road in the distance, the two figures would walk slowly out into the centre of the field. Mercedes shuffled, licking his lips, unblinkingly looking at the scrub in front of his feet; Bee would dance languidly behind, smacking his partner's buttocks gently with the bat or swooping a gracefully crooked foot around his ankle to trip him.

Bee always bowled first. Mercedes did not object, or never loudly enough for Muller in his tank to hear. Yet each time it seemed a point of contention as Bee would pluck the ball away from Mercedes' stiff fingers, or thrust the bat at him a few times before the squat Mercedes would accept it.

Muller disliked Mercedes. The boy was slow, he knew, and he tried not to hold it against him: he could not help being a fool. But despite the disgust he felt for the slack face with the faint smile around the eyes and the slowly expanding midriff, he had to flinch when Bee began his long run in. Mercedes would take the bat as if it was a rifle presented to him by a nagging wife demanding a kill for the pot. He would slowly turn it around in his hands, as if to examine the maker's name. Then with a small shudder, he would turn to face down the straightest and least overgrown stretch of ground.

Muller had seen beautiful athletes before. Of course not beautiful that you'd want physical intimacy with them: he was not depraved. But a man could still look at another man and be moved. A runner named Isaac Pemberwell had once come from fourth place to win the half-mile in Arnos Town on the Mainland, and Muller could easily conjure the moment, how he had stood as if alone in the noisy concrete stadium, fascinated by the man's still head and hips, the pumping flanks gleaming black in the dusty evening sun.

Bee *was* beautiful. He ran as Muller had run in a dream when he was young, a tireless surge down a snowy slope. He loped across the patches of struggling grass and stubborn devil-thorn, gathering momentum. Mercedes slowly shifted his buttocks from side to side and licked his lips.

Bee unfolded into his delivery stride, a long arm shooting into the sky as his front foot wheeled down into the ground. The slap of his worn sneakers was the only sound as his right arm whipped over, rotating on its axis like a war catapult. Bee bowled very fast, and his

follow-through, his body bunched from the effort and face distorted as if by a sneeze, could not disguise his animal joy in his ability.

On a more responsive surface, the Municipal Oval on the western coast of the Cape perhaps, Bee would have been a terrifying prospect, and Mercedes would have been in danger. But the dust was soft and the ball was old, and had been since the young men were small boys. The ball hummed down the track and smacked into the earth an arm's length from the crouching form of Mercedes.

Mercedes moved like a wetland toad. With an entirely functional swing of his arms he struck the ball back past Bee. Muller could remember what it felt like to play such a shot, as if a bone – specifically created for translating varying degrees of impact into pleasure – had grown down from somewhere near his wrists, vibrating like a mute tuning-fork.

"Two, Bee?" Mercedes might call.

"Maybe one, maybe none, " Bee might reply.

"But we got no fielders, Bee."

"Not so retarded when it suits you, man."

Bee's cruelty was exciting. It was raw and ugly: Muller knew it would be tempered with age, and he listened while he could.

"So two?"

"I'm going to knock your goddam head *off*."

When the door drifted shut behind the pair, and the glare retreated beyond the walls of the *Happy Dragon* once more, it seemed that Bee's standing threat had been acted upon. Dried blood covered Mercedes' lips and chin, and an ugly purple tinge was spreading below his eyes. Bee was grinning.

"Good game, boys?" asked Orange with affected joviality.

Marconi guffawed and wagged his moist finger at Mercedes. "You play games and you smash your head. Now you go home, I think, and Giuseppe cleans the kitchen."

Mercedes shuffled behind the bar. "I'll clean," he said. The retard sounded bored at the best of times, his allergic snuffles clogging together with a monotonous voice that irritated Muller intensely. But now he was unmistakably disconsolate.

Muller carefully looked at his wristwatch, and polished the face. Orange swallowed hard, his hands fluttering to his neck.

"How's our time?" he asked.

Muller shrugged. Bee was still grinning, a mad flash of teeth.

"I've got to go," said Orange. "Jesus, I'd better go." He wiped his rough cheeks carefully and shuffled for the door. "You'll put in a word?" he asked no one in particular. "Just hope they'll listen," said Muller into his empty glass. The sun surged inside, turning the blood on Mercedes' face an exquisite deep purple, and then Orange was gone and Mercedes looked dirty once more.

"Anyone going to ask what happened to Mercedes?" said Bee. He straddled a stool, grinning at Muller. Muller wanted to slap him.

"You hit him?" he asked.

"Yep." Bee rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue at Mercedes, who watched him resentfully from where he was dabbing at his lip with a dishcloth.

"Good," said Marconi from the shadows. "Two time, I hope."

"Just the once."

They sat in silence. Marconi's movements stopped, and the sound of the wind filled the room, rushing across the slats of the roof and moaning dully through imperfections in the windows. Bee still looked at him. Muller reached into his pocket and gripped the knife, Bee's eyes tracking every movement. The boy hopped backwards from his perch and approached Mercedes. The retard retreated into a corner, facing the wall and examined an invisible spot on the woodwork.

Bee threw his long arms around Mercedes' neck and pressed his cheek against his the coarse dusty hair. "Mercedes doesn't want to accept that there's no dishonour in being nailed by a great ball." He turned Mercedes to face him, his fingers digging into his shoulder. "Because it was a great ball."

"Wasn't," said Mercedes, suddenly animated, his eyes flashing between Bee and Muller's pocket. "It was – a bad ball. I hit it for four."

Bee's smile fell away. Muller looked into the hard eyes. He was his father's son: the change from sun to shadow meant violence was not far away. They were all the same, educated or not.

"Four," Mercedes muttered peevishly into his chest.

"Wha'th'fuck you know 'bout fours?" The boy slipped so easily into anger, surrendering himself before terms had been laid down. Muller watched. "It's our game, man. We don't play right because you're slow, remember?" He slapped the back of Mercedes' head. "Remember? Think I'm *trying* out there?"

"I'm good enough," said Mercedes in a whisper. "I'm…can bat better than you." He looked up quickly, ready to fend off another blow.

"Ever seen me bleedin' out me face like a pig?" said Bee, rising to his full height. Mercedes slowly shook his head, tears sparkling in his eyelashes. He wiped them away fiercely, and shuffled into the makeshift kitchen behind the bar. He sniffed moistly as the greasy plywood doors swung closed behind him.

The wind tore once more at the sails over their heads, and settled. The silence of the heat that surrounded the island returned immediately. The trees stood unmoving beyond the window, the twitching banana leaves framing the outside world the only indication that there was any air at all beyond the still room. Muller's back began to sweat at once.

"So Mooler," said Bee, making no effort to hide his lack of interest. "What's new?"

"You treat him badly," said Muller.

"I don't treat him bad." Bee arched his neck sensuously. "Mooler."

"I think you upset him."

"Man, you know what?" said Bee, his back straight and his hands motionless on his lap. "I don't care, see." He wrote his name on the smooth surface of the bar, flicked an invisible fly from his face. The subject was closed. "Want to know something boring? Know that dust from the Kalahari desert flies across the Atlantic and feeds the Amazon jungle, Mooler?"

"I did not know that," said Muller. "How does it do it?"

Bee could not realise how uncannily he looked like his father when he spoke as he was speaking now. Bee leaned forward slightly, hands splayed out before him, weaving delicate lattices or capturing stray addenda in fleeting parentheses. He did not blink: his eyes jerked back and forth as if over a wall of words written in flame. Sometimes the eyes flinched, a tiny spasm almost sure to be missed by a casual observer not waiting for it as Muller was. He had enjoyed that flinch in Bee's father: once, when he had kept a journal, he had described the moment as an intersection of a barely comprehended peace with an equally unrecognised brutality. (Harold Robbins would have written it better, and the journal had long ago been destroyed.)

In every respect Bee was inferior to his father.

The boy was silent again, the note of his voice instantly made to nothing by the stillness of the day descending like an octopus onto a reef. Muller stood up and nodded to Bee, turning for the door. He hurried: exposing his back to Bee made his skin stretch.

"Told you it was boring," Bee called after him. "So long Mooler. Thanks for the chat." Muller's knuckles ached as he gripped his knife in his pocket. He stepped out into the late afternoon, his eyes stinging with salt water.

In the still room Bee flicked a coin along the counter. It struck a glass and rebounded onto the floor, spinning to a racketing halt. Muller was looking old. Bee rested his head on his arms. Here lies Muller. Regina would knit a mohair crucifix, toss it in the grave. Then they would fill up the hole with beach-sand.

He shuddered, his face hidden in the shadows as the sun dropped behind the banana tree outside, and went in search of Mercedes.

The channel between the Cape and the Mainland was beginning to blur, the shallow water smudging sky and vegetation into a soft mist, when Fat Mike the hi-fi repairman called Muller. Fat Mike weighed more than Marconi's long-dead arthritic mule that tended to the blackjacks and thistles behind the *Happy Dragon*: it had been proved one evening but Muller could not remember the drab details of the exercise.

The flight had been delayed – bad weather, then unrest on the runway, a fire. But for sure, said Mike, for sure they would be in the next morning. Private charter, some tourists, foreigners. Muller thanked Fat Mike: the man was obese, with a permanent swamp down any shirt he wore, but his information was reliable. Orange would be deeply panicked by this stage.

First the cat. The cat lived under an overgrown concrete pipe in Muller's scrubby back garden. When he had hissed at it and thrown a half-brick, it had flashed away in a puff of tawny fur only to return bearing an unconscious kitten in its black mouth. Muller had been enraged at its stupidity. He had tried to shoot it some time later, but the bullet had whined away into the night, and the slamming of windows across the way had filled him with shame. Radar and the Gang of Five – Mrs Keefer's long-eared spaniel and a posse of strays that tagged along – could not be coaxed into savaging it. The kittens – for there were two – had died. Muller buried their tiny bony bodies near a bush of arum lilies, holding the stiff sausages gingerly lest an extra pressure should squeeze their already protruding tongues further from their grinning mouths.

The cat had sniffed the patch of earth and then followed Muller into his home. He had slung the animal out of a window, feeling its protruding hips slide beneath the lose skin, but the next morning it had returned, delicately licking its inner thigh on his doorstep.
He fed the cat an expensive brand. *Yummy Kat* was apparently the Choice of Cats Everywhere, and Muller had been too shy in the supply store to ask for alternatives.

Cats were vacuous creatures. Where dogs would rally, cats would go to pieces. Muller slapped another spoonful of *Yummy Kat* into the faded plastic bowl at his feet and the cat

growled deep in its throat. Its tongue and throat continued to work until the bowl was slimy and empty.

Muller felt cold. He knew by now there was no use in closing the windows: it was a chill that settled on the back and neck like a damp spider, and covering up with a blanket just made him sweat. His knees grated as he pushed himself towards into the centre of his house. From his chair – a patched leather block with the legs removed – he commanded a view of his front gate. No one ever came through it, but if they did, he would see them.

The room was neglected. A rickety card table stood thin and exposed by the armchair, while a large cupboard, its dark stained doors intricately worked with satyrs and oak-leaves stood like an outlandish castaway in the wastes of the far corner. His wife had loved it – he thought it might have been an engagement present from her parents – and to remove it would have meant dismantling it. Dismantling it would have meant getting Bee or Mercedes in, and the thought of them stepping into his living room was preposterous, out of the question. The cupboard would stay.

With the blind of ease of endless repetition Muller slipped a record onto his turntable. He shut the window so as not to disturb the neighbours, and touched the needle to the scratched fluctuating disk.

"It's rather dull in town, I think I'll take me to Paree.
The Missis wants to open up the castle in Capri
Me doctor recommends a quiet summer by the sea!
Mmmmmm wouldn't it be loverly…"

He awoke with a surging inhalation of breath and a racing heart. The room was dark and cool, and the record hissed at his side. His shirt was soaked and his knife lay on the floor some distance from him. Muller ran his fingers through his damp hair, and sang softly to himself. I could have danced all night, and still have begged for more…

He got up and called Orange. The old man was relieved and very angry. Goodnight Harry. Muller closed the curtains, drawing absolute darkness across the room. He slid his feet across the smooth wooden floor, his toes parting the dust like the prows of racing yachts. He knew that the cupboard was seven paces away, although he had never counted.

He carefully took down a heavily draped hanger, shrouded in plastic, and arranged the curtain of clothing over the back of his chair. Muller closed his eyes as he dropped his trousers to the floor. His thighs were heavy, his feet clumsy. He peeled his damp shirt over his head, and glanced at the window. The night outside was electric with the sound of insects but no one moved in the streets.

The pressed pants scratched delicately against his legs as he drew them up. Tighter around the buttocks and waist, but not a bad fit. His balls were getting heavy: they pressed warmly against the fly. The shirt was blessedly dry on his back, the collar drawing his neck up straight as if it was his first morning on the job. He ran his finger over the lettering stitched to the breast pocket. He could make out his name by touch: it felt lumpy and enticing as a scab.

The jacket was heavy as it slid over his shoulders. He bowed his neck and slid his cheek over the hard epaulettes. His hands swiftly probed the pockets, finding them empty as they had been the night before and on all the other nights Muller had crept into the jacket. He moved slowly. The trousers must not be creased. He straightened before the open cupboard door, gazing at the blacker panel of the door where the mirror was fixed. Two specks of light, nothing more than a glitter, hovered at the edge of his vision: his moist eyes flickering white in the mirror, and below them, hard and gleaming, the tiny crossed swords on his collar.

Later Muller cleaned his pistol. It was not satisfying in any way – the slide had jammed, and in the dark he had pinched the soft skin between finger and thumb – and he repeated the process, four times.

He picked up the heavy weapon, testing its balance in his hand, and aimed at the cupboard. The door had subsided entirely open, and the mirror glowed dully into the room, reflecting the night sky behind Muller in his chair. He lined up on the blackest centre of the mirror, seeing the glint of the metal on his chest in the glass. *Clink*, the bolt slammed forward. He dragged the slide back: *clink*. The mirror gleamed, utterly unmoved.

Muller waited for the morning. When the sun rose, enormous and silent, isolating shadows and melting them where they lay in the recesses of his room, his mouth hung open and dry saliva darkened the chair where he slept.

3

Orange had been hiding in the store room behind the Vineyard's solitary grocery shop for some time now. Padding through the aisles of milk and candles, the old man had managed to pilfer an overall from some unwary assistant, and had created something of a bunker behind crates of potatoes.

"I only ask Sir because Sir was the police," said the store's owner, a ruddy-faced woman named Flora St John with remarkably tortured hair: scraped back from her forehead, it seemed that a gentle tug on any strand might trigger an event like the bursting of a tightly wound clock. She wrung her hands moistly as she trotted behind Muller towards the storeroom.

Muller smiled, the skin stretching tight across his cheeks and baring his teeth. Her shoulders were damp with sweat, and his hand sank into her flesh enough for him to jerk his fingers away and wipe them on the back of his trousers. His wife had not sweated once in the time they had been together. Twenty seven years in the grime and heat of the city, and the fingers in his hair had been cool, wreathing his forehead in the scent of powder and the perfume he always bought her when he was abroad. His wife had not been like this woman. His wife had been like no other woman.

"He won't come out," said Flora St John, pointing tremulously at Orange's hide in the gloom of the storeroom.

Harry Orange was an idiot, but idiot enough to be armed? Muller did not think so. "Please don't worry, Mrs St John. Mr Orange is a jackass." A cough rang out from behind the potatoes. "He thinks there are secret police on their way here to shoot him," said Muller conversationally. The woman's mouth dropped open and her hand fluttered to her cheek.

"I don't want any shooting in my shop," she whispered, gazing at the shelves around her. "I have to think of my books."

"Do you hear that, Harry?" called Muller. "Mrs St John doesn't want your blood all over the canned goods. Are you armed?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

There was a pause. "No."

"Good man, Harry. Are you going to come out?"

Orange began to sob in his hiding place. He gasped for breath as the sobs sounded dully into the shop where Muller stood. The woman was entirely superfluous here, and should be removed.

"Mrs St John," Muller said gently, "I wonder if you can leave me to get Mr Orange out. You have been more than helpful already." He showed her his teeth, and shook her spongy hand firmly. Flora St John blushed and curtseyed, backing away from the corner.

Harry Orange was pathetic behind his makeshift fort. His eyes were red and puffy, and he had a greenish tinge that suggested to Muller that the old man had not slept the previous night. Orange sat with his knees drawn up and cried softly into his sleeve as Muller knelt down by his side.

"They aren't coming, Harry," whispered Muller, his hand hovering over the old man's head. "They aren't coming today." Orange pushed Muller's hand away fiercely. He lifted his face to Muller, his cheeks lagging behind. His mouth quivered, drawn tight across his teeth.

"You think I'm being stupid," said Orange in a whisper, his voice deserting him. "You all think I'm…" – his face crumpled, and he released a single spasmodic sob – "silly."

Muller smiled. They all thought Orange was silly, a tragic anachronism living in fear a thousand miles from the marble corridors and phalanxes of paper-weights of his youth. "I don't think you're silly, Harry. I think you're very tired." Orange inhaled deeply, an inrush of air that seemed to hiss on for an extremely long time. He looked suspiciously at Muller, his cheeks blotchy and damp from his tears. "I think you're tired. Everyone likes you, Harry." He paused. "You're a beautiful guy."

Orange deflated with a shuddering chuckle. He smiled slowly, his yellow teeth perfectly regimented, the Camelot smile of forty years ago remembered behind a crate of potatoes. "You're full of shit, Muller."

Orange was not going to change. He had not changed in forty years. Muller did not like being told he was full of shit. It irked him intensely: the old man had no idea what Muller was full of. But icing up on Harry Orange would not help. He would become defensive and get in the way.

"Yes Harry," said Muller. "Getting up?" He stood up, extending a hand. Orange eyed it for a moment, rocking gently on his buttocks. His face was working slowly, and his sunken eyes looked dark again.

"They're not coming?" he asked. Muller didn't follow. "They didn't send anyone?"

"You're off the hook." Muller began moving back towards the shop. The plane would be on its final approach. Orange's floundering was extremely frustrating.

Orange's arrival at the Cape had gone entirely unnoticed thirty years ago. Evenings were golden, the dusty roads of the Vineyard churned up by the trucks and bulldozers that worked around the clock relocating the Locals to the western end of the island. Muller must have seen Bee's father on one of the trucks, before they became acquainted.

The grass had grown over the remains of Antoine, the Local quarter in the Vineyard, long and thick, sharp enough to cut a trailing palm or finger. Martial law – the extent of which had been the posting of a padlock on the Vineyard's only telephone booth – was lifted and the winter rains had retreated south again. The island had simmered once more, the air thick and fragrant as honey.

Orange, young, strong, had walked into the new settlement beyond the cool forest, his shoes gleaming and his safari suite pressed like an origami creation. The Locals had welcomed him into their tin homes, dark as kilns, and he had drunk their acrid beer and smoked their pipes. They had regarded him with gentle eyes and secret smiles. Hearts and minds, he had

told them. He told them about communism and they saw that it was wicked. One of the chiefs, Daniel Arupi Nawaj, had been confused. Why, he earnestly asked Orange, should they worry about the communisms? Because, Agent Orange replied, the Reds were intent on taking it all away from them. The Locals had quietly looked out of their doors, at the dusty square where dogs and naked children tangled with one another. They were welcome to it, Daniel Arupi Nawaj had said, and Orange had returned to the Vineyard.

Once a day the memos had come through the wire specially installed in Agent Harry Orange's neat and expensively decorated cottage. Inter-departmental budget news; *Cairo Star* rerouted through Suez; Russian figure skater's dog impounded until further notice. Await further advisement, they read. The sun baked down, the wind blew and gradually Orange became irritated by the tape's slow descent to the floor from the machine's chattering mouth. The months crept by, the channel between the Cape and the Mainland filled with water and drained, drained and filled, and Orange took his siesta as the machine – draped with a towel-covered box – clattered in the bathroom.

Then one day the memos stopped. Orange had been on the island for five years. He waited a week, but the machine was silent. Well, he had thought, happy days, and he had kicked off his shoes and gone for a long walk along the beach.

Twenty years later, the machine sat silent next to Orange's bed. Late at night he would run his fingers over its damp-blistered rods and reels, checking once more that the transformers and wires that had kept it ticking for so long were still functioning. But they had never been touched since a team of Locals had carried it back into his room from the bathroom.

Boxes of papers covered an entire wall: Orange had sat down one evening with his typewriter and the vast coils of paper that had come from the machine, from the real world. It was not Agency protocol to make copies of memos. It was downright…wrong. But, reasoned Orange, all the better to be up to date with their contents if he had first typed them up and then filed them. Each strip of type was softly run through his fingers. The words were beautiful and stirring: he had been desperate when he had destroyed two strips trying to bleach their yellowing age from them. He had asked Muller for a filing cabinet, but Muller had declined. Muller was sometimes a real asshole. Micky Mouse training.

"The Agency didn't send anyone," said Orange softly. Almost in a whisper he addressed his knees, "They didn't care." Orange's throat worked spasmodically and his eyes filled once more with tears, as if a fate he had long been expecting had ambushed him too early.

"They didn't know," said Muller softly, patted Orange's knee and walked from the storeroom.

A small huddle of onlookers, arranged like a sprawl of cactus plants on the little bluff above the bay, shielded their eyes and squinted at the sky above the hazy green mass of the mountain wall on the Mainland across the channel. Muller could identify the greater bulk of Fat Mike, pointing randomly at the white blue bowl above them, at the shimmering crags of the solitary peak behind them, between small fits of fanning his face with his great hands. Bee stood angular and apart, hands on hips, and Mercedes paced anxiously from side to side, his fingers forming binoculars about his deep set eyes. Three smaller figures stood still over their shadows to one side, Local boys.

The sea looked cool and blue as it lapped slow as syrup against the concrete slipway that led down from the unremarkable headland where they stood watching. Two fishing boats lolled in the shallows, their anchor chains visible all the way to the sandy bottom. A half-naked crewman, his ebony skin glistening in the glare, slept with his feet up on a box in the bows of the nearest boat, a newspaper draped over his face. Muller straightened his collar and set his hat square on his head. His back was sticky with sweat.

"Any sign?" It was Orange, bobbing at his elbow, his eyes red. Muller watched Bee kick at the ground. "I was pretty dumb, huh? Back then." Like a dog fresh from a whipping, offering a slipper. "Forgive an old man being stupid?"

"Nothing to forgive, Harry." Muller wanted to slap the loose skin of the old man's cheeks, see it glow crimson.

"Usual suspects here, then?" asked Orange, jutting his chin at the group ahead. "Same gang every time."

Fat Mike was looking at his watch every half-minute. He worked it loose around his puffy wrist, and glanced it again. Muller asked him the time, and Fat Mike raised the face to eyes as if the question had not crossed his mind.

"Oh, getting on for noon. They're late again."

Muller knew Bee would see the aircraft long before the others. He would wait until he estimated someone else would be able to spot it, a speck of displaced light against the glare above the mountain.

"There she comes," said Bee dispassionately. He turned his back on the group, and strolled, loose-limbed, down towards the shoreline. The bubbling wash of water retreated from Bee's bare feet, held its distance and at last surrendered to the mass of ocean behind it, surging once again up the beach, caressing Bee's ankles and shins. Muller watched Bee wade deeper, watched him scanning the northern horizon like a lighthouse beam. Then the boy unhinged his

gaze from the distance, and regarded his toes through the viscous surface of the ocean, wiggling them slowly as he gently chewed his lower lip.

"…kid's an asshole," Fat Mike muttered. He scowled at Bee's shimmering silhouette, peeling his shirt front away from his chest.

Muller heard nothing. Bee was watching again, as if his eyes anchored a column of air that supported the distant form of the aircraft as it settled lower on its approach. He did not blink as the grey blob settled into the shape of the monoplane, small wings detaching themselves from the blur of the sky, heavy floats sagging out beneath the fuselage. The three children picked up smooth pebbles and began to hurl them at them at the sky.

"You kids stop that," barked Fat Mike. "You stop that now."

The hiss of the grass and the dim buzz of sugarbirds took on a rough tone, at first nothing more than a pulse throbbing behind the sound, soon a distinct hum, and then the floatplane whined angrily as the pilot fought the throttle on his final approach. The small aircraft slumped onto the water like an exhausted swan, twin wakes of froth surging out behind it, merging slowly to settle into small swells that subsided into the still surface of the sea. The three boys threw down their remaining stones and rushed shouting to the water's edge where Bee stood gazing at the approaching machine.

"Can you see who's flying her? Can you see who's flying her?" Fat Mike called eagerly at Muller's elbow. "Is it Diesel?"

It wasn't Diesel, Muller could see. Diesel, the once-a-fortnight regular, wore instantly recognisable giant sunglasses. It was a thinner man, wearing what seemed to be a white skullcap. Three dark shapes were propped up behind him. The aircraft's engine died with a smoky splutter and the wash of the ocean over its broad floats came to them dully through the still hot air. A small surge pushed away by the aircraft's silent passage rocked the two sleeping boats in the bay and lapped against Bee's shins. The sun gleamed from the aircraft's burnished wings and Muller shielded his eyes with a long hand. His fingers trembled for a moment and he clenched them into a fist.

The pilot's head was bare. The skullcap was coarse white hair, closely cropped over a face the colour of tanned leather. He waved hesitantly and tossed a mooring line to the three boys on the beach, who threw themselves upon it, shouting and laughing as they wrestled for a firm grip. The pilot inched back towards the cabin along the float and hauled himself with some difficulty into the seat.

The boys strained at the rope, laughing as they struggled for footholds in the wet sand. But a shark's head, drifting in the shallows, hypnotised them and the rope lay slack on the sand. Bee moved swiftly, kicking the nearest boy in the buttocks as he gazed into he water at

his feet. The children stopped their game and looked at their assailant, their mouths open and their eyes resentful.

Muller watched as Bee tightened his delicate hands about the rope, twisted it around his arms and shoulder, and began to pull. He saw the sweat on Bee's face, the struggle to hide the exertion. They could hear Bee's breathing hissing between his carefully hidden teeth. Mercedes grinned at them.

"Bee's strong," he said proudly. "Bee will pull it all the way."

He did. He sat down heavily in the damp sand, losing his balance as the aircraft would come no further. The pilot once more disentangled himself from his seat, gingerly picking his way around wires and struts, and carefully made his way forward. With an ungainly jump, he landed at Bee's feet.

"Thanks sonny," said the pilot. Bee looked into a face as lined as desert rock, gleaming like copper in the sun. Two pale blue eyes met his own. "Quite strong, hey?" Bee's face remained motionless, his mouth curled into a grimace as he squinted against the heat. The pilot hesitated, faltered. "Thanks anyway," he said, and turned back to the aircraft.

"Welcome," Bee said to his back. "You're new?" A question, but his tone suggested that the pilot would not do well to deny it. The man ran a hand through his short hair and shrugged. He turned and clambered back to see to his passengers.

Nobody but Muller turned their backs on Bee. Muller watched Bee swell with anger, the boy's shoulders bunching forwards as if he were about to leap upon the pilot's retreating body and fix his teeth into the tight lined neck.

Mercedes and Fat Mike helped with the luggage. Expensive, unused backpacks, crammed with sleeping bags, insect repellent, guide books. Weather-proof rolls that could have contained mosquito nets or mortar tubes. And finally a little suitcase, locked with a heartbreakingly inadequate ornate padlock.

The owner of the suitcase was helped from the float after her luggage, held gently by Mercedes as he made sure her feet did not get wet. She was about ten or eleven, a slightly built girl with limp fair hair and small dark eyes. She wore a dress with small pink and maroon flowers printed on it, and Mercedes let his hands linger under her arms, feeling the silky material on his rough fingers. She was placed on the beach near her suitcase and the men returned to unloading the aircraft, and stood tense and fragile glancing from the pilot to Bee and back.

The beguiling whispering of ripples expending themselves on the sandy shore disappeared as the nearest fishing boat cleared its engines, a gout of black smoke coiling into the bright sky as the engine set up its ragged rattle. The crewman twitched under his

newspaper, slowly pulled it from his face like a patient unwrapping bandages for a tentative look. He scratched his side, pulled his trousers from where they had wedged between his hard buttocks, and disappeared down out of sight. The girl watched him go, her mouth hanging open, her eyes unblinking. Then she turned to Bee once more, as if wanting an explanation. Bee looked at her sullenly for a moment as the boat made a wide arc in the bay, setting up small waves that slapped against the aircraft's floats. Bee looked away, and the girl dropped her gaze.

Visitors to the island were not uncommon: it was after all one of the most beautiful islands in the south sea. He had himself come as a visitor before the great eye of which he had been part had turned upon the island, and sent him here to sink roots into its sandy soil. No, visitors were acceptable if they stayed sober, stayed out of his way and did not judge what they saw.

But tourists were another matter entirely. Dirty, degenerate, ignorant invaders from a soft and inherently meddling world far beyond many horizons, and they always, without fail, tracked him down somehow and asked him questions.

When Muller was six years old, a governess had asked him if he could spell 'octopus'. He had wondered for a moment if he could, but had soon answered, entirely truthfully, that he could not. The governess had told him that he was a lazy child, and a cheeky one too to answer an adult in such a flippant manner. She was not asking *if* he could, she had said with a fragrant finger almost in his nostril, she had wanted him to spell the word.

Muller had remained silent about the incident with his parents, sitting at the end of the long dinner table while his mother fidgeted and father read the newspaper. But he had kept the matter in his heart, watching and listening as questions began to appear more frequently around him. And some years later, while enduring a lacklustre beating from a bored mathematics teacher, he had decided that questions were vile. He would never ask a question he already knew the answer to. He would never solicit answers by flattery or violence.

Ironic, he had often reflected, that his life should have been devoted to investigation, finding evidence of things already suspected, confessions. So much for childhood renunciations of violence.

Muller did not mind people knowing about his life. He had few secrets to hide. He had confessed all, either to himself or to his wife: he had been forgiven by the people who mattered. He had enjoyed, in however dilute a manner, the magazine article about his home. It was the *manner* in which the information was acquired that mattered. Muller was willing to admit that he could dish it out but could not take it. That much he would admit to. Yes, there

was no shame in it. That was why he disliked the aggressively merry questions thrown at him by these fat pink people from another world.

And two of them stood on the beach pointing and gaping ingratiatingly at the island. Wasn't it pretty? Wasn't it magnificent? Muller turned quickly to see what they were enthusing over: the gravel road, a fresh pile of dog shit its only main feature, rose up to the rusty and deserted guard house that once regulated access to the slipway. The boom stood permanently raised, grass and weeds enveloping its concrete counterweight and a wasp's nest bulging from its tip.

Muller walked carefully to the group on the beach by the luggage, being sure that sand did not spill into his shoes. He secured his jacket under his arm and tipped his hat back on his head.

"Welcome to the Cape," he said. Reticence would whet their appetites. "I'm Muller." He extended his thin hand.

It was regarded with obvious embarrassment by the couple before him. Both were sunburnt, their pale skins flayed by their recent acquaintance with a sun more voracious than their own. They were thin, almost drawn, but their eyes were bright and roved drunkenly over Muller and his hand. The man bowed stiffly.

"Jaap Wolfswinkel, of Rotterdam." The woman coloured even more as she hesitantly took Muller's hand. Her grip was weak, the bones in her hand collapsing like spokes on a closing fan.

"Ilse," she said softly. "You have a lovely island." Muller bowed stiffly, and the pair smiled nervously and bobbed their heads until it became foolish to continue.

Bee sat sprawled on the beach some way away, his heels buried in the wet sand and his head flung back into the sun. "If you think this is gorgeous, you should see our other pile of dog shit, on the west coast." The Wolfswinkels smiled once more, and twined their hands together, their knuckles white. The pilot loomed up behind them, and Ilse started as he flung his arms about their shoulders.

"These two have had quite a flight. Fuckin' nigs opened up on us about two hours out of here, scared us shitless, didn't it?" He ruffled their hair with his broad flat hands as they grinned sheepishly. "Where's the bar?" He scooped up his flight bag and set off after the panting mass of Fat Mike.

Hans Wolfswinkel asked Muller in a half-whisper if there were any place to rent for a few days. The pilot had suggested that the three of them find somewhere together, but…

The girl was sitting on her suitcase, watching them with her mouth still slightly agape. Muller looked at her with mild distaste. He could not leave the child alone on the beach with

Bee, but children thwarted him. Their motives were obscure, and he knew they disliked him without exception. He walked stiffly to where she sat, and bent over. Bee, wriggling his toes in the remnants of swells, watched him. Mooler you beauty, he would say. Santa Clause is coming to town. Muller straightened once again. He reached out a hand, and the girl took it. Her handshake was more firm than Ilse's had been.

"I'm Mr Muller," he said slowly, enunciating each world carefully. "Who are you?"

"I'm ten," said the child thoughtfully, as if not wanting to announce her age until she was sure of it.

"Have you been given a name at any stage in those ten years?" At what age did they begin to speak appropriately, abandoning this language of shadow and suggestion? It was confounding.

"I'm Claudette," she said matter of factly. "That man is my grandfather." Muller followed the line of her outstretched arm to the retreating figure of the pilot. "He's mad." Her little ears crept slowly back and she was weeping softly.

Bee watched Muller as he hesitantly put his hand on the child's head. He held it there, stiff as a slab of marble, and looked desperately about him, first to the dispersing group on the headland, then to Bee, as the girl sobbed. Bee shrugged and smiled. You absolute beauty. He turned once more to look at the aircraft and the horizon.

4

Jaap and Ilse Wolfswinkel had saved for three years to gain the maximum benefit from their holiday. Jaap explained that they considered themselves socio-anthropological consultants, although they had no formal training. Ilse's work on the social stratifications in a large informal settlement in Belize had gained some acclaim, Jaap repeated periodically. She was a pre-school teacher by training, while he had written some plays along generally apocalyptic lines.

God alone knew why he should feel obliged to check up them: they would not fall into any wells. But they were tourists. A week had passed since their arrival on the island. They had remained relatively discreet for their first two days, strolling about it in the Vineyard taking photographs and complimenting everyone they met. But on their third night in the town, Marconi had invited them to join him for dinner. Muller was invited as a matter of course, and he blamed himself for the resulting events.

Wine was plentiful, and Marconi had been impassioned, his face a procession of pantomime masks as his hands darted and swooped like courting butterflies over the rough oak table. For an hour or two the Italian could indulge in a masque, a caricature of a Local elder,

steeped in the wisdom of the land, his dark skin a trophy of his survival over its hostility. His small living-room was dim and comfortable, crammed with the ornaments and mementos of a life spent tacking with the winds of trade: a wire biplane bought from a shepherd on the great dusty flats of the Mainland many years earlier, blue marble eggs covered in cobwebs and spilling from a basket (a gift from a Venetian whore, Marconi pronounced), an extensive collection of vinyl records, Elvis and Puccini, gathering dust as his turntable served as a resting place for a stuffed ferret, patchy with age and missing a bead eye.

"And the Mainland?" Jaap asked without warning. Marconi glanced at Muller, tacitly surrendering the floor. Muller declined the invitation and shrugged. But the red thin face was persistent. "The instability is well documented," it offered, probing for common ground. "The systems of governance are still intact, though?" Ilse mouthed an overly eager request for more wine, and Marconi swayed into action.

Systems of governance: that was one way of looking at it. The rumours from the north were far more regular than the directives, delivered by state couriers, harassed city folk who made no attempt to hide their contempt for the Cape and its residents. Young men who did not know who Muller was, or who he had been. The courier had last come two months ago.

Marconi belched. "Government give us toilet paper, but we shit by ourself." Ilse giggled nervously and Jaap stole a hand into her lap. Muller watched her tug against the gentle leash, flashing a glance of defiance at her companion.

"We are looking forward to seeing the Mainland," she said loudly. "Do you go there often, Mr Muller?"

"I'm afraid not." Marconi would offer no assistance in steering the conversation into milder waters. "Have you seen our public garden yet, Mrs Wolfswinkel? It is very tiny by your standards I'm sure but it contains some quite lovely shrubs."

"I would have thought you go to the Mainland often, Mr Muller," said the young man.

In retrospect, a lie should have sufficed. The strangers would have been satisfied with a vague allusion to the decline in the need for administrative contact between the island and the Mainland. And yet he had spoken the truth when he said: "Why?"

The Wolfswinkels had seen smoke, and were hungry for fire. The next morning had found them packed and resolute: the white confines of the Vineyard were simply illusionary as long as there were injustices to be unearthed. And, Jaap confided to Orange, he had read the Locals were eager to part with their superb pottery for the right price. It was very rare in the grey port town on the North Atlantic they called home. How much did Orange suppose it would cost? They loaded their cameras, wrapped their most austere sarongs about their thin waists, and trudged out of the town towards the Local settlement, their backpacks and

paraphernalia blurring into their bodies as they reached the distant tree-line, transforming them into lumbering beetles.

Regina Bee had been politely laconic on the telephone. Muller guessed the pale couple were sitting in her small living room when he called, and Regina's only care in the world was that she not offend any guest in her house.

"Just phoning to check the whereabouts of our visitors, Mrs Bee."

"You are very kind, Mr Muller," said Regina. Muller could hear she was smiling.

"Is this a bad time to call?"

Regina hesitated. "Mr Muller, you can always call us. But…"

"I'm sorry for disturbing, Mrs Bee. Goodbye."

A small solitary cloud moved slowly in front of the sun, and his shadow disappeared, as if evaporated by the heat. The Vineyard was still this morning, a group of three Local drunks lolling outside the tradesman's entrance to the Happy Dragon, poking at empty beer bottles with their open shoes. A burst of noise from inside the door, the words unintelligible but the voice unmistakably Marconi's, set the men swaying and lurching into the road, their arms gesticulating woodenly like those of puppets. Marconi's voice was ripped away by a gust of warm wind, and Muller held onto his hat as the small tornado spun through him.

The bay was calm, but the wind plucked at the wings and spars of the aircraft, causing it to tug restlessly at its mooring as if it was keen to be on its way once more. Bee was sitting on one of the floats, shirtless and gleaming like polished granite, his legs amputated just below the knee by the silvery blue sea. Muller began to raise an arm, but let it drop to his side. Bee watched a gull come skidding over the Vineyard, following its trajectory as it banked, dropped towards the sea and then muscled its way into the sky once more, heading inland again towards the mountain.

If Bee had been his son. Bee was athletic, and his intelligence was almost tangible in its intensity. Muller wondered what it would be like to bathe Bee, a two-year-old Bee, rounded and soft, his skin a roll of oily velvet and his hair like lamb's wool.

Something touched his elbow, and Muller lashed out blindly behind him, spinning with the force of his blow as his fist missed its mark. He righted himself to see the girl Claudette crouching on the ground behind him. Muller moved clumsily to comfort her, reaching for her shoulders with his big hands. Claudette hopped backwards like a frog and watched him warily.

"I thought you were someone else," he said softly.

"A grown-up?"

Muller nodded. Yes, he supposed, a grownup. "Why are you out here by yourself?" he asked, offering Claudette his hand. She took it shyly, and Muller wished at once that she had not: her hand was soft and dry as a baby's, while his was rough and calloused. His palm would surely hurt hers, leave some crude imprint in the soft skin. He loosened his grip, offering her release, but she frowned at him and tightened her fingers around his. Muller saw that her eyes were grey, still and serious below her high forehead. One day she would be quite handsome.

"I came to see you," she said. Another whirlwind of dust and leaves rushed at them from the pale field of dry grass to their rear, and Muller moved to come between it and Claudette. It hissed over them, and the child turned into Muller's body. Muller willed the gust to pass so that she would move away again. Her skirt flew up suddenly, flapping like an animated mushroom around her narrow hips. Muller turned his head away into the wind, his eyes clamped shut against the prying grit.

The dust devil extinguished itself some yards away, and Claudette pulled her fringe from her eyes, carefully straightening her hair. She had come to see him, she had said. She had been sitting somewhere, probably comfortably, on an island with a perfect beach and many children her own age eager for play. But she had come to see him. *I came to see you*: those had been her words.

Muller shook her hand from his gently. "What did you want?" he asked.

She hesitated as she spoke, rocking on her heels as if preparing to bolt away across the yellow grass. "My grandfather said you might take me up the mountain." She blushed. "I don't think he wants me around."

"You shouldn't say things like that about your family. I can't take you up the mountain."

Claudette's eyes dulled as they fell to the road. She fumbled for a lock of hair above her ear, and twisted it carefully into a smooth cocoon about her finger. "That's fine," she piped, "I didn't really want to go. It was my grandfather's idea." The lie was amateurish. Muller prayed that she never became more polished.

"You must go back to the Vineyard," he said, setting off once more for the tree line. "It is not safe for little girls around here."

"I'm not little," Claudette called after him. The hiss of the heat insects began to smother her voice in the air.

"You are a small child," said Muller. He walked on.

Some way down the track he turned for a moment. Claudette was straggling towards the bay, dragging her canvas shoes through the dust. Muller could hear them scrape over the gravel,

and wished she had disregarded his instructions. A small companion would have been diverting. *I came to see you.*

The small forest closed about him like the surface of a mountain pool around a fish. Green and blue light filtered down with dust motes through the canopy overhead, and the ferns around his feet plopped and trickled with moisture and invisible reptilian movement. A great grey parrot eyed him from the fork of a yellowwood tree in the gloom. His feet were silent on the rank decaying foliage at his feet, and Muller held his breath. The parrot tilted its head and leered at him out of a yellow eye, its black pellet of a tongue protruding from its half-open beak.

Yellow and silver light began to dapple the forest floor, littering the path ahead with intangible gold coins, and Muller slowed his careful tread, unwilling to surrender the darkness of the ancient grove. A sunbeam skewered through the thinning canopy and dazzled him, and at once the heat of the day was upon him again. He narrowed his eyes and lengthened his stride, bursting out into the glare.

Antoine lay sprawled before him, its shacks and shanties piled upon one another like blocks in a child's play-pen. It was small as settlements went, no more than forty dwellings jostling for space in the sandy expanse that had been hacked out of the forest. A rusty tap stood gushing in the middle of the path, and a baby boy, his potbelly hidden by a ragged vest and his tiny buttocks clenched with effort, was urinating into the stream of clear water that slid away into the sand.

You could teach them until you were blue in the face, and they did not budge. It was more than a case of in one ear and out the other. Muller had read the literature. He knew the retarding effect of poverty. But had any of those anthropologists tried to teach these people how to live? Had they put in the hours, as he had, repeating the wisdoms of two centuries of successful civilisation and technological advance, only to see it pissed away into the barren sand? Muller had read the words, but he could not believe that the Locals had anything but stone in their heads. Except for Bee.

Muller stepped over the small delta forming near the tap, and turned it off. Two older men sat on a porch, smoking their pipes through coarse beards. The one smoker withdrew his pipe and waved the stem vaguely at Muller, muttering to his partner. The other man nodded slowly, and drew deeply on his pipe. Muller nodded at them.

"Good morning Martin Anjari. Melker Kwingila." The men waved slowly. Muller unbuttoned his collar and loosened his tie, wedging the stiff brim of his felt hat under his arm. "Don't wise men like you know when to turn off taps?" Muller leaned against the rough wooden railing of the porch. "Waste of water."

Martin Anjari, who had gestured at Muller, shrugged slowly. "The baby want a swim. She get a one." Melker Kwingila, his eyes crazily magnified behind massive spectacles, gazed at Muller's feet, grinning.

"And you, Melker?" Muller jutted his jaw at the old man. "Still the ladies' favourite?"

"Melker, he a love god," said Martin Anjari slyly. "Girl can't resist the boy." The love god nodded slowly and drew deeply on his pipe, without taking his eyes from Muller's shoes.

"True, that man," he said.

"White girl, black girl," continued Martin Anjari, waving his hands slowly at a sky full of amorous women. "Even me dog love the boy, keep humpin' he leg."

"True, that man," said Melker Kwingila and laughed softly into his beard.

"Regina Bee at home?" Muller asked and pushed himself off the porch.

"Where she going to be?" asked Martin Anjari.

It was deeply frustrating. Muller had known Anjari and Kwingila for most of two decades. Anjari had been a superb gardener, and Muller's wife had developed a respect akin to superstition for his gift for coaxing roses out of the white sand of the island. It was natural that Muller should want to enquire about their health, share some limited banter. But they always went too far. Muller could reconcile himself entirely with being hated, even being mocked. But why, he wondered as he walked up the natural gutter that led waste water into the forest from the flat yard that served as Antoine's town square, why did they do it *every* time? It was tiring and unnecessary. He did not want to remain aloof, but if it was expected, he would. Let Anjari crack his jokes at someone else's expense.

Lavinia Kitso and Doris Navidad nodded and beamed in unison as they shuffled past him, two daisies in a window box. From deep within shadows of a small porch, a young man's voice asked for a cigarette. Muller squinted into the darkness, made impenetrable by the glare of the day.

"I see you," said the voice. Muller hurried on. The words made his back crawl, and he put his hat squarely back on his head, carefully straightening the brim.

No. He wheeled around easily without breaking his stride, and squared his shoulders as the cool darkness of the porch opened into view. Muller raised his hand, finger extended to hammer home his point. The porch was deserted, a dismembered newspaper lying on the planks and a crate cutting shadow from light, pushed into the glare by its departing owner. Muller wagged his finger slowly at the crate. What had his point been? Children were staring at his hand, and he flexed his fingers.

Regina Bee's house stood at the end of the single open dustbowl. A small track wound towards it, the forest encroaching on either side. Already there were ferns growing as far as the

perimeter of her garden, once demarcated by a fence but now a simple square of rough turf, kept clear by her goat.

The house was like no other on the island. Its architecture was unremarkable – Regina Bee had designed it, and had wanted a simple rectangle large enough for her needs, which were few. But about the house grew a rose bush. Muller could identify the two original plants, their stems now thick and gnarled, pushing up below the obscured front windows, but a swirl of scarlet, blistering the looming forest with a burst of red, negated any brief suggestions that the plants were cultivated. Their wild stems twisted and coiled about the walls, the roof, the little chimney, like flaming coral snakes. Muller could smell the flowers' perfume, sickly sweet in their intensity, as the sound of the children and dogs of Antoine became hushed by the trees behind him.

Regina's front door had long been nailed shut, made impassable by the bulging trunks of the matriarchal bushes, and Muller trod carefully along the paved path that ran around to the back, the last human footprint before the deep shade of the forest. The top half of the kitchen door was unlatched, and Muller could hear the woman's tremulous singing piped from somewhere in the house.

He knocked loudly, and waited. A dog barked from Antoine, a frantic ululation that hung in the air. As if in reply a bird trilled behind his back. Muller scanned the blue-black line of trees, but there was no flash of yellow, no turquoise ripple in the leaves. The trees surrendered nothing.

"Mr Muller!" cried Regina Bee, her wrinkled face cracking into a gentle smile. "We seen you comin'." She could barely see the pages of the large-print detective novels he brought her, and yet Muller had never surprised her when he dropped by unannounced.

Her thin forearms flexed as she manoeuvred her wheelchair out of the way of the inward-opening door. Her little hands gripped the wheels like claws, but her arms were not those of an old woman: the veins were black and protruding, the elbows scuffed, but Muller knew they were the arms of a mother who had cradled children with all the tenderness and luxury of a down pillow.

She pushed her way into the deep shade of the house, the chair creaking softly as she talked. Muller removed his hat and stooped, following Regina Bee down the low passage, past bunches of dried flowers and the travel magazines she adored. An old red carpet covered the wooden floor, but many passing feet – and Regina Bee's wheelchair – had worn it thin in places, so that it seemed that they were treading on dark lichen as they went further into the cave of Regina Bee's home.

She halted at the door to her study – in reality no more than an annex next to her small bedroom, but it had been named in earnest – and ushered Muller in.

"You will sit there," she said, pointing to an armchair pocked by moths, its seat hollow with use, "and we will sit here." She laughed and delicately placed a hand on Muller's arm. "It's always here wherever we sit, Mr Muller." She patted the thin padded armrests of her chair. "Now what we talking about? You hushed when we ask why you came."

Muller had not realised he had been asked. Much of what Regina Bee said was superfluous, and Muller had learned when to listen. "I was admiring your house, Regina," he said, and she clasped her hands together and beamed. A doleful Christ suffered in a florid print pinned onto the wall behind her head. "I came to see if our foreign friends are comfortable."

Regina Bee rolled her eyes and once more clasped Muller's arm with the intimacy of a shared secret. "Them hiked up and gone," she whispered. "We tell you a thing?" She glanced about the room as if ascertaining that they were alone, and beckoned Muller closer. "Don't think old Regina Bee was *squalid* enough for 'em." She said the word as if it had been recently learned. "Them took one look at her magazines, electrical stove, fridgedaire, stamp collecting and said, No, this duchess not half poor enough, and off they go. Oh, Mr Muller, don't worry they were powerful polite, and the young Ilse girl left a lovely card with pressed flowers all over him. D'want to see?" She began to turn her chair for the doorway, and Muller quickly touched her shoulder.

"I'm sure it's a lovely card," he said. The wooden frame of his chair bit into his thighs through the thin padding. "Did they say where they were going?"

"Didn't stop telling, Mr Muller, didn't rest their tongues for to even swallow. They gone north way." She jutted a thumb in the general direction of the bay. Muller sat forward in the chair and licked his lips. "Good souls, Mr Muller, them so badly want to help the poor people. Not Christian people, them, but still they help." For a moment she gazed wistfully at the embroidered lamb, pinned in mid-frolic in the cushion on her lap. "Told them they'd find folks more *squalid* up north. On Mainland across the wading." She paused, her eyes flickering for a moment from Muller's face to the doorway. "We pack them rusk-breads and they hike out last night. Said they didn't want to cause no-one fussing."

Muller appreciated Regina Bee's lack of interest in his errands about the island, and in return he never presumed to question her motives. She had sent the young couple into certain danger, he knew. Was her memory going, advising the pitifully vulnerable pair to trek northwards into a land still benign in her mind; or had it been malice? Long ago Muller had questioned a terrified boy still clutching the half-brick he had intended to throw. The child had fouled his ragged trousers at the mention of the Queen Bee: the woman in the wheelchair had

walked once. Muller had never been given any reason *(What can you tell me, son?)* to doubt that her arms had cradled only children and bruised heads; but her tongue had beyond doubt done exquisite cruelty.

He reached out his hand slowly and looked at her: an old woman swathed in religion and dragging herself through the world with her thin arms, ready to die and leave only a house of roses. Regina looked into his eyes, unblinking. A slow smile began to spread across her face, and for a moment that hung suspended on the woman's ever thinning lips, Muller was afraid. But soon her eyes were smiling, and the little claw was hammering Muller's knee.

"Mr Muller," she exclaimed, "The devil take our head! We been axed with to that Premier's jollity come month end."

Muller spoke easily. "May I have the honour of being your escort?"

"What a gentleman Mr Muller's mother born," cried Regina Bee. "Old premier Miles going to be mad as a skink-tail when he hears his honour guest been gone Mainland way. Hope he don't worry 'bout their poor white hearts."

Regina Bee smiled peacefully at Muller, and pointed out that the tea was ready. The wind whispered through the roses and died away to a rumour of hot air.

5

The day dawned, a mighty bubble of fire inflating to bursting point over the flat sea. The sun struggled above the horizon, the shimmering distance clinging onto its molten orb until the last moment, and surged unhindered into the staggering vault of the sky like a fiery jellyfish. The shadows crept from the island, cringing from the onslaught of the heat back into the forest and up to the slopes of the mountain. The air began to bake, turning white, as the cinder gulls wheeled and fell through the burning sky.

The small oak trees at the outskirts of the Vineyard stood cracked and parched as the morning ticked and sizzled around the still town. A tern, lanky and curious, flopped down the avenue.

Suddenly the bird was gone, half a mile into the sky, its feathers tattered and its course unknown. The wind struck the island with a giant fist, and the little battalion of oaks reeled and creaked, a swarm of leaves torn away and vanished while the survivors clung on and streamed in the blast.

Dust frosted the shop windows of the Vineyard, and above the surge of the wind across the grass of the plain, the bangs of unsecured shutters and doors could be heard. A ripple crested white in the harbour, and those following it remained frothy and uneasy, slapping the floats of the aircraft, splashing droplets onto the baking Plexiglas windscreen.

The wind had arrived.

The day passed in heat and wind, sheets of newspapers joining the gulls in jerking passes over the Vineyard. The mountain stood unmoving, but even its impregnable slopes were tormented: scant pines, sticking from tenuous ledges like whiskers upon the face of an ancient sea-lion, quivered in the gale.

In Antoine children and dogs squinted against the dust as the rusty roofs of the houses flexed and hissed. In the Vineyard a delivery truck swayed down the High Street, its canopy billowing and cracking like a whip. The driver waved to an unseen shopkeeper, mouthing a greeting that was torn off his lips and sent away with the dust, tumbling across the yellow lashing grass towards the mountain.

High above the island a cloud floated motionless in the sky, unmoved beyond the surging tide of air below. Its soft white edges tapered away into ragged sky.

Bee glanced at the cloud as he fought with the rough wooden shutters, leaning out of his apartment window. The little room roared and hummed as the wind hurled itself against the roof above his head. The streets below his building, the red brick block that once housed the power station, were empty, just a drunk reeling with the wind, his baggy trousers flapping at his shins like the sails of an abandoned clipper. Bee let the shutters slam shut. Bright slashes of light furrowed the wooden floor at Bee's feet, the sun concentrated once more in the still air of the room.

Muller sat in his armchair, deaf to the wind. The record scratched and ticked at his sleeve, echoing the wild world outside the drawn curtains. *Don't look so vain with me, don't stand in the rain with me...people will say we're in love.* The cat tongued its dusty fur back into place by the door.

In the cool inner reaches of her small home, Regina Bee massaged her knuckles absent-mindedly as she wandered through the worn bible on her lap, her lips moving and her eyes flying across the pages before her. A tinny clash filtered through the roses, a bucket rolling down the path. Her hands spread like starfish across the pages, and she listened.
In the afternoon, the little white cloud was a dull white smudge across the sun. Away to the south the horizon was shifting, swelling. The sea ended in a band of green, and from the distance the ocean was changing colour, a greasy slick spreading its tendrils across the waves: they bucked and tossed, hardened to bronze by the distant yellowing sky.

An hour later, the bank of cloud was eating up the horizon and racing across the sea, a wall of jaundiced haze. The sun was dimmer now, beginning its plunge through the haze to skim the peaks of the Mainland. The wind was cold.

Bee awoke beneath his shroud of mosquito netting. His floor was dull once again, no hint of the day's heat lingering in the floorboards. The wind tugged at the closed shutters, and he carefully unlatched them. The Highstreet flashed into view and was gone as they slammed shut. Bee pushed himself through the window, screwing his eyes up against the swirling dust.

The sky was a sheet of neglected copper. A sunbeam blazed through a solitary hole in the clouds above, smashing into the mountain peak in the centre of the island, turning it to a monument of bronze. The mountain's crevasses and buttresses leaped out, the shadows black amid the glowing rock; and then the mountain was grey once more as the cloud rolled on over the world.

From the south the green and blue band of the storm was at hand, the sea a mist of rain and spray as the tempest squatted upon the horizon like an atmosphere unhinged from a vile planet and now crawling towards the island.

Later, the first drops thudded into Bee's window like great insects. Tack, tick-tack, and then the pane was rattling in the deluge. In a moment the high street was gleaming wet, the canvas awnings of the vegetable market flapping spray as they reeled against the wind. A man rushed across the street, his jacket stretched across his head in a futile attempt at comfort. His ankle twisted and the man sprawled onto his back, his jacket swirling about a lamppost where it fluttered, a drab pennant dripping from its sleeves.

Bee's apartment was small, cramped by the standards of the building, but large rooms made him uneasy. A large bed, its springs sagging and its frame chipped and starting to rust, dominated the small floor, while a mirror in a modest wooden frame hung from a nail above the pillow. A trunk lay open on the floor, Bee's clothes stacked in piles inside its dun corners. A table crouched in the corner by the small sash window, strewn with papers and mathematical instruments, half an apple, a small alarm clock frozen at a quarter to two. The extremities of the floor disappeared into gloomy corners as the roof of the old building sloped down on both sides.

Bee gazed listlessly out of the window for some time, toying with his lips, tugging and tucking them. The Vineyard did not look bad in the wet. If one put a hand or a piece of paper over the distant palms, their frenzied tops flailing in the wind, and beyond them the hazy suggestion of white waves lashing the bluffs, it could pass for a real city, in a real climate. Bee squinted through the frame of his hands, regarding the streaming street from the best angle, and held the pose for a moment. Then he sighed, a long shuddering sound drawn out by the hiss of rain on the roof, and let his hands fall limp at his sides.

Among the papers on the table was a map. Its edges were crumbling, and its colours were muted, running into each other in places. The map had been in the sea a long time when Bee had plucked it out on a windy morning years ago.

His delicate fingers traced the line of the Mainland, ever north, and when his hand brushed towards the table, the map sterile white under his touch, he gazed at the border as if the force of his will would extend his view beyond the paper, tracing a coast onto the table, across the floor, through the window, up the street outside and then away; away to the cities and the people and lights. A renewed gust rattled his window.

The night fell, the rain turning from the gloom of the day into slashing sparks as the clouds overhead sank away into blackness. In Antoine the water crept into doorways, probing under beds as the frontal attack of the storm clattered into buckets and basins under leaking roofs. Dogs that had spent all day cautiously circling one another huddled in dejected packs under any sheltering roof or iron sheet.

The small forest in the middle of the island swayed and surged in the night, the treetops flashing in the rain. Great flat leaves flapped and twisted like the flukes of whales, and below them the chain-mail of the wood's lesser foliage glinted and rippled. Below the heaving surface of the canopy, the forest dripped and creaked, the sodden earth surrendering its grip on the twisting trees. The blackness of the wood was utter, the crashing sky veiled and muffled as if the air itself were thick with water, and like the shoots of some aquatic forest, ferns swayed slowly in the currents, a secret world hidden from the chaos above the highest branches.

And high up in the gloom, the mountain streamed, cascading rivulets bursting into space from its crags to be whipped away in the wind, rejoining the clouds and mists that had spawned them. The old naked pines jutting from the summit did not flex like their damp kind far below. They stood petrified, their dead branches trembling. The oldest, a gnarled gaping trunk supporting knotted boughs, stood unmoved, the patriarch of the extinct stand. A renewed blast surged at the mountain, and then the tree was falling, its roots tearing loose stones and mud out of the mountain's flesh like a cruel claw. The tree struck the mountain's flank, and then tumbled away into the night, crashing from buttress to buttress. Two other trees, as if surrendering in the light of their guardian's destruction, heaved themselves loose from the mountain and slid away with the rain.

Silence, then whispers. The stars crept out, ghosts beyond the vapour, as the earth became still once more. For a brief hour they blazed, cool in the flat pool of the night, the mighty Cross tumbling towards the horizon. Then the rumour of dawn ruled the horizon off

from the sky, and the stars withdrew before the imminent ambush by the sun. The seething eye surged into the sky once more, and the day had come.

The wind and light denied the events of the night. The grass hissed and rippled, and the beaches baked, but the evidence was overwhelming: swells of silt made the high street a dry river bed; the mountain still dripped like a vast sponge, cataracts thundering into its wooded slopes. The channel to the Mainland was muddy and angry, white caps spinning away with the wind, and the mirror of the ocean was fractured into a million boisterous swells.

The body floated gently in the mouth of one of the small streams that cut their way through reeds and earth from the forest. The man's rigid fingers stroked the sand of the island, caressing the land like the face of a lover. A swell lifted him, surged past him, and the man's neck bent against the little bank of the stream, his submerged face nestling into his chest.

A small fish darted from his elbow, drawn by the blood seeping from the sleeve but frightened by the sudden rolling of the corpse. The man's arm was savagely broken, torn almost free from the shoulder. The elbow was shattered, and jagged bone had torn through the long brown sleeve. Pale pink strands of flesh fluttered in the wash of the tide and steady trickle of the stream. A larger swell rolled the man onto his back, his arm bending under him as he pivoted around his spongy shoulder.

His face was deep blue, almost black, the cheeks sunken and the skin smooth and tight as wax. His lips had drawn back across large teeth, and with his gently composed features, he had a look of polite interest, as if listening to a tedious anecdote. The water and bank conspired to bend his neck once more, his head pressing into the crumbling black earth. A neat slit opened across his throat, a pink cavity yawning open like a predatory tropical flower. His head lolled back for a moment, the water sucking and slapping in the gaping wound. Then he lay peaceful once more, his throat unblemished, a holidaymaker floating on his back in the swells.

It was unclear who found him. The two boys who burst through the door were yelling simultaneously, and pointed in so many directions that the constable could not establish any succession of events. Bee stepped out of the shadows from where he had leaned against the cool stone wall, running his hands over the plastic limpet mines that warned against Suspicious Packages. *Herwaak voor Baggage Vromd*, the pidgin of the Mainland. Something was not right. Something had been forgotten, but the remembering of it would be futile.

From above there was the thump as Mercedes lost his footing on the sloping roof. The boys were still shouting, beginning to sob, but the stocky policeman's voice cut through their tremulous narrative.

"He's going to fall, and you better clean up the stoop." He poked an accusing finger at the ceiling. Bee shook his head. Mercedes would not fall. Mercedes was on the wires, fondling the great lattice frame of the antenna with fingers that moved across connections and bolts with the frantic comprehension of a blind man reading Braille.

Bee did not want to see the body. He had no horror of the dead, for they were harmless, infinitely helpless. But the mourners that swayed down the main street of the Vineyard, swathed and purposeful as nomads in a distant desert caravan, filled him with terror. Once on a beach, barefoot and laughing, he had run onto a macabre congregation at prayer, a murder of crows gorging on a bloated and decaying seal. He remembered their ancient eyes, unblinking and infinitely solemn, as they regarded him. They had turned from him and bowed their heads once more, feasting on the sandy flyblown flesh. Bee clapped his hands, shouted, but they had not fled.

When you buried things in the white sand of the Cape, they did not stay buried. The resurrection and the life. The dunes had claimed the bleached bones of the seal, but dunes shifted. The birds would cluster again, some day. Bee would not be there when they did.

The boys were braying now, weeping and laughing, their burden relinquished, and twined their hands into the fingers of the policeman as they dragged him from the building. Bee heard their voices grow muffled as they were pitched into the diesel police wagon outside, and then the roar of the engine obliterated their excitement.

"Try now!" Mercedes sounded frustrated. Bee fingered the radio: it whined and hissed, but the outside world was silent. The frequency used by the fishing fleet was empty, tweeting and gurgling into the still police-station.

Nothing. Bee breathed deeply as the first pressure of panic settled on his chest. He stepped outside, onto the makeshift concrete skirt that formed a little veranda about the station. The yellow police truck bumped and rattled away down the gravel road past the most northerly building of the Vineyard. The wild stand of reeds pressing against the veranda swayed in the breeze as Mercedes swung and levered himself down from the roof, wiping his hands on his blue overalls. In their whispering and swaying the obscured fear surged into Bee's throat and was instantly gone. The reeds swayed. Bend or break. Something had broken, in the storm. He had not seen it break, but he knew it was broken. He dreaded that he would remember what it was out here on the barren outcrop where the police-station perched, a mile from the Vineyard, a little island in a sea of bracken and ferns.

"She's fine," Mercedes announced. "Mainland's buggered." He scratched his damp forehead and became suddenly timid. "The storm?"

Bee nodded, deaf to Mercedes at his side. The wind whistled through the wires above their heads, and Mercedes peered at them for a moment, as if anxious that nothing, however ephemeral, should tamper with his operation.

Mercedes spoke again, something about supplies, a nervous and futile observation about the silence and the storm. It rolled over Bee's shoulders as he watched the police-van trundle ever more slowly away across the grassy plain. A small dust plume rose up and was borne away towards the forest by the wind. The van seemed to be picking its way like a grazing animal, its squat rear shifting clumsily as wind and potholes thwarted its dull passage. It was not the body. The body was merely coincidental, unimportant. But the van held Bee's eyes until they streamed, and the forgotten horror danced close the edge of his mind. In the bright sun of the midday he felt it rushing towards him as fast as thought, and whipped around, his neck pricking.

The little building stood as it had stood all day, for years. Mercedes was his stupid self, carefully prying grease from his fingernails with a screwdriver, his tongue gripped firmly in his teeth. The reeds were doughty little plants, flexing in the breeze.

"Radio," said Bee slowly. Mercedes nodded.

"It's not the radio," he said patiently. "It's the Mainland. No talking."

The police van had a radio in it. The police van was taking that radio to investigate a body. The body had come in the storm, from the north. Bee teetered on the edge, but once again the pieces refused to dance in unison, and he started again. The police van had a radio in it…

At the small inlet, the constable held his handkerchief over his mouth and pressed his lips together for fear of betraying his week knees and churning stomach to the two boys who capered about the corpse in the swells. He wished they would stop, would leave the thing to lie still, but he could not open his mouth to chide them. With clenched jaw and eyes fixed on the mountain towering above them, the constable gripped the man's slippery collar and tugged. For a dizzy, ludicrous moment it seemed that the man's arm was staying behind, tapers of flesh extending with nightmare smoothness from his shoulder, but soon the arm was twisting and twirling against the muddy verge.

"She's arm's loose," laughed one of the boys. Then the head lolled back, pressing with intimate tenderness against the constable's arm, and the watery pink flower opened once more in the elegant neck. The boys screamed and fled into the forest. The constable tightened his grip on the collar and wrestled the body onto the bank. For a long time after he stood still,

looking at the mountain and breathing into the handkerchief. Then he folded it up and carefully placed it in his pocket.

As the constable arranged his handkerchief in his breast pocket and gave the corpse a glare, Bee began to remember. He was running before he had thought the word, imagined the white form floating on the bay.

His initial burst down the slope knocked the wind out of him, the bracken tearing at his knees and shins. He should pace his run; he must breathe. What had happened had already happened six, seven hours ago, but he could not bear to stand back and watch. Bee began to stride, loping through the brush as it turned from heather to grass, from grey to yellow, and then he was pulsing through the flowing fields, his feet thudding into the sand and his breath tearing at the wind.

A gasping sob tore loose from his burning chest as he crested the headland above the bay. The aircraft lay on its side on the beach, its wing torn free in a single piece, half buried further up the beach. One float jutted into the sky, its supports buckled. Of the other float there was no sign. The boisterous swells slapped over the buckled tail unit, and the rudder twisted gently like the fluke of a lazy porpoise.

Bee rushed down onto the beach, throwing himself onto the sand at the aircraft's nose. He began to dig at a buried prop blade. The wet sand slipped back into the hole, and Bee shouted, cursed the sand, the storm, the foolish weak aircraft.

Muller sat on the headland and watched. The boy flailed at the wet sand, pitifully small against the ruined mass of metal looming before him. At last Bee struggled to his feet. With a force that made Muller start, he kicked the cavernous nose of the aircraft and began to sob.

Muller watched. His mouth worked, forming vague words as he understood why the boy wept, at last recognising the cruel, selfish motives and the defeat represented in the shattered spars of the machine. Muller rejoiced in Bee's failure as his hand closed around a stone, but the boy turned and saw him, and he let the stone roll away. He smiled, and Bee mistakenly smiled back, embarrassed. Muller waved. He could not have thrown the stone. The truth – he smiled as he thought it, so obvious and yet so obscured by the wind and sand of the island – was that he loved Bee too much. (No admission there, no revelation, simply a time and place to acknowledge it.) He should leave, he knew, abandon Bee to his hurtful, pathetic schemes. But he remained, content in the distance between them as Bee circled the wreck. He would stay and watch while he could.

Them's the breaks, Regina would say. Bee stroked the ragged metal and burst rivets where the wing had torn free. Them was certainly the breaks. The aircraft was pitiful, robbed of all its grace and promise. Muller was watching him, and he wiped his eyes and grinned. But

in a calm chamber, safe from the ravaging disappointment that pricked his eyes and squeezed sporadic sobs from his chest, Bee was glad that the old man was nearby. He looked at the ravished beach, the sand grey and packed hard by the tide and rain. A gull settled clumsily by the wreck, officiously strutting to and fro, as Bee slowly walked past Muller towards the whitewashed blocks of the Vineyard.

6

Regina Bee was concerned about sharks. Upon hearing that the party was headed for the Mainland, she decided that the small shallow stretch was infested with them.
"We seen a man once get taken in no more than two inches of water in that wading," she declared, waving a rolled-up magazine at Bee and Muller as they sat in her little study.

"Mam, it couldn't have been," said Bee.

"Don't backchat, child. We seen him go, and that water was deep as a widow's thumb." Bee glanced at Muller. Muller was always the same with the old lady. Interested, so polite. He wondered if there was something going on between them that he didn't know about. He shuddered and smiled, the idea tantalisingly repulsive.

"We'll be careful," said Muller. Never a correction around her. The old man was worth watching: being a chameleon in such spare surroundings was admirable. His mother, though, was not convinced.

"Our legs don't work this day, but least we still got 'em!" she said with a condescending wink. "When you comes dragging yourself back to Regina's rosehouse toting them stumps sayin', 'Oh them sharks is wicked cunning', know what she'll say?"

"Told you so?" offered Bee. The old lady was happy, and somehow in the cool of this home, surrounded by so many familiar things, Muller's inherent creepiness was diminished.

"That's the boy," she crowed. "Told you so, and amen!" They laughed, a pleasant ripple of human communion spilling through the empty rooms as the roses rippled and glowed around the house.

"Know how we lost our legs?" she asked. Bee nodded, but Muller leaned closer. The wily buzzard had heard the tale God knew how many times, yet still he would not disappoint her. He could see why Muller disliked him: now, in the presence of Muller's expertly subtle adaptation, Bee felt crude, a blunt and unsophisticated yokel. Regina Bee squinted at the Christ figure on the opposite wall, and knitted her fingers.

"A baby was going to be born to parents, a gift from the Lord." The words were familiar as a prayer. "A baby girl, black as the blessed night and beautiful like a star. Now the angels make this babe a great runner, to praise our Lord with her speed, to offer her laurels and

winnings to His glory. But the babe listen too much to the earth, to the flesh of the world, and she little legs was weak, curled up there in she mam.

"But the Lord will be honoured, and he giveth as he taketh away. Old Regina Bee could run like a jackal when she a girl, so she were graced by the Lord and of a day she walk in front of an automobile on Mainland. Her back break like bread, the Lord carries her legs to the baby child." She paused, suspended in remembrance, and wetted her lips. The knotted fingers stumbled to her throat, tugged gingerly at the little chain than hung inside her dress: like a bucket emerging into the light from a well, the locket came into view, and Regina Bee comforted it in the palm of her hand. A pink and lurid Christ stared aloft with bloodhound eyes, his lips full of desire. Beside him in the locket was a young woman, her face bright with sweat and triumph, kissing a medal. The picture was vague, the yellowing newsprint slowly becoming blotched with damp.

"Me legs done her proud," she said at last.

"There are no sharks in the channel." Bee stood up. His back crawled as, unbidden, the hours of his boyhood stretched before him, the dark regiments of the pews indifferent to his discomfort, threatening to creak and reveal him should he squirm. Bee looked at his mother's dim eyes and remembered the trembling hands held aloft and the fluttering eyelids.

Muller would play along: she would not be woken from her dream. He trod across the lichen-carpet and made his way to the back door, plunging his eyes into the cool of the forest. The trees swayed gently, dark and vague, and the sky above was high, vaulted blue. Their whispering filled his ears. He chuckled: the mother, the son and the unholy ghost, arranging doilies at the end of the earth.

"The boy don't like our stories," said Regina Bee to Muller. "He think he too old for fairy stories. He sore about his airplane." She chuckled and patted Muller's knee. Muller nodded and looked past her.

There were no sharks in the channel. The tide withdrew, leaving behind a crystal ribbon, a gentle current tugging at their ankles as they waded towards the Mainland, their trousers rolled up and their shoes dangling from their hands. From the mighty mountain wall that lay before them, its granite buttresses glazed and baked by fire and sun, the party appeared a straggling column of ants moving painfully slowly off the little island.

Bee looked back, as the scorched beach drew closer, resting his eyes from the glare of the sand. The Cape hovered over the sea, the waves seeming to evaporate before they could lap against the little slipway in the bay they had waded into. Suddenly the island looked

inordinately far away. Bee hesitated, about to clutch Muller's sleeve to point this out, but the old man was wading silently ahead, his thin white ankles cutting through the water with ease.

Bee stood still, as the party forged ahead. The Mainland. Who knew anything about it, actually? Muller and the police inspector, the panting Conway Pope who was at that moment was cursing himself for dropping a large leather boot into the sea, had been to the Administrative Centre up beyond the pass. But four years could change a great deal. There was no doubt that the Centre was still operational – the last radio message had reached the Cape's police station the week before the storm – but who was operating it? Above the beach, a long and ragged row of palm trees parted at one point for the rutted tar road that cut into the scrub. And towering over them was the wall of the plateau, the white scar of the pass slashing towards a distant saddle where it disappeared into the interior. Bee glanced back towards the island. The flat white roofs of the Vineyard gleamed and danced across the distance, pretty and delicate. Away to the right, inland on the slopes of their mountain, the forest that shielded and banished Antoine looked cool and ancient, not like the hot, scratchy palms that sprang like weeds from the beach before him.

Pope was calling, an impatient arm flailing for him to follow. Muller watched him from under his hat, his eyes hidden. Muller was too much, the grey ghost of Cape Formosa. Bee waved and smiled at Muller. You miserable fuck. He waved again, and Muller turned away, continuing his silent progress up onto the beach before them.

"Don't know why you come if you going to hang back all the time," Pope wheezed at Bee as they laced their shoes in the humid shade of the palms.

Muller spoke without looking up from his long fingers. "Why did you come, Steven?"

"Bit of exercise, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Muller licked his lips and carefully pulled his lace ends to equal lengths. When he looked up, Bee felt the grey eyes smash through his chest, through his muscles and lungs and into his heart. You can't get away, said Muller. It's all too far away. I've been and I know. It's too far away.

"Is it far?" asked Bee.

Muller shrugged. "Not too bad."

Pope bore down on them, clutching a map. Bee recognised it as the State Trigonometrical Service forestry map, a frustrating sheet ten years out of date that petered out fifty miles to the north of the Cape

"It is so hot I could die," announced Pope, clawing at the tight felt collar of his jacket. "My wife said to me that I would be hot, but I said no, we'll be fine. I suppose I should have

listened to my wife." He guffawed, and Muller smiled discreetly. "It's so hot I could die," the policeman told the palms. "Are you hot, Muller?"

"I suppose."

"And you, Steven?"

Bee shrugged. Pope nodded vigorously. "Well, I'm so hot I could die. I will take off my jacket. My jacket is made of very thick material, and so I get quite hot in it." He fingered the sleeve as he shifted the dark blue blazer from his shoulders to reveal a damp off-white shirt. "You see, thick material, wool, acrylic, all sort of things blended, so it gets very hot." Muller nodded sympathetically.

A frantic yelp rang out from the bush beyond the beach, echoed immediately from away to their right. The wild dogs of the Mainland were known to be shy, but hunger had driven them to the coast. Bee edged towards Muller as Pope wagged a finger at the mountain wall.

"There's the pass. We have to go over there."

"Are you sure?" asked Muller, and Bee could not hide his smile. He wondered if he and Muller would have been friends if they had been the same age. But the dark eyes swept over him like a beam from a watchtower, cold and distant as a star, and Bee remembered why they never spoke. Muller was a stranger, familiar but indisputably foreign.

They walked up the rutted road away from the beach. The bush was sparse and ravaged, numerous blackened stumps testimony to the massive fires that periodically raced down the coast of the Mainland, fanned by the south winds. Tortoiseshells, gutted by fire, lay like hollow rocks on the fine shale through which thorn-bushes and hardy shrubs poked. A tiny sunbird, gleaming ruby and emerald, hovered for a moment before them like a jewelled bumblebee before jerking out of sight towards the beach with a whirr of wings.

Pope was talking, wheezing like a rusty squeezebox. He rolled over the tarmac, his great boots trundling forward like the treads of an ancient tractor. Bee watched his mighty buttocks shift up and down as he walked, giving the Cape's senior executive policeman the look of an industrial force, a gothic machine powered by steam and bluster. The thick neck, collapsed into rolls above the spine, gleamed with sweat.

"You and I have never seen eye to eye, Muller," he was saying. Muller remained silent, watching his shadow tease his feet. "You are a lost cannon, eh? Not a team man, yes? Am I right?" Muller made no indication that he had heard. "I am right. I am a very good judge of people," said Pope.

"However," he added, bracketing the hissing air before him with his ham hands, "if I were to go on such a mission as this – which I am – I would have chosen you to come with

me. Which I did." He glanced with a ponderously avuncular expression at Muller, and Bee realised he was expecting thanks. Pope would be waiting until Hell froze over.

The pass was steep, but Bee welcomed the incline: every dozen steps opened a wider vista across the beach below and over the island. He delighted in spotting his building, standing like a ruddy thimble among the white dice of the Vineyard's houses. The little police station stood away on its rocky bluff, and for a moment he thought he could make out a figure on the hair of the radio mast. A shadow of disappointment crept over his eyes and he allowed himself to glance at the bay, the jetty a twig floating against the white sand of his home. The wrecked aircraft glinted in the sun, and Bee turned back to the path, lengthening his strides and surging ahead of the older men.

The aircraft was destroyed. Bee accepted the practicalities of this: the wreck would be cut up and dumped in the small crater on the plain that served as a scrap-yard. Yet he would fly out, he knew. The wings would buckle and rust, baking in the day and cracking at night, and yet he would fly out.

He had been burying his arm in the sand of Antoine, his little feet kicking on the warm earth, when the women had begun keening. Bee remembered the sound, a cacophony that drilled into eyes and ears and made him angry. Grief was silent, a wild and desperate imprisonment; not the stupid wailing of water birds. He had wrenched his arm free and shouted for the women to stop, and their wailing had become more shrill. His father had died, said Regina Bee. He had got sick and died. Bee had nodded. Yes, he understood, his father was dead. But more importantly, when could they go and visit him? Was it a bad illness? He had carefully replaced his arm in the hole, and smiled as he thought of visiting his father, away in the city on the Mainland.

Some movement against the mountain wall on the left made his memories to nothing. His heart leaped into action at the prospect of dogs and snakes; but the haughty features of a rock rabbit let his legs subside into twitching relief. The fat animal surveyed the party unblinking, its jaw working mechanically at some resilient morsel. The rock rabbit was still watching them when Muller smoothly drew out his pistol and fired a single shot from twenty yards down the road. For an instant Bee saw the animal bunch, the moment of flight heralded by the crash of the weapon's report. Then a burst of crimson mist obscured the little face, and the shattered body slithered down the rock to lie, vibrating gently, in the road. A thick rivulet of blood was spreading across the slates under the animal, and soon the trembling limbs were still.

Pope was recovering himself, clutching his chest and puffing out his cheeks, as Bee swept down onto Muller, striking him across the face with his flat hand. Muller's eyes sparkled, and Bee became afraid of the light that flared up in the dark hollows.

"I was in front of you, Mooler," Bee said, his trembling voice betraying him. "What if your shot gone wide?"

"It didn't." It hadn't. End of debate. Bee fought his rage, mastering the desire in him to wrest the pistol from Muller and send a shot just wide of his ear.

Bee saw only a suggestion of movement before Muller's fist crashed into his head. The mountain flashed white and his stomach dropped away from him as he reeled backwards. A fierce pressure crushed his throat and his body was sinking into the road. The sky swam from white back to blue, and Muller was astride him, his felt hat askew and his neck pulsing. With a shrinking terror that made him squirm under the old man, Bee found Muller's pistol pressed into his chin. Bee prayed that the bullet in the chamber would not spontaneously detonate. Muller's breath smelt of tea.

"Never touch me again, *klont*," he breathed. "Touch me again and you will be dead." Bee nodded, his chin sliding over the gaping muzzle of the pistol.

"I didn't know…" he said, the words forming themselves. "I was in front of you." Muller sat up, dusting off Bee's chest. He looked away, and Bee saw that he was deeply ashamed.

"I am not accustomed…" He abandoned the conversation at once, struggling to his feet and carefully adjusting his hat. The pistol looked massive and squat in his thin hand. Bee massaged his throat. Apology accepted.

Pope guffawed and pointed at Bee. "Lovers' spat, eh? The lads having a go, eh?" His slack grin evaporated as Muller stalked on in silence. "Dangerous, Muller, shootin' like that. Got a permit? For your gun?"

Muller's head bobbed in tired confirmation as he watched the road before his feet. Bee knew that Muller had obtained permits for all the island's gun-owners, including Pope. His jaw ached, and the wind that murmured around them made his ears ring. He delicately touched his chin, as if expecting to find some scar or trace of being six inches from joining the rock-rabbit as red mist. His chin was unblemished, and Muller was an old man forcing his thin legs up the incline of the pass.

The road levelled, and the mountain pulled its curtains aside as the road turned inland. The island lay behind, a vague puddle of green and grey on the massive glittering sheet of the ocean. Bee could no longer see the Vineyard. Only the island's solitary peak defied the distance and the brooding bulk of the mountain range the little party had breached, its golden

buttresses stabbing at the sky. The island was rightly named, Bee realised. With the town absent, buried beneath the sky and the colours of heat, the Cape was a jewel let fall by the idle mistress whose petticoats they had surmounted.

A tiny gleam blinked and was gone from far below, a car mirror, a window opening. At once the Vineyard came rushing out of the gentle slopes of the island, the white encrustation now plainly visible once again. Bee could hear the spades, scraping softly as they lifted sand into the bright sun of the southern sky. Foundations had to be dug deep if the little houses were to survive. More sand – the same sand – slid into the hole, and the spades would plunge and scrape faster, but the eternal sand slid back like a shark's head in the waves, polite and utterly dead. The spades were crunching rhythmically, the digging determined and resigned. The little houses shifted through the serried pillars of air that surged and wavered between Bee and his home; shifting on their foundations. When a white house crumbled under the sun and wind, would it leave no trace in the white sand? Bee knew that it would not and listened to the soft shuffling of the spades.

The sound grew softer, and he broke his gaze away from the sphere of the island to see Muller and Pope striding into the sky, their feet crunching in unison on a shimmering carpet of horizon, the towering cliffs of the pass looming like the Red Sea on either side. They paused, their legs turned to vapour, and the small silhouette of Muller waved. Bee surged to his feet and ran towards them, ears singing, up the last stretch of the pass and onto the escarpment of the Mainland.

7

The road plunged into a maze of rocky outcrops, following the course of a long extinct river through small wooded canyons. The wind was gone, and in the deep shade of the contorted rocks, Bee let his feet carry him. From an overgrown hollow in the rocks a bird piped, shrill and sweet, and at once the call was answered, a vision of scarlet and tail-feathers jinking overhead to vanish behind a curtain of gleaming leaves.

The horizon would be visible in good time. Bee whistled, a crude approximation he knew, but the crunch and slither of Muller and Pope's boots had become offensive as soon as the wind had withdrawn. The sound died away and the green curtain hung unmoving. Bee walked as silently as he could, revelling in the sounds of the stillness. The murmur of the sea was gone, resolving into the concrete trills of busy creatures, the silence of a land asleep. A funeral here would be still. Nothing would move for hours after the black forms had melted away. Days would pass, and the land would not move. Bee grinned at the hardy trees that

jutted from cracks in the walls around them. He placed his finger on his lips, and the world obeyed his order.

A new sound joined the grumbling of the four heavy feet ahead, the rhythmic squeaking of neglected metal and rubber. Pope edged closer to Muller as a felt hat suddenly appeared and skimmed across a low outcrop some way away. A feather trembled merrily in the brim, gleaming suddenly as a shaft of light found its mark through the canyon walls. They stopped, and waited as the creaking hat skidded out of sight once more.

An ancient man with a dusty but well-preserved suit sagging from his wiry frame wobbled into view in the road ahead. Between his bowed legs wobbled a sturdy but uncooperative bicycle, protesting with tooth-shivering screeches against the rutted surface beneath its tyres. His copper face was creased with age and concentration, and a little pink tongue quavered at the corner of his mouth as he fought the machine in a direction it seemed to have no intention of following. His hat appeared some sizes too large, and it regularly slipped over his brows, each time forcing a comical salute from the old man. However the tussle with the hat forced more extreme vacillations from the front wheel, which in turn dislodged the hat from its perch. As he drew near the party, he seemed to grasp the futility of resistance, and let the hat slide onto the bridge of his nose. The machine made a sound as of a spring uncoiling, and halted. The man gingerly released the handlebars, as if unsure of the bicycle's motives; however, all was at rest, and he could turn to the group that stood in his path.

He regarded Pope suspiciously, and glanced at Muller with obvious dislike. Bee nodded, and the man returned the gesture slowly. The pink bud of his tongue slid across his lips, but Bee could detect no moisture on either. Pope was gesturing vaguely at the pass behind them, his arm flapping like the wing of a wounded albatross.

"How far to the district office?" he boomed, and peered at the cyclist as if examining a zoological specimen.

The old man's voice was thin and piping, a bird song slicing through the rich air of the afternoon. "*Wy wil wot*?" Who wants to know? The language of the colonies, chewed and digested, regurgitated through generations and wrapped warmly around the tongues of the Locals. Pope made no effort to hide his displeasure, and began to bluster, but Muller stepped forward quickly. His words were muffled as he spoke earnestly to the old man, but one was unmistakable: *staatzpolitie*. The cyclist quickly removed his hat, and cast his eyes to the road as he told Muller what he needed.

Bee watched Muller, the thin white hands splayed on his hips, his cold eyes devouring the words of the old man, questioning the pauses, probing the leathery face. The grey ghost

was becoming infused with bone and blood, away from the sea and the shifting sand. Muller still looked frail, but there was now an authority in his gesture and bearing that Bee had never seen. *Staatzpolitie*. Muller was gradually coming home to a landscape of fear and triumph long washed from his mind by the bone-white beaches of the Island. He watched Muller remember himself, and could not look away.

Bee's jaw had ceased to burn, but still throbbed dully. Had Muller struck him? Had he remembered it correctly? There had been the shooting, and the fearful rage. But had those white hands summoned the power to strike him down? That was Muller, who drank tea with Regina in the rosehouse and blushed when the boys from Antoine called him an asshole to his back. The man on the bicycle was afraid, grinning like a snarling dog. If he knew of Muller's cat, of the log in the water-tank, the old man would laugh, replace his mutinous hat and ride on, and Muller would remain behind. He would stand fighting the riptides that surged across his flat, broad soul, and be defeated.

But there had been a revelation, the shadows around the ghost momentarily burnt away by that one harsh word, and Bee had been trusted enough to witness it. Muller's past was common knowledge on the island: the activities of the state police ran like a theme through most of the histories his mother had teased him with as a child. But by then she was speaking as a child of Jesus, and the tales were parables, and the *staatzpolitie* mere children who had wandered from beneath the wings of her elderly and forgetful lord. The hand that gripped the leash had changed, but Bee recognised that the dogs had remained the same. He thought of the rock rabbit and smiled. Licensed to kill. The old man would have to endure his fear.

But even as he watched Muller pat the cyclist on the shoulder, saw the old man bow and grasp at his hat as it slid into the dust at his feet, Bee's ears burned. The great bubble, turning over upon itself like a fireball, that had swelled in his chest, was no revelation, no blossoming of any sense of honour. He recognised the lust, and was ashamed. He wanted to kick the old man over, kick him once and walk away with impunity, and the walls of the canyon drew in upon him. As the cyclist wrestled his machine into motion, struggling to gather momentum, Bee tried to picture his father, the young man in the photographs. But the eyes that gazed at him were Muller's, and the smooth young face was white. The old man nodded once more as he creaked and heaved past Bee, and he feared that he would strike the stranger. He would shout: Muller is *staatzpolitie*, and he'll make you nothing because he can. And I'm with him.

imminent arrival in the light. Still she did not emerge, as they approached the dark cave of the doorway.

The Administrative Centre was a single room – not unlike the Cape's police station, Bee realised with tinge of disappointment – but divided by a thin wall flecked by cigarette burns and stains. A small Perspex window, riddled with neat holes, gave a glimpse into the administration area behind. Behind the smoky plastic a young woman lay slumped across a table, her forehead cushioned by a stack of documents. Once more the man spoke, but this time his voice was gentle.

"Beth. I love you." The young woman lifted her head, and Bee saw that her cheeks gleamed with tears. Muller strode toward the window, and as Bee marvelled at his indifference and despised his single-mindedness, he rapped his knuckles on the counter and peered through into the office beyond.

The result was startling. With a force that sent papers and stationery into the air like the eruption of a small bureaucratic volcano, the woman leapt to her feet and groped before her with panicked fingers. The man spoke again – he loved her, would always love her – and was suddenly silenced in mid-declaration. She approached the counter, carefully replacing her glasses over tear-reddened eyes. A smile wavered on her trembling lips, and Bee saw that under the neglected mop of wavy hair and ludicrously inappropriate spectacles there sheltered a fragile beauty that made the drab office seem suddenly a touchingly sad thing. Its dim walls and flickering neon tubes had harboured the woman for hours, perhaps days, and had never done her any justice, or been capable of attempting to. The sad little building clutched at him, and he smiled.

Muller was making introductions, and Pope poked at the cracked linoleum floor with his toe as he looked down his nose from the woman to the office behind her, trying to catch a glimpse of the suitor. Still Muller spoke, an explanation and enquiry of astonishing formality and clarity. The island, the body, Pope's position, all were presented without emotion as the girl blushed and glanced at Bee. Pope could stand no more.

"The man, woman, the man!" he blurted, pointing at the invisible depths of the office. He wheeled upon Muller. "Surely we should be talking to him. A superior, no doubt. We should be talking to him."

The girl giggled but Muller silenced her with a hand, nodding carefully as he considered Pope's suggestion. He spoke again, in the same measured drone like that of a cleric reciting holy lineages.

"Inspector, he will be of little use to us." Pope puffed up once more, a finger already levelling itself at Muller's chest, but the thin grey man continued. "His identity is known to us.

He is doctor Angus Mandrake, brain surgeon and philanthropist." Bee settled on his heels and watched the old man perform. He thought of his mother's home. "Miss Apollo here tells me that doctor Mandrake has mistakenly seduced the twin sister of miss Beth, but as we have witnessed, he has recognised his folly." Pope goggled, his tongue capturing a blob of spittle that threatened to escape the corner of his mouth.

"She has also," continued Muller, bowing slightly to the woman behind the counter, "apologised most kindly – and entirely unnecessarily – for following *Secrets of the Heart* while on duty."

"*Destiny's Desire*..." corrected Miss Apollo shyly through the window. "*Secrets of the Heart* went off three years ago."

Bee's mother had followed the soap operas, already institutions when he was a child. He could remember the embarrassed urgency that filtered through the shanties of Antoine at four in the afternoon. Newspapers were put down, slowly enough to disguise any desire of the reader to be elsewhere, and easy conversations in the shade of porches became stilted, pregnant pauses leading to snatched glances at a wristwatch and a polite farewell. The four televisions in Antoine became altars of worship every afternoon, beer and nuts the sacrifices passed around for half an hour as the state-produced series zigzagged its way through kidney-transplants, clandestine pregnancies and amnesia. Bee had never found himself able to surrender to the gentle ebb and flow of unlikely events, and the daily half-hour had been a time for play with the dozens of children also temporarily orphaned, out in the verges of the forest. They chased butterflies and pelted one another with over-ripe fruit, while mothers and aunts sobbed into handkerchiefs. He could remember clearly the day of the final episode: he had captured a beetle with dramatic antlers and magnificent colours, and guarded it jealously until his mother was ready to be impressed. But Regina had stumbled from the home of Laetitia Monambo, her face a mask of grief and her hands lifeless at her sides. The beetle escaped later in the afternoon, and it was only at dinnertime, after a brief weep, that she turned her attention to her son once more.

"Utter drivel," announced Pope. "For feeble minds and layabouts."

Muller looked through the blustering policeman, and spoke softly to Bee. "Your kind mother was a convert to the television drama, was she not?" Pope wilted visibly, opening and shutting his mouth. "And it would take a very unobservant and unkind man to suggest that Miss Apollo here is in any way idle." He smiled at the woman, his eyes cold and alert. "Miss Apollo," he continued, then nodded to the battered nametag on her old blouse, "or may I call you Cynthia?" She grinned her assent. "Cynthia, I wonder if you can tell us who your supervisor is?" Cynthia Apollo continued to grin, but her eyes dimmed.

"Sorry?"

"Your supervisor." Muller spoke very slowly. "The person you report to."

"I don't report to anyone."

"Are you sure, Cynthia? Think carefully." His hand slipped like a snake into his pocket: the knuckles would be white now, the thin thumb massaging the silver haft like a kitten butting a teat. No, she thought, after careful deliberation, she did not report to anyone: she had been told by a man on the telephone to sit in the office until further notice. She was paid a food allowance and given the television. Muller's smile faded, and Cynthia Apollo shrugged her shoulders and began chewing on hitherto invisible gum. Now she eyed Muller casually, and ignored Bee. The pretence over, he felt his interest in the woman and the place drop away. Once the little cinema screen in the Vineyard had subsided away from its supports, tearing itself slowly in half to leave the illusion cruelly exposed, dancing dull and vague on the grimy bricks behind. Bee looked at Muller and the girl, and thought of the bricks and the gentle ripping sound the screen had made. Muller would extract the information he needed, with or without Cynthia Apollo's help, and Pope would continue his sad pantomime. Time would pass: he slipped out into the light once more.

He walked to the fence, and paused. There was no sound, no suggestion of the sea just below the crest of the horizon. The sky lay massive and heavy overhead, supporting its vast arches on the rocky outcrops that jutted up like chess-pieces all around the little plateau. In his room, fingers and dividers coveting his maps, gloating over distances, he had wondered what it would be like to walk in a direction for weeks and months and never see the ocean. The thought had titillated him, but so abstract was the idea that he had always returned to measuring the miles and skipping away to maps unseen, where cities shone through the night and a boy could plunge into a sea of people, to drown or swim as he pleased.

But here, alone on a little dry lawn on the Mainland, he felt his tether pulling, stretching taut behind him. It lay quivering like a mighty cable on the road through the green rocky basin of the cyclist, down the shimmering pass and through the thorn bushes to the beach. The channel whispered and rippled over it, but could not shift it; and somewhere between the rosehouse and the mountain, it was anchored, buried deep in the white sand.

He looked at the road, winding on towards a little ridge, the lip of the basin they were in. He could walk on to that ridge, leave Muller and Pope in the office and disappear into the heart of the country. The rusty gate opened without a sound, and he began to walk towards the ridge, the silence like a great beast holding its breath. The ridge approached slowly, too slowly, and Bee broke into a trot, a run. Then he was dashing with burning chest to the top of the headland, fighting the desire to look back, afraid that he would see the awesome girth of

the cable that tied him to the sand. While he ran he could not feel it: if he stopped, it would fling him back, onto the lawn of the Administrative Centre, back to Muller's side, and at last back the island. He would run while he could.

The crest rushed at him, surrendered under his feet, and he was standing teetering on the edge of another pass, the road slicing down away along the edge of the cliff that he found himself on. The cable at his back was gone, and he staggered forward, his feet light as the land fell away below him, loose pebbles skidding across the road to drop out of sight where it bent sharply down the face of the mountain. The distance was more than Bee could bear. He shrank back, his knees sagging as he reached blindly for the ground of the little crest.

The interior stretched away, a carpet of grey and green, terrifying in its stillness. At first it seemed a dead ocean, bereft of its tides, its constant advance and retreat, its murmur and roar; but a warm breeze stroked his cheeks, lifting off the land below like a gentle breath, and Bee recognised the silence of sleep.

As his fear drained away into the road beneath him, he knew he could not cross the sleeping land before him. To walk across that ocean was to be watched, observed by distances and rhythms totally unfamiliar to him. He sat on the road and marvelled. He would tell his mother about this place; but she had lived on the Mainland for years. He marvelled that his mother, with her frail hands and muttering lips, should have walked across this terrible wonder before him and not given him the merest glimpse at its majesty.

Bee sat and watched the plain below him, soothed by the whisper of the breeze and the sporadic calls of the swifts that carved the air beyond the road, flying fish high above the frozen sea. He wondered if Muller and Pope had missed him, but the little office seemed far away. Had it been today that they had waded across the channel? He drank in the horizon, and thought of the wrecked aircraft on the island.

8

A spider was crawling over his neck, its long legs probing his shoulder. It squeaked persistently as it prodded, its legs frighteningly strong. Bee struck at it, felt it flatten under his palm, the legs hairy and coarse under his hand.

A little man in a black robe shook him, the clouds of sleep swept away by the sun and the swifts that still stirred the sky. The man was the colour of gunmetal, and the white stripe of his clerical collar was at first the only indication of where the man's skin ended and his robe

began. He squinted at Bee from behind thick spectacles that made his eyes seem tiny specks of light in his face.

"I'm fine, I was just coming," said Bee, and sprang to his feet, his head reeling and his feet a mass of tingling numbness. The man was tiny, no taller than a boy, and he took a step back as Bee swayed to his full height. At last he extended a hand cautiously.

He was Gabriel Fanuko, a travelling minister. Had Bee heard of the Ministry of Paul and the Epiphany? Few people had, in these harsh days. The light of the world was a guttering candle. Was it not always the case with men?

Bee let the priest talk. How long had he slept? The idea flashed before him that Muller and Pope had left him. Eaten by a shark, Muller would tell his mother. And yet the sun had not moved in the sky, and the afternoon was still suspended in the still half-time that had drugged him. He must return to the office.

"Father Fanuko…" he started but the priest pressed a finger to his lips.

"Brother Gabriel." His little mole-eyes twinkled behind their glass windows as he shrugged. "We are all brothers here."

"We're an only child, father." Bee dusted off his buttocks, and turned for the cutting behind them. The priest hurried after him.

"She must be a fine lady to bring forth such a spirited son. You are a fierce young man, and I think you do not love the church." Bee chuckled, and slowed his stride. The priest was perspiring heavily, and he tugged gently at his collar. He grinned at Bee. "I have hit it on the nose. You wish to be a man before you become a lamb."

Bee picked up a stone and tossed it away, over the priest's head. "Don't normally like folks who think they know what Steven Bee is before he's showed them." The feeling was returning to his feet. "Let's say you're right, don't that make you out of work round here?"

The priest shrugged, and polished his glasses on his sleeve. "Who says I'm working? Priests got to piss too."

The slight figure behind him amused Bee, and he thought that it would not be disagreeable to walk back to the office in his company. They walked, the priest sporadically breaking into a jog to keep up with him. Fanuko spoke of the poor who had welcomed him into their homes along his way, the farmers and miners who had struggled at first to remember their saviour.

"They looked at me with the eyes of orphans," he said, as Bee saw the iron roof of the Centre glinting on the little plain below. No-one moved near the tiny matchbox or the yellow handkerchief of the lawn. "They had not forgotten Him, but they had not spoken with Him for so long that they had forgotten how to speak."

They walked in silence then, the priest hitching his robe about his knees and putting in a skip.

"You walk quickly," he said. Bee nodded and walked on. "Your friends are waiting?"

"Not me friends." Muller was not his friend. Pope was nothing. What was Muller? Before he could rein them back, his lips and throat murmured like a night breeze – Just my father. He slowed, almost stumbling. It was pathetic. It was really pathetic. The little black man nearly collided with Bee's buttocks as he spun about in the road.

"How's this, priest?" The thoughts crowded his face, weighing it into a frown. His hands clutched at the air before him as he battled to arrange the faces and times, trees and beaches, which surged into his mouth. "Me pa long dead…" He held up a hand to silence his companion's imminent compassion. "…and I didn't know him, so me don't miss him. But the way I see her, a man wants a pa, just to kick him and let him know he's a man." He waited, and at length the priest nodded slowly. "Right, and if there's only pigshit and women about when he's getting young and big, he's well beached."

"He would seek what they call a father-figure. The Lord…"

Bee laughed, and grasped Fanuko's shoulder. "No statue of Jesus the Crucified ever give Bee a belting when a he needed one, Priest. I'm not one of your orphans." The Centre shimmered gently, and a swallow skimmed the tops of the little shrubs next to the path. Its neck flashed white, and with a touch of a razor wing, it was gone again.

"Want to know something?" he said. The little man was attentive, alert. Bee hesitated, suddenly ashamed that he should open the shutters of his heart to the stranger. But priests and children spoke much and meant little. "If a lion don't want her kittens, they can take them and put them with a bitch and her pups. The kitten he thinks he's a dog, and the bitch, well she don't give a damn either way I think."

"I have heard of this," said the priest.

Muller would be leaning against the counter, looking through the walls of the Centre as Pope prattled. For a moment Bee thought he could see the cold beam sweep across the lawn, rush like something undead across the brush of the hillside before him. The shadow found him, and Bee felt the sudden chill that had fallen upon the landscape. Muller was waiting; he would not leave Regina's boy on the Mainland. Bee felt the vaguest shape of another image pressing against his mind…Muller would not leave him behind. Then the cloud passed from the sun, and the land and sky dozed once more. The priest was still waiting.

"When that kitten is a lion, he could eat that bitch for breakfast no questions asked, no?" Once more the priest nodded carefully, and Bee warmed to the earnest cleric before him. A lost kid on a mountain talking about lions, and still he listened closely. Muller had that

patience, a discipline that fascinated and frustrated him. "Even now he knows the old dog is nothing; even though he's a lion, do you think he sometimes…?"

The priest pushed his spectacles up his nose. Bee knew he had spoken too long, and that Gabriel Fanuko had learned too much for them to be easy travelling companions. But the little man loosened his collar and once more wiped the sweat from his spectacles.

"Mr Bee, I wish to cause you no discomfort, and far be it from me to pry where I am not welcome, but I think we are speaking of you and someone I suspect is in that building."

"God tell you all that?" Bee's ears burned.

"No, Mr Bee." Fanuko became sullen, and Bee fidgeted with a coin in pocket. The building was near as the priest spoke again. "You want to flee, do you not?" The man was a stranger, a name twenty minutes old and twenty away from vanishing forever, and evasions would merely frustrate them both. "Where do you wish to go?" asked the priest.

He could name no destination. "Away. North."

"And do you know what is to the north?" asked the priest, waving vaguely at the pass behind them.

"The Mainland. The cities. I been to the city, when I was a bub."

The priest grasped Bee's wrist. Bee towered over Fanuko, his hand limp and massive in the delicate grasp of the man who stared with gentle desperation into his eyes.

"There is nothing there, Mr Bee," said Fanuko. "Stay. Go back to where you come from with whomever we are going to meet. The Mainland is a ruin. It is a monstrous giant, and it will eat you whole of you journey into it."

"Sodom and Gomorrah, priest?"

"The Sodomites were plentiful. Sin needs numbers. The Mainland is not evil. It is simply empty."

The priest was annoying. The homunculus body walked in fits and starts, the legs entirely inadequate, and it occurred suddenly to Bee that he was still unsure of Fanuko's motives in waking him on the pass. No mention of money had been made, and the little bright eyes, like ripe berries behind their spectacles, held none of the pleading familiarity that betrayed all the beggars Bee had encountered.

The question had to be asked. "You do this for free, for a living?"

Fanuko beamed, and when he spoke the avuncular tone was gone. The priest was off duty.

"Boy, God don't sleep and his helpers also get up pretty early in the morning. You're wondering when this priest is going to lay the finger on you. We're all the same, not so, we

witch-doctors?" Bee let the jibe slide away unchallenged, aware that he was being led down an unfamiliar road by a man who could be badly underestimated.

"Why did you wake me, up there?"

"Heard there was a body at the Cape. There'd be a party coming inland to report it, with the lines down, and since I'm in the body business, I was on my way to your Centre yonder. Hatch, match, dispatch; old joke."

"Body business?"

Gabriel Fanuko smiled and his lips cracked into pink fissures. The breeze tugged at his sleeves. "Mr Bee, a great many people die on the Mainland." He was priest once more: the voice of Gabriel Fanuko was masked behind the kindly tones of propriety and order. "Many of these people die far from their homes, indeed, far from any home. I am too little to fight injustice, too sickly to help the sick, but I have my feet and my eyes, and I can ease the suffering of the bereaved by finding out the fates of their loved ones."

"And you do this for nothing?"

"People are glad to see a man of the cloth. I am never hungry." Bee thought of the body, waxy blue, in the meat locker behind the Vineyard's largest butchery. He hurried for the wire gate, and they were through.

In the office all was silent. Of the Apollo girl there was no sign, and his two companions sat motionless on little plastic chairs apparently placed there for them. At first glance they seemed to be reading, but Pope's head slumped back on his shoulder, his mouth gaping open, and a mighty rasping snore escaped from deep within his throat. Muller lifted his head slowly, his eyes invisible below his hat brim.

"We waited," said the thin voice. "Pope slept and I waited." Muller's voice trembled, and for an instant it seemed to Bee that he was weeping. But the grey eyes were utterly dry and clear when they fixed upon him and the priest. "You have been making friends?"
Bee's companion stepped forward smartly and bowed, introducing himself. Muller nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Many apologies for detaining Mr Bee. I have been prattling to him while he tried to extricate himself and return with all haste to this place."

Muller looked at Fanuko, and at once disregarded him.

"It's getting late," he said to Bee, and nodded to the limp policeman at his side. "Wake him."

The priest skipped forward, his eyes burning as he studied Muller's face. "I missed your name," he said. His face was clear and bathed in a passion Bee could not recognise. Fanuko seemed bound to the grey eyes.

"I didn't give it, brother."

Fanuko nodded, and began to smile. Bee became suddenly afraid. Pope was waking, gasping and smacking his lips, but he too became still as the little priest grinned.

"I did not think you would," said Fanuko. "I have heard that Mr Muller does not give his name freely."

Muller snorted. "Your friends talk too much."

"You are well known. Fondly remembered by many."

Muller turned away disgusted. "What do you want, priest?" His voice was tired and hollow.

"Merely to shake the hand of Mr Muller."

Pope gasped as Fanuko's hand shot to Muller's side, fumbling with the long fingers that could not retreat quickly enough. Then Fanuko was twining his hand around Muller's and shaking it in the intimate greeting of the Mainland, palm to palm and fingers interlocked. Muller stared, immobile and appalled. After an interminable moment, he tore his fingers free. Bee found himself retreating, treading slowly backwards towards the door: Muller's revenge would be quick and brutal, and a terror began to form in Bee that he would see the holy man beaten, the white collar torn and bloodied. But Muller stood unmoving, looking at his hand and at the priest; Fanuko was panting gently, his face damp with a great mental effort. Muller seemed pale in the late afternoon sun, and at last when his hand dived for his pocket, it was trembling. Slowly, like a great tree falling, Muller looked away and stalked past Fanuko. Bee saw that his eyes were full of tears.

"Into the lion's den, and all that!" It was Pope, guffawing with a face made stupid with relief. "I'm a slow man myself, and I know not to grab Muller here. He doesn't like being grabbed. Not at all." He laughed, and looked quickly to Bee for confirmation.

Fanuko watched Muller's back, his eyes gleaming a wild euphoria. His hand still hung suspended before him like an offering. "I shook his hand," he murmured. "I would never grab him."

"There's a fine line, you know," chuckled Pope. "I think you grabbed, and then shook, but there's not much of a, you know, a distinction." Bee knew that Fanuko heard nothing: he knew the look of a man entranced. The old sailors of the island got that look when they walked along the beach and looked to the sea, across the highways and canyons of a life long gone and deeply missed. Muller's dark figure filled the doorway, and then he was gone.

The spell broken, Fanuko smiled secretly to Bee.

"Your lion cub is mistaken, Mr Bee," he said gently. "He thinks he lies with an old bitch. But she is a python, cold and slow. Her embrace is death, Mr Bee, so slow and gentle

that your cub will only cry out when his ribs are pushed through his lungs and the noon forest becomes dark."

"That's horrible," cried Pope. "I don't like that sort of talk. Don't like these horror books either. My wife tried one, and she liked it, but I had a go at the beginning, and I just thought 'Why write something like this?' Anyway lions don't associate with snakes."

"It seems that sometimes they must, sir," said Fanuko with a smile. He beamed at Pope. "Have you ever considered owning a parakeet? They are highly intelligent, and are wonderful listeners, I hear."

They locked the office, and joined Muller on the path. His face was clear, his eyes hard and narrow as he squinted into the setting sun. Gabriel Fanuko apparently had friends, "not far away" – Bee remembered the barren little plateau and wondered how far the priest would walk that evening – and took his leave. Muller bowed stiffly, and Pope asked about the diet of parakeets.

9

The hammering from the beach was unbearable. The idiot had been at it all morning, an erratic clangour that tore at Muller's nerves. Twice he had risen from his chair and spun for the door, but each time the wind had dulled the sound, and he had collapsed into his deep seat once more. If it started again, he would go.

Muller awoke, and cursed his aching knees, the trail of saliva on the stained upholstery of his chair. Like a geriatric, falling asleep like that. He glanced at the window, but the net curtains drifted in the breeze, slowly. A passer-by would have seen only the darkness of the room.

He fed the cat. A small red tick stubbornly rode the animal's ear, and he gently pulled at the soft fur as the cat flinched and purred. He whispered, gentling her, and the tick came away. He thought of Bee. He had struck the boy, on the Mainland: the pass seemed far away, and he remembered the silent march to the sea, Bee's eyes seeing but blind.

The priest was not problematic in isolation; a mild, excitable man, under the illusion that he possessed unique information. But his passion was dangerous. A zealot would not be reasoned with: victory and defeat were uneasy neighbours in a mind like that, with no room for the deep shadows that lay between. He had destroyed zealots in the past, a practical necessity. A fanatical will was no less obscene and dangerous than a rabid snout. How much had the priest said to Bee?

The hammering clanked into life once more. He burst from the house, the cat flying like tumbleweed from the open window, and stormed towards the beach. A Local tipped his

hat to Muller, and Muller grabbed at his own brim, baring his teeth at the man. Do not talk to Mr Muller now, friend. Mr Muller is going to the beach. Beyond the little headland, the wreckage of the aircraft lay arranged on the slipway. Laurels of seaweed lay draped from its prop and trailed into the shallows from a wingtip as the retard swung at the buckled tail structure with a large hammer.

"Emmerson!"

Mercedes slowly lowered the hammer, as if remembering a forgotten engagement, and peered at Muller, putting much of the silver rudder between them.

"Emmerson, you're making a noise." Mercedes looked ridiculous, a monkey-man cowering barefoot behind the silver flotsam, and Muller grinned as his rage evaporated. The idiot was after all an idiot. "You're making a big noise," he said. Mercedes shyly emerged into full view.

"I'm…working."

"I can see that. But your work is a little loud, no? You scared my cat."

Mercedes clutched at his hair, and Muller saw that he was genuinely upset.

"It's a silly cat," he shrugged. "Moths scare it." His pantomime had the desired effect: Mercedes would not become difficult.

"I must work," said Mercedes, and hesitantly began to shuffle towards the open cabin door. Something dawned on Muller.

"Wasn't this on the beach?" Mercedes nodded and licked his lips.

"How did it get here?"

Mercedes regarded his fingernails with slow cunning. He glanced at Muller's face, and Muller felt himself being weighed. Then the idiot's earnest face collapsed into a broad smile. "Pulled him."

"You're very strong."

Mercedes snorted, and flapped his hands at Muller. "With tractor, trac-tor, Muller. We pull him out with chains, and a tractor."

"Why did you pull it out, Emmerson? Who helped you?"

"Your girlfriend's coming," grinned Mercedes, looking past Muller. The child was approaching, Charlotte – Claudette. She stepped across the beach gingerly, apparently willing her soft shoes not to sink into the sand. Muller realised his escape was blocked: he would have to pass the girl to reach the road and the headland once more. He turned to Mercedes, but was met by gleaming fuselage, and a hollow thud from the bowels of the aircraft where the idiot crawled about in his mess. It would have to be the sea, wading through the shallows at the bottom of the slipway to slip around the wreck and away from the child.

Muller fumbled with his laces, and wrenched his socks from his feet. The slipway was savagely rough, and he flinched as the rough concrete snagged a toe, threatening to cut the yellow skin of the long thin feet.

"Are you looking for shells?" The child was upon him, and escape was impossible.

"No."

"Why did you take off your shoes?"

"I had a stone in my sock."

"So why did you take off both shoes?"

Muller glared at her. "You ask too many questions. It is very rude."

"My grandfather says you are quite a queer fox."

"Does he?" The pilot would have to be observed.

"But I told him I thought you were nice."

Muller wished the child had not spoken. "Have you enjoyed your time on the island?" Still there was no sign of Mercedes. He wondered if he should call for the idiot, but the fuselage was silent.

Claudette shrugged and curled a bright lock of hair about her finger. Muller watched the finger, twisting like a dancer in a silk robe, and thought of his wife's hands. They had been no larger than the girl's, and the little finger on each hand had curled inwards. The runts, she had called them. The child's hair gleamed like water in the sun.

"It's not boring. I still want you take me up the mountain, before I go."

"When are you going?" Muller berated himself for the rude ambiguity of the question: the girl would be offended, too young to know that her presence on the island was insignificant. It was the pilot who must be monitored.

"My grandfather says the next plane will come in a week."

"And then you will fly out?" Claudette shrugged again, and bent quickly to examine an oddity in the sand at her feet. She did not wish to be pressed.

The girl was relaxed, pleasant in a crude way. As a conversationalist she was redundant, as her opinions and observations were not yet half formed; and her trains of thought were ragged, frustratingly disjointed. Yet this same gentle anarchy put Muller at ease. Claudette knew nothing of him, and he wished to know none of her traits: in that moment, he was glad that they were companions.

Muller stepped carefully onto the beach. The cool mass of the sand crushed like an army of aphids between his toes, and he fought the urge to step back onto the concrete. His soles were stretching – not without pain, he realised – into contours long rendered impossible by black leather shoes and he watched, entranced, as the sand rose like water about his feet,

the powdery beach busily burying his toes. Muller shuddered, jerking a leg into the dry air, but the beach pressed its attack with renewed vigour on his other foot.

"It's only sand," said Claudette. Her smile was warm and uncomplicated, and Muller returned it without thinking.

"I haven't walked here for…" A lifetime? The twenty years of solitude, the dark rooms with his wife's curtains rippling in the night-breezes: years ago Marconi had told him he was a sleepwalker. The crude Italian was new to the island, and had spoken imprudently, but the humiliating truth was that even the newcomer had seen it. Life had had little to do with the years of watching and listening.

"Not since I came here with my wife." The island was a green and golden bed, a bower whose sole reason for existence was to celebrate the most beautiful woman ever granted a man. She had walked down the beach, and he had lingered to watch. Her legs, slightly knock-kneed, pushed her across the grabbing sand like the wings of a swan, and her buttocks swayed beneath – had it been a robe? A sarong? – slow as the palms that flirted with the breeze. She turned, her broad straw hat curling down over her neck and shoulders like the petal of a tropical flower, and winked at him over her dark glasses. He had run to her, clumsy as a schoolboy, and they had been married for a lifetime.

Claudette stared dully at the old man, squinting in the glare. Muller saw her big front teeth as her lip curled back. "Doesn't she come here any more?"

"She's dead." It was an apology, Muller thought. I'm afraid she can't come to the telephone now, she's dead at the moment. How hollow a state of affairs, that an officious speck of a word should try to negate the garden deep inside him that flowered at every conjuring of her face and smell. Dead to the world, perhaps, but he touched her every night, whispered to her and sang to her. *Don't put your hand in mine: people will say we're in love.* "She passed away about twenty years ago." Twenty-one years and four months.

Claudette wilted. The child did not know how to respond: the pat condolences of adulthood were years away. In their place Muller saw deep embarrassment, and a sudden recognition of the solitude he had made his friend. She was remarkable.

"You must have been very sad," she said at length. Muller laughed, and nodded. He had wept just once, when he had found a shopping list under her dressing table. The maid sent by the church committee after the funeral had thrown the list away, and Muller had blundered to her little home in Antoine, his hands clenched and his eyes blind. Her round face, luminous with terror as he lifted his fist to strike her, had woken him from his fever dream. Weeks later he had apologised, and the same neat little woman had come back to move about the house like a silent beetle, scouring it clean and opening the curtains.

The hammering from the wreck started once more, and Claudette leaned to Muller.

"I've found a special place," she yelled. Muller's knees began to ache, and the sun was slashing down onto his ears. He chided himself for allowing the child to force herself upon him as she had. He looked at her open face, entirely self-centred once more as she gloated over some find on the island that Muller was sure to know. Had she found the rose-house? A cove along the sandy Southern shore? Claudette was a child, and Muller wished once more that Mercedes would emerge. He began to edge past the girl towards the road.

"It's magic." The hammering ceased for a moment, and her words sliced clear across the beach. Muller flinched and glanced quickly towards the little headland. It was deserted. He began to walk, fighting the damp knots of his shoelaces.

Surely she was old enough to interpret his manner? He resented the uncomfortable position she had forced him into: aware enough to be wounded by a slight should he walk away, yet still too stunted to pre-empt the situation by keeping her peace. He must not offend her. He walked on.

"I wonder if you took your wife there." Muller stopped, steadying himself. Suffer the little children, Regina Bee would say. That a little girl – no weightier than a sheep – should be so wanton with words and worlds that she had no claim to: Muller listened to his breath and stared at his toes to keep himself from the surging blood in his head that made the horizon tilt and heave. His toes were ugly. Her toes had been stunted, like chipolata sausages. The wind behind his ears died down, and the beach – his shoes under his arm, the child, Mercedes – returned to him. Claudette had never seen his wife's toes: the girl's words held no power, for she spoke from ignorance.

"I must go," he said. "Please do not speak of my wife again. You do not understand why, but I know that you are a good girl and will do as I ask."

Claudette nodded, and though it was the slack bobbing of a bored child, Muller was sure as he walked from the sand onto the hot gravel of the road that the girl had seen the vaults behind the words, and that she would on no account mention the morning or its subjects again. She was remarkable, for a child.

Marconi did not seem perturbed at the absence of his labourer as the wind beat at the shuddering boards of the *Happy Dragon*.

"He listen when he want, so why I keep saying 'Come now, come then,'?" He dismissed Mercedes with a decisive deflection of his moist hand. "He no worry about his job, so I no worry about him."

Harry Orange poked at the shrinking sliver of ice in his drink. "Kid's got no discipline. No respect."

Muller thought about the beach, the shimmering glare of its white ribbon. When his wife had stepped across the shadows of the palms, the strip had been an exotic boulevard. It had seemed wider, then.

"When last did you go to the beach, Harry?" asked Muller. "I went down there today."

"Don't care for the beach," muttered Orange, shifting on his stool. "Dirty. Gets into your shoes, hair, mouth, for Chrissakes. God knows what you'll stand on as well. Needles, dogshit. No sir, not for me."

Surely the girl was unusual. Her unduplicitous offering at the beach had unsettled him, certainly, but in itself her conversation with him was fairly conventional. Had he been questioned – why did he still feel that he had been interrogated? – by a boy, he would now have his answer. The child would be easily dissected. But this little creature, so unwomanly and yet nothing like the dull, scuffling boys of his own youth, was obscure to him.

"What do you make of this pilot fellow?" asked Orange before his little frame was battered by a fit of violent coughing. Muller's eyes scanned the hanging skin of Orange's face. Had he met Claudette? Harry Orange was not appropriate company for Claudette.

"He talk big," said Marconi. He drew an imaginary six-gun from his side and sauntered toward Orange. "He taak the taak, but he don' waak the waak. Guiseppe Marconi, Gary Cooper, there is no difference."

Orange peered at Muller. "What do you think?"

The pilot's personality was irrelevant: the forced gruffness of the man on the afternoon of his arrival had revealed him as remarkably weak and therefore easily manipulated should the need arise. But another scenario had been forming itself in Muller's mind, taking shape as slowly as the hands of his clock crept from yesterday towards tomorrow. No efforts had been made to contact the charter company that operated the monthly flight: the pilot, Muller knew, spent his daylight hours peddling war-stories to the Locals and civil servants in the Long Street. The man's inactivity was perplexing: if the next flight was indeed scheduled to arrive within a week, cargo would have to be arranged. Official mail, packages, medical samples and specimens, all the minutiae that crammed every returning flight to the Mainland, would have to be marshalled and processed. And yet the cogs that creaked into activity a week prior to each flight were silent. The island's administrative building, a sprawling compound of face-brick and dust-grimed glass in the High Street, lay still and cool, its linoleum-swathed corridors deserted and gleaming.

The pilot was malfunctioning, Muller was sure. When the relief aircraft arrived, the situation would clarify itself. There was one further possibility, of course, but Muller shied away from it. The conflicts of the Mainland had rumbled on like aborted rainstorms on the horizon, but the aircraft had always come. The relief would come in a week, and the pilot would be on his way. Claudette would go with him.

"Excuse me, gentlemen." Muller rose to his feet and left the men at the bar.

The beach was deserted. The wreck was silent, Mercedes gone to play his game with Bee in the relative cool of the afternoon. On the High Street there were the usual respectful nods and half curtseys, the mild disgust of the young civil servants, their plump cheeks gleaming like melting chocolate under garishly designed spectacles. But of the pilot there was no trace. Surely she would not accompany him to the bars and gaming rooms in the cramped little buildings? He had cut her loose, even tried to palm her off like a puppy. She would be walking, her thin legs dusty and her limp hair ruffled by the wind.

He scanned the grassy plain as the buildings retreated behind him. The tarmac crumbled into gravel, and he was out under the sun, with the mountain sending a probing shadow towards him. She was not on the path towards the forest.

He set out blindly, his breath shallow as his ribs were cemented together by fear. She must not go into the forest by herself. The beach, she should have stayed on the beach. He should have gone with her. He lengthened his stride, teetering on the verge of a trot, his knees jarring and his chest on fire. The child must not go beyond the forest.

Muller stopped and palmed the slick nape of his neck. Was this old age, the surrender of reason and dignity to a gross behavioural drive that ended in incontinence and death? It seemed unlikely, as all his other faculties were apparently intact. It was certainly not the effect of the child. Claudette had impressed by being superior to an essentially crude set of peers. He knew nothing of her desires or hopes, and was glad of it. Let the girl wander. Her hair would gleam in the sunlight for an instant before she stepped into the green labyrinth of the forest. The lichen would stifle her tread, and the great dripping leaves would enfold her as she stepped further into the rank heart of the wood. Muller shuddered, and turned for the Vineyard. He was regaining his breath, and a little breeze teased his tie. The child would be safe.

The crumpled envelope, wedged ineffectually under his door, mocked his efforts and for an instant he hated the cruelty of the girl. Muller's cheeks burned as scanned the street, his eyes flicking from doorways to windows. They, she, would be laughing, surely. But the street was asleep in the heat, and only that cat intruded, grinding herself against his shin and

demanding swift entry into the house. He pushed it away with his foot, and the cat slumped against the mat and carefully tended to its inner thigh.

She was innocent of course. He had made no pact with her, and she owed him as little explanation as he owed her. And yet the envelope angered him: he could not understand it. Brazenly she had marched to his home, opened his gate and forced the envelope under the door. Perhaps worse, she had knocked before leaving the letter. She had spoken to him as an equal, and he had not rebuffed her in terms obvious to her childlike sensibilities, and so she could not respect him. And yet Muller regretted that he had not been at home for the knock.

The hand was broad but not unattractive, a unique script a century away from the hideous flat hieroglyphs that marked all the products of the Mainland's schooling system.

Dear Mr Mooler
This is an INVITATION for you to come to the
Magic Place I told you about on the beach.
from
Claudette
(Secret code for when and where on the bottom!!!)

In a painstaking mirror image – Muller saw that she had erred with reversing the en's – Claudette instructed him to meet her at the end of the High Street on Thursday afternoon. Tomorrow? No, the following day: the week slipped so easily into driftsand when the aircraft's routine was disrupted. He folded the paper into a tiny square and tossed it into the refuse. *Love, Claudette*. She would learn: if only she had learned already. Muller sank into his chair, his fingers fumbling for the turntable.

10

The small room smelled of chemicals Muller could not identify. Clean and acrid, the tiles blazed white under the flickering neon lights. The body was grey, its lines swelled into bland curves and suggestions of contours. The pilot licked his lips and continued poking the soft stomach of the corpse. Bee continued to stare at the ceiling with clenched teeth. The boy shared none of his mother's faith: death was ugly and final to Steven Bee. The way it was meant to be, how it had once been. Muller wondered why the boy lingered.

The pilot pronounced the corpse that of a solider. The coroner, a bulky man with a short-sleeved white coat straining to contain his girth, scratched notes behind his clipboard. Sauvage was a blowhard, quick with a bogus anecdote – their brief and fruitless second

introduction en route to the morgue this morning had confirmed this to Muller – but the pilot was possessed of a certain animal cunning that only experience could have produced, and Muller listened for the explanation.

"Fat rolls, mate. Three meals a day on the Mainland, you're in the army." He grinned at Muller, messily chewing gum. His gleaming fly eyes were unblinking, the lights flickering from the dark glasses that the pilot seamed to wear at all times. Sauvage tongued the gum into sight and whipped it back again. "You did service, right?"

Bee was still clinging to a point on the ceiling; Muller pulled the coarse sheet over the body. He turned to the coroner, and advised him to account the man as a military clerk.

Sauvage spat his gum into the steel bucket beneath the table. The coroner regarded Sauvage with tired eyes, and gingerly pushed the bucket out of site behind a trolley that gleamed with blades and clamps.

Sauvage said, "They say you were quite a cowboy."

Muller was pleased that Bee had returned to the group and was carefully wiping his moist face on his sleeve. The pilot went into a laboured account of his exploits. Helicopters, impossible odds, sentimental farewells with wounded comrades. Muller turned to sign the stained papers offered to him by the coroner, but his mark was hurried, spilling over the neat line drawn for his benefit. Bee's skittishness was more than a squeamish nature. His great eyes clung to the drawn features of the pilot with an intensity that perplexed Muller.

"They say you were security branch," said Sauvage. "That true?"

"Yes, yes…" Bee needed nothing and no-one, and Muller had been given no reason to believe that the boy's original disdain for the pilot had softened. What sway did the grizzled-haired wastrel hold over Bee's mind? It was impossible. Sauvage was weak, and the boy's instincts were beyond suspicion: he would have weighed the stranger, found him wanting almost immediately. At best Bee would have devised a way to exploit the pilot's weaknesses (a gentle prod, a delicate slap: Regina's child had the gift but wished for nothing and so it was all in fun). At worst, he would have ignored Sauvage entirely. No, the boy was exploring a landscape still obscure. Muller would wait and watch, and Bee would betray his motives at some stage. Perhaps Muller could even assist. He did not enjoy the pilot.

Sauvage was grinning at him. He saw himself, small and bulbous, reflected in the green lenses, a patient visitor to a run-down freak-show.

"People around here think you're rude," smirked Sauvage. "But I know different."

"Do you, Mr Sauvage?" Bee was beside himself. The boy had betrayed him entirely, this much was obvious. It was not disappointing: he had slipped into a mantle surprisingly

akin to grief twice before, on the beach as the boy's hopes of escape were finally crushed, and on the mountain pass. Bee had never been his, and he had never pretended to be Bee's. It was an unavoidable consequence of his relationship with Regina that both parties should have begun to imagine bonds where there were none. Muller was gratified to learn that the inevitable betrayal aroused nothing but deep embarrassment.

"Need-to-know, china," said the pilot. "You're not rude, it's just that everything is need-to-know." He chuckled contentedly. "What's wrong, Muller? Afraid we won't understand?"

"Fear has nothing to do with it, Mr Sauvage. I'm confident you will not understand. It is of no importance."

Muller stretched his fingers, feeling the stiff joints burn and relax. He would find Claudette. They would – chat. The thought filled him with defiant glee: Muller and Claudette, *chatting*. He brushed past Sauvage and saw Bee squirming at his side. Muller's hands snaked forward like the killing probes of the deep-sea squid that would turn to grey pulp in the fishermen's nets, gripping the boy's broad shoulders.

"How are you, Steven?" The reaction – confusion, shrinking suspicion – was pitifully predictable. The death of his wife had thrown Muller into a perpetual hour between night and dawn, a grey time when depth was negated, endeavour was delayed and memory was practically irrelevant. How much sooner that dawn would come if Steven Bee could stand unmoving – a smile would not go amiss – in the brief embrace of a man who loved him. It was embarrassing. The anarchic freedom of the moment was crushed once more by the four white walls of the room and the bored disbelief on the mouth of the coroner. The actor's mask has slipped and the illusion is shattered, leaving the provincials to regard only themselves and the flyblown sandbar that they cling to. To hell with them. To hell with Steven Bee.

The boy scrambled to a sorry posture of nonchalance, shrugging or rolling his eyes, Muller did not remember which.

Claudette was gone when Muller reached the street corner indicated in the mirror-writing. He waited, scanning the road and the few shopfronts. Surely she would not have left after just – a quarter of an hour? He would wait another ten minutes, for then she surely would have arrived or else returned. Muller wiped his palm on his trousers and leaned against the rickety street sign.

Twenty minutes later, she had not returned. Muller asked the nearest storekeeper – a sailmaker with no teeth and a maniacal twinkle in his tortoise eyes – if the girl had come yet. The ancient weaver gummed his lips and tapped his head.

"Know what, Master Mooler? I can't see difference between me wife's face and me dog's face these day. True was the same when me marry him fifty years ago!" He subsided into a wheezing laugh that soon cracked into a racking cough. "Bless her!" He righted himself, and assumed a more earnest air. "No, Master Mooler, only way I knowed it were yourself entering me hestablishman were your delightful fragrance of what we in the trades call haftershave. But me ask me ladywife what manner of thin' been waitin' for you on the corner." He bellowed over his shoulder, and a grey mop of hair poked through the curtains in the shadows at the rear of the shop.

"Wife, Master Mooler here -" The mop bobbed frantically – "want to know if a white girlchild been waiting for himself outside the hestablishman."

"*Jaar, amormyjn. Se hat buit gewys. Halbuur gelyd.*" The pidgin was broad and rich, and Muller remembered heat and willows on the Mainland. The sailmaker licked his lips and began translating, but Muller cut him short.

"Thank you, I understand. Half an hour ago. You and your wife have been most kind."

He would wait another ten minutes. If she had been earnest in her invitation, she would come for him. She would know he was a busy man, and she would return for him to show him her magic place.

The sailmaker waved cheerily late in the afternoon as he slammed the shutters closed on the small shop-front. A squadron of terns was beating its way inland, and already the cliffs of the mountain were becoming clouded by the wheeling shapes as they returned to the lone beacon jutting from the plane of the sea.

Muller turned for his home, his eyes hidden below the brim of his hat, his hands deep in his pockets.

She was waiting for him outside his house. Muller shrank back against the line of wooden houses, where he could watch her unobserved. The cat was whoring itself to her, arching its thin body and scraping its cheeks against any protrusion – fingers, knuckles, knees – that it encountered. Claudette smiled and chattered to the cat, oblivious of her surroundings as she enjoyed the soft urgency of the animal that craved affection.

Muller cursed his frivolous fantasies: the child on his doorstep was entirely incapable of engaging in the banter he had craved in the morgue. She had bent him to her will outside the sailmaker's shop, and he would be naïve to believe that her presence outside his door was a piece of childish whimsy. She must be sent on her way. If, however, she was allowed to remain, it must be entirely in the understanding that she was a passing guest, and an inconvenient one at that.

He stepped into the road once more, and Claudette beamed at him. Would she like tea? It was all he had. He waved roughly. The cat eyed him and once again set about butting the girl's hands and arms.

"Why did you hide over there?" she asked, and Muller reddened.

"I was not hiding. The wood-beetles have taken to that house, and the extent of …" She was smiling at him, waiting for the joke to be revealed. "What do you want here?"

"I came to see your cat."

There was nothing more to say. Should he step over her and leave her to the animal? She clearly had no intention of making a social call – how could she, child that she was?

"Would you like to come in and have some tea?" He would sit in his chair and watch the door if she remained outside. He would listen to her prattling in any event.

"Yes," she said, and stood up neatly, depositing the cat at her feet. "How did you get her?"

"I tried to shoot it and I suppose it decided to stay." Claudette laughed and stroked the animal with an educated foot, and Muller was pleased that he had amused her.

He was not a romantic: Harry Orange's sporadic maudlin and sentimental observations about Muller's solitude were ignorant and very wide of the mark. Pining was as intrinsically futile and vulgar as weeping. Orange, Marconi, none of them would understand the truth of the matter.

She had died on a Tuesday, after what the gazette termed a brief illness. The week of watching her drift into a world where he could not follow had not seemed brief. He held her hand, spoke her name, read to her from her favourite novels, and in her better hours she had smiled at him or whispered painfully of arrangements to be made, family members to be contacted. Muller had shut his ears and felt her soft hand in his, and plunged back into the pages that had lulled her to sleep as a young woman, delighted her in later years. He had fallen asleep, in the small hours of a clear and still day, and she was dead when he lifted his head. Her little lips were slightly parted, and her hand lay limp and curled on his arm. She was staggeringly beautiful, and Muller looked at her until the doctor made his call at mid-day.

He knew death: it was abrupt and meaningless, a line that straightened after wearying hours of twitching and waiting. Half an hour before the moment the paperwork would be prepared, or destroyed, depending on who was about to disappear from the world. But her moment had not been an ordinary death. She had not died, as all the other men and women had done. She had held his arm, and pushed gently off on a barge, keeping the land of her life in sight until it drifted into memory and forgetfulness, and then she was gone.

A few letters and telegrams of condolence had come in the weeks after, as he sat in his chair and wondered when she would be coming home. Some were curt with embarrassment, and he valued their brevity. Others floundered through stumbling sermons, celebrating her reunion with God and the angels. He should not feel shy about contacting friends, for talk and time healed all. (Neither had healed her.)

He was not unaware of his reputation on the island. Even the pilot, a stranger to the rhythms and silences of the Cape, had remarked on it. As a boy, Muller had lived in an apartment next to that of an old man who was widely thought to be a deaf mute. The man would take his morning walk, cane in hand, and wander down the busy avenues of town as if scouting a rough beach on an unnamed island. Muller's peers, cocksure, raucous and safely bunched behind the fortification of the ornate school gates, would call and whistle – the bravest would perhaps dart up and tug the plodding figure's coat tails. None would admit it, least of all Muller, but they were deeply afraid of the old man, his silence making him an exile but also the emperor of a world where the children were not only meaningless, but were non-existent.

Now he understood. The old man had not ventured away alone, as the imaginings of the children insisted; he had merely been left behind, time and circumstances picking off those who had filled his life with sound. There was simply no-one left to talk to. In Muller's case, there had only been one precious other, and his passage into silence had been as sudden as her death. Regina Bee was incapable of conversation: her kind enquiries and suggestions never required an answer, and Orange, Marconi, the older civil servants were only good for mild diversions. The boy Bee had a mind, but Bee hated him now, that was quite clear.

It was not problematic: the branch of his attention that was once dedicated to interpretation of frivolity had atrophied, giving his more important faculties space and time to flourish.

Company, however, would not be unpleasant.

11

Claudette's reaction to his home was understandable, but he was nevertheless ashamed as she stared with appalled fascination at the empty rooms before her. To her he was a freak: she would never wish to be his companion.

"Would you like a biscuit?"

She had not heard him, so focussed was she on the desolation around her. Muller flushed, and repeated the offer. Claudette dragged her wide eyes to his face, and he had to look away.

"Yes please." Released, he turned for the kitchen.

The horror was complete when he found the biscuits. The box was rank with mildew, and just one square lurked in the soggy depths of the packet. Muller prodded it with a finger and the biscuit parted damply around his fingertip. He glanced desperately at the doorway, lest she see his groping: she was gently stroking the back of his chair, whispering to the cat. Would there be time to get to the store for another packet before she realised how the situation had derailed?

He began to rifle through the cupboards, finding and discarding cans of *Happy Kat*, pushing years of grocery bags out of the way. Claudette laughed behind his ear. He was revealed.

The child held the biscuit in her fingers, her face a parody of disgust as she laughed. Muller lunged for her hand, his shame complete. She shrieked and wrenched it away. The biscuit sailed gently across the little room, splitting like a two-stage rocket, and thudded into the wall.

Claudette clamped her hands over her mouth, her eyes wild with glee and apprehension.

"I'm sorry…" she whispered, staring at the cluster of soggy crumbs on the wall, and then a great shuddering laugh burst through her fingers. The cat skidded through the window, and turned at a safe distance, quickly observing the scene before examining its paw amid the blackjacks that wobbled in the wind.

"It doesn't matter." Muller groped for a cloth, dizzied by the chaos that had burst into his home. *This* was why he shied away from company, this superficial anarchy that was so unnecessary. "I'm afraid that was the last biscuit." Claudette giggled and wiped her fingers on her dress.

She would remember the visit as an absolute failure: he would remain in her mind as a pathetic hermit, provisioned with decaying confectioneries and expensive cans of cat food. She must leave, as quickly and quietly as possible. She had drifted from the kitchen once more, and it seemed that the biscuit was forgotten in favour of renewed antics from the cat beyond the darkness of the house. Muller quickly removed the last crumbs and thrust the marshy remains of the packet into the refuse.

"What was the place you wanted to show me?"

She flounced to the chair, slumped against it and gave an exaggerated shrug. "It was nothing. I found someone else to take."

Surely she was lying: the care taken on the invitation did not suggest that she would drop him so easily. "Who did you find?"

"I don't think you know him."

"I know a lot of people, Claudette." It was gratifying that she still considered him limited.

"He's nobody." She was blushing. Harold Phillips, the ten-year-old son of the postmaster, was a dashing youngster with large eyes and a blonde cowlick that he brushed aside expertly in the presence of ladies. He was sure little Harold was the object of desire.

"Did he enjoy it?" Phillips was undoubtedly charming, but Muller doubted that the magical yearnings of Claudette would make much of an impression on a mind dedicated to marbles and crudely animated television programmes.

She was fingering the turntable, flipping the heavy disc back and forth. He quickly brought it to a stop, and she put her hands behind her back, irritated but chastised. "We haven't gone yet," she said. "He was busy." She nodded at the turntable, her hands still clamped together behind her. "What's that?"

"It's for playing records."

"Have you got any?"

"Look under the chair." It was deeply satisfying to boast to the girl. He felt young for moment, and wished that he had something more impressive to boast about.

Claudette gave a small cry and surfaced clutching the ragged cover, Rex Harrison looking bored and lascivious next to a doe-eyed Julie Andrews. She thrust it at Muller. "It's my mother's favourite."

"Your mother has good taste."

"I only see her every half a year."

A reaction would not only be inappropriate, but entirely beyond him. He carefully blew the dust from the scratched vinyl and settled it on the turntable.

"Which one shall I play?"

"The horse-racing one, Ascot."

They listened to the tune in silence, Claudette mouthing the words without conviction, and when it was over, Muller lifted the needle.

"Which is your mother's favourite?"

She puffed out her cheeks and crept into the chair. Muller stood very still as she slid down in the seat, her delicate dress pressing into the folds and hollows made over a thousand

nights. Her little hands spread out over the armrests and she wriggled to get comfortable: he suddenly feared that when she stood up, her dress and fingers would be soiled from where they had touched the familiar leather. She was still protesting her mother's lack of judgement.

"The worst one on the whole CD." She pulled a face. "*On the Street Where you Live*."

Her objections were vague, but revolved mainly around the apparently non-negotiable fact that the tune was too sentimental. Her stumbling tirade was childlike in the extreme, and Muller wished fervently that she would fall silent.

"Shall I play my favourite?" He would, of course, not play his favourite. That was for nobody but himself. "Do you know *The Sound of Music*?"

Claudette rolled her eyes. "They show it every month on TV at home. I saw it when I was a child."

"They showed it here at the Cape two years ago." Muller had burned with disappointment when the children of the island had laughed, thrown crumbs and sweet-wrappers at the flickering screen. Some of the older boys had wolf-whistled whenever there was an embrace or a kiss. To confront them would have been entirely out of the question, and he had clutched the arms of his seat until the lights came on again.

The old speakers hissed and crackled, and then a single guitar string hummed into the room, and Muller was happy. Claudette began to hum along as she recognised the tune. *Edelweiss, Edelweiss, every morning you greet me...*

"It's pretty," she said when he lifted the needle. "You like that one?"

He did like that one. If he had written a song, it would have been *Edelweiss*: on the rare occasion that he thought with nostalgia of his life on the Mainland, the song made sense, the ache of longing and the pride in a duty henceforth rendered obsolete meshing easily with his own memory and heart. The entry of Maria and the children ruined the ending, of course: American sentimentalism was unavoidable. But for a time Muller thought it excellent indeed.

Claudette sat in his chair, but with the novelty of the turntable dissipated, the hush of the house settled about them. Muller watched her, his mouth dry: this stage of the visit had been the only variable he had not had a finite idea about. The panic of the biscuit had not been an intrinsically problematic event, for it was merely part of the introduction. Indeed, he was glad in retrospect that the shame of his dismal hospitality had catapulted him through the first terrifying hurdle of the visit. She had laughed, and they had progressed into the calm waters of polite social intercourse. But now the moment loomed that he had – for so long! – been able to evade. There would be no comic relief, no flurry of activity to soften the shame of her inevitable departure. He cursed his foolishness for having believed the visit would be a success.

And yet, the child was exceptional. He had denied it, ignored it, tried to explain it away, but she had lunged where others would feint. She remained where all the others had departed. Looking at her now Muller saw that she was bored and yet she showed no indication of wanting to leave. The implication struck him like a blow to the throat, and for an instant he thought he knew what it was to have a daughter.

He must not speak to her: the girl seemed a transient creature brought into his room – had she entered through the front door? – by the silent evening, and a word, a whisper, would almost certainly crush the cocoon of unreality and drive her away. Let her sit in the chair – remain in his house – while he fed the cat, washed his mug, read his books. If she remained, Muller knew, it would be the beginning of something immensely sad. He thought of his wife.

"What do you think counts as a boyfriend?" asked Claudette, and Muller reluctantly conceded, returning to the girl in the chair. "Is it a boy who is your friend, or is it a boy that you like?"

"I don't know." The language of fickle affection was distant to him, and nearly impenetrable; and yet he had once wondered what Claudette wondered, before his age and his wife made it irrelevant. He would try, for the girl. "It depends on the boy."

"This one isn't my friend…" She blushed. Dull Harold Phillips was a lucky boy. Muller wondered if he had ever blushed over.

"So he is the other kind?" Claudette teetered on the edge of a confession, her cheeks burning; but when it seemed that she would reveal her heart's desire, she shrieked with laughter and hurled an imaginary missile at his head. Her timing was immaculate, leaving the retraction late enough to lure him into believing she had lost mastery of the situation. Good girl, clever girl. "When are you going to show him your special place?"

She shrugged, poking the arm of the chair. "Maybe tomorrow." Then she said, "My grandfather says I have to stay here until my father fetches me." He cast wildly about the room as the walls seemed to draw in upon him. Where would she sleep? She could not stay. It would be disaster, beyond question, a catastrophic, exulting, beautiful calamity. He wanted to sing. "I'm going to stay with Mrs Gerber," she said. "She said I could."

"Good. That will be pleasant. Mrs Gerber is a kind woman." It had been an easy mistake to make. The clarification was a relief, surely. The widow Gerber would suit perfectly. Muller made for the window, apparently to observe the cat, and gripped the sill tightly. It was definitely a relief, and yet he was afraid. How quickly he had leaped at the words, in an instant mapping out the room, a cot bed, a little chest of drawers, all without question. The pilot – confirmed as a suspicious character – was abandoning his charge on the

island, and yet Muller had played house. She must never return to his home with her magic that bent logic into pretty fancies.

He gently ushered her out – an engagement, he told her – and watched her walk slowly into the heart of the Vineyard as the magenta mists of the sea rose to meet the deep purple sky.

Later, when the vault of stars shimmered overhead, he returned to the chair. He closed his eyes and smelled the leather where her head had rested. She had left no trace. She would not return.

12

The pair moved slowly along the sandy path, the man treading carefully as the wind twisted dust and leaves about their legs and tugged at their clothes, while the woman, bent and wrapped in bright shawls, pointed out some disturbance in the heather beyond the path that ran down to the rocky coast. A swell surged in from the wide ocean and burst gently, pinched into disarray between two bulging granite outcrops studded with baked sea-snails. She exclaimed, her voice torn away on the wind, and clutched her hooked hand to her breast as she talked with her companion. The rocks streamed, glistening, and then they were green and secret once more as the next swell surged into the little bay. Her companion stood motionless, his eyes shaded by a fading broad-brimmed hat. He allowed her to claw at his arm and listened as her red ragged shawl fluttered in the wind.

They began to move once more, the wheelchair ploughing gently through the hot sand of the path. A particularly delightful view – perhaps a wave, perhaps a reflection in the emerald deeps by the rocks – elicited an exclamation of joy from the woman, and her cry was snatched up and carried by the gulls that rode the gusts, creaking and squalling. The man quickly glanced behind them as if to confirm their solitude on the path. Reassured, he bent his ear to a fresh observation from his companion.

At the sea, Regina Bee was happy. The transformation was dramatic and gratifying and Muller never tired of watching it: the weight of her piety, a back-bending mass of painful needlepoint and whispered prayers, was discarded like a shroud when the first salt breeze teased her wrinkles. Regina had grown up in the shimmering white hinterland to the north, he knew, and decades on the island had never blunted her joy at the ocean's moods and flirtations. The wheelchair was clumsy, its thick rubber wheels sinking into the track, but she was light as a bird, and she drove him onward.

"That's him, dear! Rollin' rollin' up she mountain! Use them strong arms, Mr Muller!" She laughed, and grasped at her skittish shawl. "God *bless* them, Mr Muller!"

A fragile white shark-boat shimmered in the distance, and Regina pointed it out as he secured her chair at her customary view point. The little shelf of rock, conveniently level off the path, commanded a fair vista of the secluded bay and the ocean beyond, the western headland and the last houses of the Vineyard obscured by the skirts of the forest, the hardy milkwoods coming down almost to the waves themselves. Out of sight below their feet the sea tugged at the shore and boiled emerald and black.

She gazed at the horizon for a time as Muller wiped his neck and buffed his shoes on the back of his trouser legs. Then she sighed, and beckoned him to crouch at her side. Her preamble had become a ritual: the mood having been measured, Regina was entirely absolved of her immortal duties, and could turn to worldly responsibilities. Momentarily she would reach into the folds of her clothes and say –

"We got something for the boy. She's not much but can't hurt." He wondered if it had occurred to her that her words were the same every time; but he knew that the secret details of these meetings over the bay were not a place for self-reflection. Regina Bee was in communion with the sea and the future of her boy. They would wash past her some day, and at best her ritual could ease her mind when that day was at hand.

The regime could still afford to be generous to the widows of its young lions, and the wads of bills Regina produced – neatly folded inside a spectacle case – were of high denominations. She did not enjoy handling the money, and she held the paper gingerly as if it was unclean. Muller took it quickly, and showed his hands to the old woman like a magician performing for a child as he swiftly counted the wad into two amounts. One he replaced in the spectacle case, the other he folded and carefully placed in his jacket pocket.

"The boy going to have enough, one day," she said as if to reassure herself. The boy already had enough. Muller had long since ceased to feel any qualms about peeling off a single bill from the pile. A transfer fee: pushing wheelchairs along sand tracks was no easy task. Regina kept no books; the boy had only a vague notion of his wealth, and Muller kept the cat fed. A comfortable arrangement.

Freed of her last duty, Regina Bee jabbed her fingers at the sea. "Tell it again, Mr Muller!" she cried. "Tell us 'bout the sea oceans. You do tell it like it was your own thinking." She devoured his halting explanations about currents and tides, of the deeps where the sun was a rumour. Flying fish, waterspouts, giant squid locked in mortal combat with crusty leviathans, every shred he could remember from the musty picture books of his boyhood was met with vigorous nodding or outright disbelief.

"Fline fis'! Like birds in God's sky. You wouldn't believe such a thing if Mr Muller hadn't seen it." He had once tried to reveal the source of his information, but she would not

allow the truth to erode the majesty of the creatures that lurked in the green kelp forests of her imagination.

Would Claudette have read the same books? If she had, a similar lecture for her on – The Wonders of the Watery Kingdom, had that been the chapter? – would reveal him as a fraud. Would a little girl share the old woman's illicit pleasure at sitting atop a sunny rock teetering on the edge of an abyss of weight and decay? He hoped that she would not. In the unlikely event that Claudette found herself where Regina Bee now crouched, he must relay only the most intriguing items: flying fish, and perhaps a synopsis of the luminous mouths of the depths, but the work of the currents would almost certainly hold no sway over her imagination.

"Mr Muller fline like his fish!" cried his companion, and he chastised himself as she patted his arm. "The old hen cluck-clucks and Buzzard get teared up from the she-chook's chattering and fly 'way."

"You do yourself no justice, Mrs Bee. Your company never tires or bores me."

The lines on Regina's face spread like evening shadows across a secret desert as she smiled. "Such sweet lies can't be heard by our Lord." Muller felt the soft pressure of the money in his pocket, and was ashamed.

They made their way back slowly, for the fragile woman was easily tired, and she sat slumped against the hard wooden armrest of her chair, her breathing deep and regular. She frequently winced as the chair became bogged down or ran across a stone, but all enquiries into her comfort were met with cheerful stoicism. Her cheeks were drawn, and she cradled her hands in her lap.

The craters and potholes in the short tar road to Antoine could be easily avoided, and her mood improved as the first shanties of the settlement came into view between the thorn-trees that bordered its south perimeter, a buffer against the wet south wind that came off the sea. The Locals, riding empty jerry cans or worm-pitted rocking chairs, watched Muller.

When he had found out why the Locals stopped to stare, why the children called their playmates to leave the dogs and gawp at the pair, he had fought a great fury. He had fired a full magazine into the ocean, his rage dissipating with the splattering swells, and soon he had begun to enjoy the fizzing wake of bubbles left behind by the bullets as they curved to a standstill in the green water. It had been obvious, in reality, and he decided later that he had reacted out of shame for not having realised it sooner. They came not to watch Regina Bee, wife of their martyred prince; nor did they crowd the battered porches and dusty square to see a white man, nervous dark eyes and beaky red nose twitching from side to side as he walked deeper into the gaze of a hundred eyes apparently ambivalent but undeniably hostile. They

came to see a white man wheeling a Local woman home; and most shameful, they came to see Muller sweat behind Regina Bee.

But now the novelty of the occurrence had worn away, and Muller's northern kingdom was a ruin, details of a crumbled state's agenda forgotten and replaced with the broad and inaccurate strokes of popular memory. He could watch the watchers who still observed lazily, and now found time to engage in banter, for Regina's benefit.

Martin Anjari and Melker Kwingila kept their heavy-lidded vigil; indeed it seemed that they had not budged since their last encounter. Anjari raised his hat to Regina Bee, and Melker Kwingila nodded listlessly, but their salutation was met with a flustered indifference that told Muller that Regina and he were watched once more, and she must carry herself as she was expected to.

"No-good idlers," she muttered, loud enough for the men to hear and yet entirely for Muller's benefit, as she spoke in his language and eschewed the tongue shared by herself and the allegedly incorrigible dotards on the porch. Muller met Martin Anjari's gaze.

"Mrs Bee was wondering when you're going to get some work," he called, and Regina fiercely patted his wrist and urged him with muffled intensity to ignore the degraded pair. Anjari cracked his knuckles audibly, and shrugged.

"Soon as Mrs Regina Bee want to let me smell her roses." Melker Kwingila chuckled soundlessly at his side, baring yellow teeth. "Tell Mrs Regina Bee anything she need doing, she know where Martin Anjari keep house."

Regina pinched her mouth tight and stared resolutely at the road ahead as Melker Kwingila explained what he considered the best moments of the exchange to Anjari, who accepted the flattery with good-natured equilibrium. The pair drew on their pipes, and let the afternoon wash over them. The white man and the Queen Bee were past, and there were skyscapes to be observed.

The rosehouse shimmered in the wind, a teeming incarnation of scarlet. Bees scrambled between swaying petals and over wagging stems, hanging for a moment beyond the overgrown windows before being obliterated against the dark curtain of the forest by the gusts that swirled about the pair on the path. A heady swathe of fragrance rolled over Muller and was gone, leaving a suggestion of sickly sweetness.

"Need me to do any pruning?" he asked.

"What was that, my dear?" Regina Bee's voice was weak, the exertions of the day's adventure at last allowed to take their toll as they neared familiar and comfortable surroundings. The roses glowed in the afternoon sun, and Muller pressed on silently.

The portrait of Bee stood in the lichen-floored passageway like a sentinel. The laughing eyes followed him as he manoeuvred Regina into the darkness of her home, and he quickly placed the picture flat on its cupboard. He would replace it when he left.

"Our boy don't treat you right, Mr Muller." She could not have seen; a remarkable coincidence. But Muller quickly propped the picture up: the photograph was poorly exposed, the glazed eyes gazing away at places and times secret from himself. The boy only looked carefully when he was unobserved. Reveal yourself while watching, and he was shrugging, loping to a prior engagement with nobody and nothing.

"We didn't know about aerioplanes, where we grow up," said Regina at last after carefully arranging a rough blanket over her lap. Muller lowered himself into the sagging armchair opposite her, stroking the painstakingly knitted cover flat under his thigh. The roses tossed outside the little window, sending red shadows dancing on the wall where her wedding picture hung; a grey and white blur, yellowed through time, and yet the jaw and the shoulder of the young man were unmistakeable. "One aerioplane did fly over of a day, Boss Lewis turn us children out of the schoolhouse and point and say 'The end of God's world, up there.'" She chuckled, and coughed abruptly. "Boss Lewis should have looked to God's earth better: keen old puffing adder bite he socks one day, and his wife burry him by the sheep-pens."

Deep in the house a small clock chimed four. The last stroke hummed to nothing, and Regina wagged a finger at the kitchen. "Mr Muller's labours are not done, no boys. He knows where the tea doings is and he hands is cleverer than Regina's." Muller stood stiffly.

One of the mugs was less stained and cracked than the rest, a sky-blue goblet adorned with faded images of a royal couple with pinched mouths and lidded, bulging eyes. He held it to his nose, but the lettering had long since swirled down the rusty kitchen sink. Regina Bee was singing now, and the formless keening of a Local hymn filled the house like an extraordinary mosquito: at funerals grief and praise were indistinguishable. Muller recalled the eternal granite buttresses of the church of his boyhood, a fortified citadel dug into a hill of wild grasses. In the autumn their yellow waves would break hissing against the walls, and he remembered the black suits and dresses of the adults moving like ravens through a cornfield as they shuffled – infinitely relieved – towards their stately chrome and leather motorcars. (Steven's father had worn a cross about his neck: in the final moments the great broad hand had sheltered it in an oyster of knuckles and nails, and they had been unable to prise it free when all was over. Muller had requested that the ornament be returned to Regina, but the request had not been acted upon.)

The wind died down, and Muller heard the cries of seabirds over the house. Allowed a temporary respite from the tormenting gusts, the roses outside the narrow chink of window in the kitchen glowed translucent, their petals revealed as delicate networks of veins and tissue. Then the forest began to murmur once more, and in an instant the wind was upon the house and the blossoms reeled again.

She chastised him gently when he returned. "We were talking about aerioplanes, Mr Muller."

"We were, Mrs Bee, before you kindly suggested some tea." He watched her, and saw that the reply had not gone unnoticed.

"Our aerioplane gone to the boy's head," she said, brushing away the impudence of the white man with a hurried flick of her fingers across the rug on her knees.

"Which aeroplane, Mrs Bee?" Muller watched the teaspoon in his fingers. "There are no aeroplanes on the island."

"None that won't ever fly again," she shrugged. "That same one, Mr Muller, that same wreck up the beach." Muller stopped stirring, the spoon poised like a silver buoy in a murky pond. "No more cricket in the field, no more diving for ray-fish, the town folk tell us. Just spend all she time mooking and mopin'. With poor Mercedes Emmerson."

"I have seen Emmerson at the wreck, but I did not realise your boy had any interest in it."

"Lord knows why, Mr Muller. Hammerin' at poor old aerioplane as if she hadn't been hammered enough in our storm." She smiled, enjoying her joke, but a shadow passed over the lines of her face, and the lips tightened once more over the teeth. "The aerioplane won't never fly again, can she?"

He could not remember that she had ever clung to the boy. Muller had even considered the possibility that he had been unwanted, and certainly in the early years of motherhood she had been casual enough to ignite the temper of the boy's father on more than one occasion. Her subsequent rages were vicious and self-righteous, and the young father bore them with stoicism and regret, and promised to spend more time with the baby.

And then he was gone, and with him went the implacable and volatile young woman. Muller was ignored, then tolerated, and one day – how clearly he remembered it now! the slow swaying walk towards him as his ears burned and his eyes bored holes in a package of soup in the small grocery – she had spoken to him, called him "Mr Muller".

The question of the aircraft's airworthiness was not a new one to him. It had been the crux of his sentimental musings after the storm, and while his initial observation of the condition of the aircraft had almost certainly been influenced by his desire for the machine to

be utterly smashed, later reflection – objective analysis, he reflected triumphantly – had put the question beyond doubt: the aircraft would never fly again. The material needed for its repair would surely not be available on the island, and furthermore, Claudette's grandfather had abandoned the wreck completely. Regina Bee would not be left alone in her old age. It comforted Muller.

"The machine cannot be fixed, Mrs Bee."

"Boy needs time to settle he belly. Otherwise, like a fly to a candle." She sat in silence, massaging her knuckles.

"Would he be on the beach now, do you think?" Would he stand on the little bluff and deride Bee, pointing and jeering like a child? Would Bee embrace him, declare that his whim was cruel and futile, and would they endure a sentimental moment of tears and silence and redemption? He would watch Bee and all would be well.

Regina was wagging her fingers at the window, as if arranging an intricate accusation in her mind. "No, Mr Muller, the boy got other plans this afternoon." She scratched behind her ear slowly, and made it clear that she was coaxing a memory from a very deep and dark corner. "Steven gone…babysittin'. In the forest."

The two secrets, so familiar where he had treasured them side by side but apart, could not be reconciled as Regina's words crackled over him. As one advanced, the other retreated like opposing magnets. Bee was baby-sitting in the forest, and the girl was with her grandfather – not her grandfather, for he had abandoned her. She had been abandoned, and would be walking, in the forest; and Bee was elsewhere in the forest, with a small Local child. A sulking toddler, its nose crusted green and its trousers damp, was watching Bee with an accusing eye. It made Muller smile. Claudette was with her grandfather. She was uncomfortable in the room, for the pilot was ignoring her but had forbade her to wander, especially to the forest and its emptiness. Not even Bee was in the forest, for he had decided to take the infant – a cousin's new baby – on a slow walk in the sunshine of Antoine. Soon now Steven would appear, grumpy and footsore, at his mother's home and Muller would watch over him. Claudette would walk along the beach and dream of Harold Phillips and his unruly hair. Perhaps she would still be there now. Harold would be with her, no doubt.

"He gone with the girl," said Regina Bee. "The white girl-child. Said he been invited along by her. Think she fancies our Steven."

Muller stood still for a long time. He looked at the roses outside the window as they revealed scarlet-framed glimpses of the forest beyond.

"Are you well, Mr Muller?"

He spoke slowly, and with great precision of diction. "Thank you, Mrs Bee. I am quite well." He slowly bowed, stiffly, and took his leave.

13

Ghostly drifts of sand curved across the beach and hissed over the steel skin of the aircraft, and Bee quickly turned his back and let the gust whip his ankles and calves with a million pinpricks. The tall rudder creaked slowly to leeward and a strange part of the machine clanged softly in the depths of the tail unit. Then the sand was gathering once again, regrouping and turning back for the shoreline, and Bee danced to spare his legs. The rudder groaned again and then the wind was gone.

But beyond the little breakers that flopped listlessly onto the smooth white no-mans-land of the gleaming shore, a squadron of terns was riding the gusts, hanging tremulously on the wild air, keeping their dagger bills relentlessly aimed at the sea with a touch of a wingtip or a careful trimming of an elegant fantail.

They fell in silence, neatly folding their wings away to plunge unheard through the sucking surf; the neat white shock of their dive would gleam in the sun and disappear into bubbles and swells. Their meal swallowed or lost, they clambered back to the light and their intangible perch, posing and poised for the next kill.

Bee watched them rise and fall until Mercedes emerged from the cockpit. Emmerson looked nervous, repeatedly clutching at his ragged fringe and licking his lips. He jabbed a finger at the scaffolding that seemed impossibly thin where it squatted over the aircraft.

"When your family coming, Bee? They coming soon?"

Bee shrugged. It would never work. A hundred men could strain at the dead weight of the aircraft: the sand held it and it was only a matter of time before the sea claimed it. "Soon, boy, soon."

He cursed himself that he had not disabused Mercedes sooner. Now his companion was in thrall of a promise he could never fulfil. It had seemed as easy as elementary carpentry in the disembodied days after the storm: a tractor, a lever, hours of panel-beating and many rivets, and they would be skimming across the bay in the silver bird, a mighty toy with Mercedes at the helm, and Bee to watch the water become a rock-hard blue smear beneath them. But the wing unit had seemed rooted to the clutching beach, and when at last it came free with a shuddering metallic screech, Bee had known beyond doubt that the aircraft would never fly. He had known that it would not, but as the metal screamed and protested, he knew that it could not.

Mercedes had never hesitated. Bee marvelled that the prospect of a small flight over the island, nothing more than a prolonged bounce, should have supplied such inexhaustible fuel for Mercedes's passion. The aircraft had been dragged onto the slipway, a week later the wing unit had lain by its side, and now the moment of disillusionment had come. The scaffold would buckle, as had Mercedes's first attempt at creating a carriageway to roll the wreck further up the slipway. The wing would drop like a two-ton knife onto the little sausage body, and Mercedes would stand twisting his hair, tears in his eyes, his mind stumbling at each diagnosis of the failure of his calculations.

They began to drift towards the slipway in groups of three and four. The six rangy sons of his mother's sister, the Elingara boys, loped up the shoreline like wading birds, and their garrulous tones rose above the wind and the sea. The polite Joseph brothers, Samuel and Elijah, appeared unobserved at his elbow and whispered a greeting, their eyes refusing to meet his own. Then there were others, boys and young men known only by reputation and sight. He waved them closer.

His cousins burst onto the slipway, all speaking at once as they slapped him on the back and jabbed Mercedes in the ribs.

"She yours, Steve?"

"We goin' to smash her up, Steve?"

"She got an altimeter? How high she go?"

Mercedes, master of the wreck and sole technician, addressed the group as he glared at a point on the ground. Briefly he glanced at the circle of faces, to reassure himself that they were listening and that they understood, and then he let his gaze drop once more. Tony Elingara laughed at the plan, but his brothers remained silent and his derision was subdued by their earnest faces.

The Joseph brothers proved by far the most dextrous in securing the half-tyres around the lifting points on the wing unit. The rubber semicircles, dragged from the scrap heap beyond the Vineyard and neatly stacked by Mercedes, were bound in place against the leading edge and between the flaps with lengths of chain borrowed from Marconi – "Maybe someone lock you up and throw key in the sea!" the barkeeper had bellowed as his reclusive assistant scuttled into the sun, jingling like a winter carthorse under the weight of the chains.

The pair worked silently and with an unbidden fervour, securing the tyres firmly before hurling themselves to the opposite end of the wing unit where it stood on its wooden supports. A squabble broke out as to who should drive the tractor, with Tony Elingara demanding that as the elder he should drive it. Gift Elingara, peering anxiously out from behind massively thick

spectacles, cited his experience of driving the tractor in the charcoal works on the slopes of the mountain. Bee was watching the birds once more when Mercedes suddenly stepped forward.

"Elijah Joseph drive. Tony and Gift shut up and pull." The nominated driver glanced at his brother, and the two briefly touched hands, a silent congratulation and celebration. Serene as a saint, Elijah Joseph stepped carefully through the group, his eyes on the tractor and the glories of its steering wheel and accelerator. He would drive it well, he decided.

The supporting chains, stretched across the wing like a spider's web, met somewhere near the middle where Mercedes and the Joseph brothers had linked them through a great iron ring – the ruined foundry would no longer miss it. The ring would be lifted by the biggest chain in Marconi's stores, a rusting maritime monstrosity with a cruel hook at one end and a convenient loop at the other.

The scaffold swayed dangerously as the great chain was led through the pulleys and over the beams that would keep it out of the way of the labourers below. Bee wondered when he should call a stop to it all. There would be bodies beneath the wing, under the scaffold, and their simple pulleys and chains would certainly fail. Failure was realistic, but injury was unthinkable.

Samuel Joseph would ride the wing onto the fuselage, ready to call out should any of the supporting chains threaten to shift or worse, slide off the tyres and start cutting or bending any leading edges. The tractor was fired up, and a gout of black smoke choked the boys on the slipway before the wind obliterated it and the wreck was clear once more. The engine roared, and the boys wiped their palms on their legs and hovered eagerly like boxers sizing up an opponent.

Mercedes stood for a moment with his hands clasped behind his back, a general wrapped in the heady airs of destiny, and regarded his troops. Then he gave a great wet sniff and waved impatiently. "Go! Start! Pull!"

The gnarled chain began to tighten, and the craggy ring rose jerking into the air. Bee thought of a gallows. He called out to them to stop, but the words were unformed and the bellow of the tractor cancelled his efforts at once. The wing would fall. Samuel Joseph rode it like a horseboy of the mainland, light and ready to tumble nimbly from his gleaming saddle. Below, they braced their brittle shoulders and arms against the rust of the poles as the framework began to tremble. The wing would fall.

Once more he stepped forward to order an end to it, but the boys crowded him out, their backs forming a jostling rampart that silenced him. They grasped at the great silver beam as it came free from its bed; and Bee was transfixed in the white heat of the sun as the flaps momentarily blazed with fire, hurling the reflection across the beach. Sand and grasses

showered their heads, and they laughed and called to Samuel Joseph to look to the chains, the chains! But the chains were holding, the rubber forceps bound immovably to the edges, and the wing was taking to the air.

Now they were under it; and it had not fallen. White eyes and teeth shone madly through the grit and thistle that crowned them, a roving band of woodland brigands stealing the comb of their dark queen. They yelled and jostled as the wing turned lazily under the red-brown ring. Bee began to watch the scaffold, and for the first time that day he hoped it would not fail.

"Hold! Hold!" commanded Mercedes, and Elijah Joseph tramped on the pedals to bring his brother's ride to a temporary end. "Turn her!"

Bee was walking, running, into the gleaming heart of their joyful sweating and fumbling. The ring, the scaffold would hold or be damned, and the wing would rise today. He kicked a pair of buttocks before him, and the throng closed around his shoulders beneath the gleaming weight of metal overhead. He pressed his hands to the dimpled metal; it was cool as sand is before the heat of the day has set the insects dancing and made the beach shimmer. He began to push.

With the ponderous majesty of a wheeling pelican the wing swung across the fuselage Samuel Joseph began to yell, but his instructions came down to them like droplets echoing in a rain tank. He began to pound on the wing above, and Bee wondered for a giddy moment if the tyres were slipping. He pressed his hands against the metal and pushed on. The pounding moved to the starboard wing, then paused, and then they could hear Samuel Joseph's small hands and feet pattering towards the port side. The hammering started once more, and Bee knew that the rubber supports and the chains would hold.

"Listen for the noise!" he yelled, and the boys began to shout. "Shut up your mouth! Listen for Samuel Joseph!"

Painfully the wing swung; slowed; stopped without surrendering the compelling force to turn again, and then it was inching onwards, like the compass of some gargantuan sailing vessel, guided by the pounding of the boy who crouched above in the sun. One foot too far, the momentum pulling the metal from fingers below, and he beat the rivets with his burning hands and watched the creaking scaffold and humming chains.

Slowly, slowly, their wing ceased its rotation and hung across the body below. The shadow of a cross fell on the beach for a moment before the wing drifted away from the right angle. The boys fell silent one by one as they became aware of the weight poised over their tiny bodies. Now they could hear the scaffold creaking, the iron ring singing like a forge as the

chain strained across its smooth bit. The wind was heard, and sand hissed into the wing and between their teeth.

A cry filtered down to them from above, and the boys looked at one another and at the baking beach. Samuel Joseph was screaming now, and then he sprang into view, arms and legs splayed in a mad leap for safety. His shoulder hit the beach, and Bee saw his head slam into the white sand, eyes clenched shut and teeth bared in the moment of impact; the boys were crouching and lunging for the glare beyond the wing, their thighs bunched and their necks a mass of tendons like bundles of reeds, as if a nightmare creature of lashing coils and needle teeth had surged from the sand in their midst. Their eyes bulged, wild and desperate as the terror of the soft sand unmanned them: feet were drawn down, toes buried and teased and their flight would not get under way before the weight and shadow pinned them broken and suffocating to the beach. Some swore, some began to cry, the strangled prelude to a sob, and Bee said, "Go. Go." Then they broke like the opening of desert flower, surging to safety as the invisible chains overhead cracked and hummed and the wing shuddered. The tractor bellowed into life, and as Bee threw himself free and plunged his hands into the hot dryness of the beach he saw Elijah Joseph fiercely wiping tears from his eyes, dragging his gaze from his brothers to the gears of his machine.

Then they were free and safe, the churned beach below the wing the only evidence of their floundering flight. Still the wing hummed and creaked, and the chains ticked and clashed as they cut at the scaffold. Samuel Joseph was pointing at the rusted beam of the main trestle and crying, "It bent, Bee, it bent! She was bending."

The boys began to whimper, and then to laugh. Tony Elingara carefully raised his middle finger at the gesticulating boy, like an archer taking aim at a distant mark. They giggled and looked at Bee, and Bee relented and joined them. Samuel Joseph's urgent hands were becoming still, and he scratched his head. "Really looked like she was bending, Bee."

"You know all about bending, don't you mister Joseph," said Bee, steadying his voice, and the boys hooted and slapped their knees. Bee wished they had not laughed, that he had said something else. He turned to Mercedes, who stood motionless and perplexed by the slipway. "Trying to kill me and me family?" he called, and boys giggled once more as Mercedes blinked at them.

"Why did they stop?" He took an impatient step towards them, and hesitated, reaching for a lock to worry. "Why did they stop? There is…no problem."

"Sam says she was coming down."

Mercedes looked at Bee for a long time and chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. "Tell them to get under it. The supports go in. The supports go in. Then we shift it across,

balanced." He flapped his hands at the structure, as if he hoped to cast the schematics into the air for them to see. The boys were losing interest: the beast of the wing had been outsmarted, and the humdrum mechanics of propping it up in preparation for its final shift into place were proving a disappointing end to a good day's diversion. They looked at the dozen empty oil drums that Mercedes wanted propped under the wings, then at the gleaming waves, green and gentle. To slip under their gentle tug, to kick up towards the light from the sandy bottom, that would be fine, thought Bee. But the boys were watching him: a smile, a nod, and the project would fail at once. Its ultimate failure was guaranteed, he suspected, but Mercedes would be broken by defeat so early in his campaign.

Tony Elingara gave a whoop and dashed for the sea, stumbling as he struggled out of his ragged shorts. He paused in the shallows to turn a wild grin to the boys, gave his buttock a smack that made it ripple, and plunged into the swells to emerge glistening and spouting fine spray in the calm waters beyond. The boys began to edge away. Some looked at Mercedes defiantly, and tossed their shirts away onto the beach before sauntering towards the waves where Tony Elingara cried and cajoled. Others smiled cautiously at Bee, helpless as they backed away from the scaffold, gathering speed and gaining voice as their awkwardness was washed away by the prospect of the waves and the sun. The Joseph brothers remained, Samuel fighting tears of shame as he glared accusingly at the scaffold, willing it to bend and vindicate his terror. Elijah watched them from his mount on the tractor and tried to catch the eye of his brother.

Mercedes looked dully at the gang of shrieking youths in the waves, and licked his lips. He held no malice for them, for he had not expected more; but Bee flinched when his friend turned his eyes upon him. The hurt and self-reproach so familiar to him in their conflicts at the bar, in the bush over a thousand lunch hours, was gone, and in its place Bee found only utter, objective contempt. The scorn of a man like Muller could be turned delicately aside, even reflected back for it served a purpose and carried an emotional payload intended to harm. But judgement and intention were absolutely absent from the empty gaze of Mercedes. He saw clearly, and the clarity of his disdain unnerved Bee. Slowly Mercedes turned and began to walk up the slipway.

"Where you going? What you want us to do, Mercedes?"

The little figure turned, dark and heavy against the sky. His voice was flat. "You know. Easy. You do it."

"I stayed!" yelled Bee. He wanted to slap the fat cheeks, choke a cry from the slack neck. "We stayed! Where you going?" Mercedes walked on. "Where are you going?"

The boys in the waves popped up like a colony of alarmed otters, straining to see the scene on the slipway. The retard was heading towards the Vineyard, and Steven Bee was unhappy. The wing, hanging motionless from its scaffold, flashed the sun into their eyes and the beach became blotched and vague.

"Don't you walk away from me," breathed Bee, and then he was shouting and running at Mercedes. "Don't you walk away from me!" The retard regarded him distastefully for a moment, and then Bee's shoulder slammed the wind from him. The pair grappled on the jagged concrete of the slipway, jerking and lunging as they fought for finger holds in the fat, the hair, the testicles of their opponent; but soon their feet and elbows were bloodied on the vicious barnacles that festooned their battleground, and they began to reel like falling men, fingers clutching at bunched shirts and hesitant fists probing for a jaw line, gentle blows willing gravity to spare them the rending concrete.

Finally Mercedes cried out, and slumped to his haunches, grieving over his brutalised toes. Bee let fell a final cuff, and looked to an ugly gash on his heel. He licked his thumb, and wiped the wound clean. The skin parted, first ice and then fire, and he watched new blood surge to the surface and spread into the creases of his foot. Bee thought of the bony attack dogs at the power substation on the north end of the Vineyard, all foam and rage until their chains clanged taut and they stood, marooned in no-man's land by their instinct to rush and shock.

"Look what you done to me feet, Bee," moaned Mercedes. "Look." He pointed at his toes and his lip quivered. "Killed. I will lose three. Three toes at least." The boys stared at one another, the tall figure lifting his heel like a resting flamingo, his square companion peering into a dark and unjust future of seven toes. Bee began to laugh, so that the Elingara brothers paused in their violent gasping games and gazed unsure and hushed at their cousin. He laughed until his heel dropped onto the slipway, and he cursed, tears springing into his eyes, the metallic taste of pain clogging his throat.

The afternoon had drifted towards the western horizon, and the squadrons of terns were gone, replaced by the mangy gulls that relied on circumstance and sharp eyes as they skulked across the dazzling pan of the sea, their shadows flitting like a piratical flag beneath them. The sun bronzed the swells, and the wild grasses, the vanguard of the bush, trembled in the breath that came warm and fragrant from the slopes of the mountain.

Mercedes slept with his head on Bee's lap. The aircraft ticked, cooling as the scent of hot leather and oil faded into the sky. The broken scaffold cast a shadow web across the beach; but it had held long enough. Samuel Joseph's limp hand flapped from the doorway of the

aircraft, as a fly settled on his flaring nostrils. His brother lay against a wheel of the tractor, his arms gently cradled in the smooth curve of the hub. The boys slept, and Bee looked at the wing above them, stern and unwavering as the arm of a cross above the silver aircraft.

14

Muller's water tank was empty. A single sunbeam, crashing through the shrivelled canopy of the thorn trees overhead, sliced the darkness of its damp recesses in half, and the log that served as his seat was revealed in part, deserted. A dove glided into the gloom of the tank, and soon it struck up its liquid burbling, a pleasant monotony in the heat of the morning.

Sauvage did not have the eyes or the initiative to explore the possibilities of the tank, and stood instead in the hissing grass out of their way, his grizzled head dazzling in the light. Bee was aware once again of an abrupt wave from the figure, but gave no sign that he had registered. He pounded the earth at his feet with the makeshift bat and watched Mercedes trundle towards him.

The ungainly delivery stride, off the wrong foot, the weight toppling to one side and the crooked arm coming over, all frustratingly amateurish to a worshipper of the form of the game; and yet ball after ball floated to him and landed fizzing and spitting in the no-man's land of indecision eight feet from the bat. To stand and wait was fatal, the soft leather sack humming back into his legs or away to the ever-vigilant and immaculately skilful cordon of fielders they had agreed stood around them, years ago when the game had been set in stone between two boys. No, the spinning top must be dispatched before it could do any harm. Bee was moving as the ball looped into its graceful arc, an eager quickstep like a poacher rushing to silence a yelping catch in his snare. For a joyful moment the ball squatted still and impotent on the ground, but even as he watched and the bat whipped down from above his shoulder, he saw it dart away from him.

The impact was satisfying, and yet the timing of the stroke had been destroyed by the guile of the bowler, who leapt into a fierce pose of vigilance, arms splayed and tongue tasting the air. In the custom of their arrangement, Bee trotted after the ball. The hot sand scuffed his heels as it crept into his shoes.

The direction of his errand carried him towards Sauvage, and once again the old man hesitantly raised his arm. The shirt was dirty, dusty and unpressed; and not for the first time Bee considered the possibility that Sauvage was in the middle of some sort of degeneration. But the white hair was still fiercely shorn, and Sauvage's gaze was unwavering: coarse and unseeing as the day he arrived, but no less focussed.

The sand was hot on his fingers as he lifted the ball out of its grasp – a shapeless lump, no more aesthetically pleasing than a potato – and flung it high into the air for Mercedes. His friend settled under the plummeting blob and clenched his eyes shut, fingers grasping at the sky. Inevitably the ball thudded into the sand.

The call, a pedantic cry of panic, surprised him when it came. Sauvage moved more quickly than Muller, this was certain. The grey ghost watched and watched until his intervention came as no more of a surprise than a change of season; but the pilot plunged ahead. He envied the man's crudity and the world in which it could survive and prosper.

Sauvage was grinning patronisingly, and gave a small and entirely redundant wave. "Got a minute?"

"Mercedes don't like being disturbed."

Sauvage glanced with undiluted resentment at Mercedes, who stood impatiently slapping the ball from one palm to the other, his hips slumped to one side in an exaggerated suggestion of long-suffering. Sauvage attempted a conspiratorial smile. Between you and me, old man?

"He won't mind if we talk some, will he?"

"Maybe I'm minding."

"That's no way to talk to someone whose plane you making free with."

Bee grinned and shrugged. "You think you can do a better job, you go to it." Mercedes began the long walk across the scrub towards them, his hand holding the ball limp at his side. "We done here I reckon."

They walked back through the swirling streets of the lower Vineyard, canvas awnings flapping like manta rays over dark caves of doorways and trails of sand hissing across shop windows. The ravages of the storm were still evident, exquisite miniature dunes burying the bottoms of lamp-posts and piling up against the town's telephone booth.

A board had come loose on the roof of the Happy Dragon, and Mercedes at once became oblivious of their progress, rolling the ball to Bee before clambering with unnatural speed into the lattice of canvas and girders that provided the establishment's unique roof. They heard the sharp enquiring voice of Marconi as Mercedes grappled with the creaking board. The door opened and the Italian came out, wagging finger first, and they left the squat figure to his scolding.

In the baking gilded canyon of the High Street the wind was rendered powerless. Solid wooden doorways with brass knockers stood unmoved, and across the cobbled streets the gusts could shift only stray sweet wrappers, torn from the dump beyond the town and flung toward the mountain overhead like novice butterflies. Sauvage's hostel – a bland and

relatively new establishment – was dark and cool, and the floor creaked reassuringly as they stepped out of the wind. The country's flag – striking and colourful as a child's drawing – hung in a lush sweep across the dark mahogany bar-top, and the plump, detached features of the State President gazed at destiny and history beyond the warping panes that turned the world outside into an ocean of light. Sauvage jabbed a thumb at the portrait.

"You think he's still in charge?" It was not a test: Sauvage was too vain to venture out of himself to set the snares that Muller delighted in. It was an unselfish warning, an appeal from a man struggling under the burden of a deadly secret. Bee remembered the priest and the plain of the Mainland.

"Why we here?"

"You don't hang around, Steven." Sauvage turned and shuffled through a galaxy of dust motes, the pinpricks of light falling dark in his wake before swirling into new constellations as he passed. He passed beyond the sunbeam that filtered through a high window, and sank into one of two deep leather armchairs, arranged around a small magazine table, which formed a convenient waiting area beyond the reception desk.

A stair creaked behind him, and Bee turned. He recognised the massive shoulders and slack jaw of Emmanuel Cupido, now apparently a porter at the hostel: Cupido had possessed a tame monkey as a boy, a pedigree that had thrown the boys together on more than one occasion, freaks to be whispered about, envied. Sauvage sat, a hand raised, interrupted in mid-summons, and Bee flushed with a shame he could not explain that Cupido should see him so – why had he come? The white man led him as if on a leash. He did not care what was said in Antoine – his kin were excitable and limited as sheep – yet he had an urge to take Cupido aside, gently and urgently explain to him the necessity of keeping his news to himself. Cupido ambled forward, wiping his sleeve across his eyes.

"How you keeping, Steven Bee?"

"Same way, same way," said Bee. "You?"

"How's it looking?"

"How's Engine?" The monkey could not still be alive; and Cupido smiled ruefully.

"Had a good long run, Steven. Got the cancer ten year ago and died." Bee found himself grinning, as if told a wicked anecdote.

"Bananas, Manny. Watch them bananas." They laughed, a sound leached dry of humour through the years of gradual separation, and yet comforting in the alien darkness of the wooden room.

Sauvage cleared his throat obviously. To hell with him. But Cupido had become aware that he was a hindrance to a paying guest, and peered at the pilot, sitting upright and irritable, beyond the sunbeams.

"Your friend waiting, Steven," he whispered.

"He's not me friend, Manny. Business, that and this."

Cupido nodded earnestly, impressed. "Business, Steven."

Bee watched the big porter – the deep maroon uniform of the franchise sat uneasily on the massive shoulders – retreat into the shadows beyond the reception desk, and turned to the pool of sun where Sauvage's hair glowed electric white.

Naturally someone's reputation got around, especially on a small island. Naturally. Sauvage's approach was characteristically unsophisticated, and Bee could watch the slow mingling of the motes in the air between them as the pilot laboured towards his inevitable point. Were the specks of shining dust drawn upwards, agitated, by the sunbeam, or were they simply an illuminated sample of great swirling swarm that infiltrated every inch of the room in which they sat?

"You know my politics, Mr Bee," said Sauvage. "I'm a dinosaur, yes sir, I'll be the first to admit that." He grinned ingratiatingly. "But I also tell people, all the time, 'Let's put it all behind and pull through together'." His hands were sweating, leaving a dark outline in the leather armrests, and the words had the lifeless intonation of a well-rehearsed and often-quoted monologue.

"Some of your best friends are Locals, not so?"

"Exactly!" cried the pilot. Exactly.

"What would you like to know?"

Sauvage spluttered, tripping over a hasty apology. No, Bee did not understand at all, he wanted nothing. Perhaps a little information, but talk was cheep, was it not?

"Depends what talk."

Sauvage was flustered as he bracketed a gleaming plot of light spots before him with his hands. "What authority do you have with the Premier?"

The Premier, nothing more than a glorified mayor, padded about his small residence in the hills where the original Vineyard had grown and answered telephone calls when his secretary was absent, which seemed to be always. Whatever Sauvage wanted from Premier Miles Smallboy would almost certainly not be forthcoming.

"Your Mr Muller didn't like that body," said the pilot, his eyes dark behind the glare around them. "Mutiny doesn't fit in with his view of things."

"Don't care for mysteries, Mr Sauvage," said Bee, standing up. "And I can get me a lecture from Harry Orange any time I wish. Even me mam not shy to pin me ears back." The walk to the hostel, the melodramatic veiling of motives, these had been tolerable, but providing a captive audience to praise small truths was out of the question. "Miles Smallboy don't even know I exist. I reckon I'll be getting on."

He parted the dusty curtains, feeling the sun on his neck, and plunged into the shadows towards the door. Sauvage called out, his voice harsh, and Bee feared to turn lest he discover he had misheard. But the pilot repeated the words.

"You can have the plane."

The immediate implications of Sauvage's words – an apparent mutiny of his own – were swept away in the horizon that opened itself before Bee, a world where one would not eat or sleep, only fly and look. Deserts, rivers, fields, and in the distance, growing ever nearer, the buttresses of the cities, crackling like crystal caves in the electric night. He would never fly over the sea, and he would never fly over the island. His aircraft – Mercedes smiling at the controls, white scarf streaming in the gentle breeze that caressed its smooth lines – would ride the warm columns of air over the great countries, and with a touch on his companion's shoulder, they would descend to bring wonder and excitement into the lives of the natives for a brief time. He would fly always. He wanted to weep, but even had he been alone, his eyes would not soften into tears as he marvelled at the gift presented by Sauvage.

Then, with an almost audible tearing like that of a canvas screen, the pilot's motives broke away from Bee's alto-cirrus future and fastened themselves onto the reality of the afternoon with hooks that he felt as physical pain. The insult of it struck him like a blow across the face: the Local boy eagerly provides the worldly traveller with his heart's desire in return for a crippled heap of scrap. The Local boy can tug the stiffening controls this way and that as the hollow fuselage fills with sand and turns red with rust. Perhaps the Local boy will make appropriate noises, mimicking the roar of the engine that has locked solid with rust and barnacles. The boy, black and stupid, delighted with baubles like all his kind, will still be gazing through the sand-misted windscreen when the sea breaks through the flaking stains it has been cultivating and laps across the floor to wet his trousers.

He returned to the waiting room, denying that a leash had been tugged.

"Done," he said. "Plane's mine. Now why you want me so bad?"

"I'm not going back," said Sauvage softly, his eyes bright. To ask for an elaboration would be to submit, and Bee sat still and let his fingers test the aromatic leather under his hands.

"You don't know about clockwork countries," said Sauvage. "My own analogy. Not bad for someone who didn't finish school. Some places, they run along like an engine: put in the gas, and she runs. She runs nicely, and gives you what you want so you keep putting in the gas. But up north…" He peered at Bee, searching for some indication of empathy. He found none. "It's clockwork. You wind it, keep winding it: all those bastards in the mines, in the factories, they wind and wind and it keeps running down. You can't blame them. I don't." The ceiling creaked loudly, and they heard the slow passage of a feet overhead. A door opened and shut, and they were alone once more in the still chamber. "You think here, the Cape, is run down?"

Bee shrugged, and Sauvage spread his hands out before him, a gesture that drew in the stained wooden ceiling, the luminous windows and the chipped surface of the table between them.

"You don't know the difference between run down and broken down."

"I like to think I do."

"You can't!" exclaimed Sauvage. He slapped his bare thigh. "If you did, you would tell your friend from the bar to drag that wreck into the sea, and you'd thank God every time another chunk of it fell off. Rudder rusted off? Thank the goddam Lord!" His voice rang through the room and quickly died away. "You can rebuild a broken-down house. A run-down house looks all right, but it's finished. There might be people and food and plants in it, but it's as good as dead, filled with sand. You know." He would say no more, and Bee realised that it was possible their interview would stall towards a unsatisfactorily early end.

"I don't know Premier Miles, though."

Sauvage smiled and nodded, a cunning grin that was more attractive than all the jocular hollowness of the previous fortnight. "I thought you were royalty around here." An ageing vacuum cleaner moaned into action above them and began grating across the panels overhead. A temporary illusion of homeliness settled over the dreamy enclave they occupied, and Bee found himself intrigued to speak on these new terms with the pilot. And yet the blue eyes, lizard-like under the loose wrinkled lids, warned him away.

"Me father didn't throw bombs. Maybe that make him something special, but it don't make me much of anything to Premier Miles." The island lay dreaming about them, the sand encroaching in insignificant waves into the High Street – it would take a decade to make its presence felt. But didn't it have decades at its disposal?

"Don't know what they tell you around here," he said. "Did you hear the one about me mam and the cops, the wire story? Everyone hears that one."

"Was that true?"

"Something was true, maybe. Know why they don't know about me? Know why they suddenly find they lost a wallet or got a stain on their pants rather than stand near old Steven Bee in the queue? Because me mam kicked my arse every week before she found that god, and some weeks after then too. I got one scar…" He rolled up his shirt sleeve, exposing a small puckered crescent on the shoulder. "That's from a knife: me cousin James playing pirates when we was nine, and he sings out 'Avast Red Dog, son of the Negress, your days of rapine are ended!' and he gives it to me, and I scream like a pig. Around here, they forgot that version. Supposedly I got it when they came to the house, you know, flying glass and dogs. Thank god Regina got the 'thritis and went to the chair, flyer, because she ain't got a scar on her body."

"It upsets you that I fought?"

Bee shrugged. "Didn't know we were talking about you."

"That's why I brought you here."

"Nobody takes me nowhere I don't want to be."

"Except Muller. You jump pretty smartly when he whistles."

Bee looked beyond Sauvage, letting his gaze settle on the gleaming square of the window. "For someone wants me to do him a favour, you got a sharp mouth."

"Why do you people tolerate Muller? How can you?"

The grey ghost would be plodding about the island on his errands now, as predictable and reassuring as the shadow of the mountain that wheeled over the grassy plain every afternoon. "Muller ain't hurting no-one."

The sun was glinting from droplets of sweat on Sauvage's forehead. "It doesn't make you angry that he did what he did?"

"What did he do?"

"Jesus, he did everything!" Sauvage invoked a great gallery of spectators, gesturing to the ceiling and walls. "You've heard the stories."

"Yup."

"Pretty special guy, Muller," said the pilot. "When he retires to paradise it's all forgiven and forgotten. And other guys, us who waded through waist-deep shit in our lives because of him and his wars, we have to tiptoe around worrying that every fucking nig we see is going to take some personal retribution." He froze, caught in the beam of a searchlight.

"Nigs like me and Premier Miles?"

"I didn't mean…" How old was the pilot? Bee had seen the lines, even admired them as a badge of years in the sun and wind of foreign lands; but now Sauvage was unmistakably

old. He watched Bee as if through a rifle-sight: eager, fearful that a shot would enrage and not disable. Bee stood up, his shoulders light, and extended a hand to the pilot.

"In the name of my father, his wife and their son, I absolve you of the bullshit," he said.

Sauvage was pale and drawn in the afternoon sun. His voice was devoid of all deceit. "Why aren't you angry?"

"I'm going," said Bee and walked from the enclave. "Thanks for the plane." The dust swirled about him, and he became aware of the wind, humming in the wires over the street, whispering about the foundations of the ornate stones that anchored the sombre building to the sand beneath. A gust wrested the door from his grasp, and it slammed shut behind him as he stepped into the glare. The sun felt good on his cheeks and he aimed a lazy kick at a twig being shunted down the pavement towards him.

In the window behind him, the white face of Sauvage floated like a creature from the black abyss of the ocean, a pasty mass of jelly and prickles looking upon a strange universe of light and heat before it surrendered to the freedom of the upper reaches, subsiding into blobs of flesh long held together by the insufferable weight of the sea.

15

The yellow grass streamed in the warm sun-wind that slipped off the mountain's face, and Bee smelled the heat around him, a scent of rock and dust, made tantalising with traces of the jasmine that grew in the sheltered gullies above.

A jade-headed lizard watched him, safely wedged in a crevice in the lichen-stained rocks that split the path ahead. He stepped on a fire-blackened branch, half buried in the sand of the path, and it cracked loudly. The green head and black eyes became invisible as the lizard jerked into the safety of its temporary fortress.

The rockscape almost escaped unnoticed: a mess of bush had been brought down by the storm, covering the telltale boulder shaped like goat's head; but the steep scree of fallen rocks, like a summer glacier inching down from the buttresses overhead, was unmistakable even if its signpost was not.

The climb was steep, and hot work, but the reward was almost instantaneous, a rapid gaining of altitude that opened up the plain below and the massive bowl of the ocean as if Bee watched from the porthole of an ascending zeppelin. The swifts and terns, fickle travelling companions on the steady incline from the Vineyard, now became childish illustrations, neat m-shaped backs that slid across the air-currents below him. High above, deep in the echoing shimmer of the mountain wall, a kestrel shrieked.

The boulders grew larger, more evenly spaced, and he scaled them with practised ease, dropping lightly into the bracken in their shadows. Slowly the buttress closed behind him, the distant sibilant murmur of the sea was silenced. He heard his breathing, and the crunch of the stones under his feet. For an instant he was afraid that he was being observed by a presence not entirely indifferent to his intrusion.

The plants had thrived since his last visit to the spot, more than a year ago. They sprouted in a glistening mat about the puddle that was Bee's spring. In truth it was nothing more than a slow trickle from the damp earth, but the thrilling insistence of the upwelling had demanded no lesser title than that of a fountain to the young Bee. He had spoken of it thus to his mother, and she, unqualified to contest her son's assertion, also began speaking of it as if a crystal jet cascaded into the sky, showering to earth a thousand rainbows.

He found the largest plant, its fleshy pink blossom no larger than his thumbnail, and removed it, taking care to provide enough of a muddy bed for his precious cargo. The plant and earth came away with a faint sucking sound, and soon the water was seeping into the new cavity. When he threw his legs over the first boulder, the excision was already veiled by the spring; the damp depressions of his footprints the only indication that a visitor had been to the chamber.

Twice Bee nearly dropped the plant, and once he brushed the bristles that probed the dry air; but they did not react, and the surprise was left intact. The path curved on as the mountain pulled away from the plain below, its wall turning inland towards the forest before sloping down to the wild western shore.

The storm had slashed deep trenches in the clay of the path that zigzagged towards the forest, and Bee watched them as he walked. Canyons, the wadis of the desert mountains and road-signs for those early flyers, looked so from the air. From a mile up the earth forgave its violent mantle, turning the scars to tendrils. Through the eyes of angels.

The uniform mat of the forest canopy was breaking up into strokes of grey and olive, deep blue shadows amid a burst of electric green. Away behind him, across the shimmering plain, the Vineyard too crystallised into the familiar scatter of dice, detail revealed as the path dropped lower and lower. Two massive rubber trees formed the gateway to the wood, their smooth black boughs arching overhead like romancing anacondas. Amid the elephantine folds of their roots small creatures chirped and rustled. A scarlet parakeet dropped silently from an unseen perch overhead, and coasted down the narrow avenue, flashing like a torch as the dappling sun struck its feathers, until it swerved once more into the trees and disappeared. A shriek echoed through the forest, and then Bee was alone once more with the crack and rustle of the wood, and the wind at his back.

The path was no secret, a wide and well-trodden route preferred by the herders who drove their raucous goats onto the slopes of the mountain, but it had remained obscure to most residents of the Vineyard and was entirely unknown to the tourists. He would surprise her, emerge from the forest like a ghost. He wondered if she would scream, and smiled at the pleasurable fantasy. He lingered along his way, treading into the deep drifts of moss that clung like green snow to the rotting tree-roots and stones that formed the verges of the path. A loerie was singing somewhere deep in the wood, bubbling liquidly like water from a bottle. Bee held his breath and stepped into the bracken.

The forest slept around him, and the sighing of the wind through the canopy washed across him and cancelled all sounds from the island. In the forest, the island held no sway. The trees grew from mud and clay, their roots long anchored in the stuff of lands that shrugged off the predatory advances of the white sand. The massive damp trunks, pulsing with sap and cracked with age, were the pillars of a temple in which the transience of the sand was not only alien but unwelcome. A million leaves, whispering servants of that heart that Bee could feel beating but had not found, discretely filtered and fanned, keeping the white drifts from the sea at bay.

He crouched, dipping his head and neck beneath the feathery ferns, pushing through them to open new scenes dripping with green and black secrets. He listened to his breath, made it silent, and crept on. The fern curtains closed softly behind him, trembled for a moment, and then hung still once more. A termite clutching a white seedling in its awkward jaws plunged into his footprints, labouring up the wall of the heel, and scuttled into the safety of the bracken.

The light filtering down onto his face through the net of the canopy began to change its hue, became more yellow and intense, and soon he was squinting again as the sun struck him, crashing through the sparse leaves that revealed the approaching clearing. He saw his path emerging from the left, and ahead was the familiar track from Antoine to the Vineyard. The clearing was deserted. He glanced at his watch: she was late. He carefully sank to the earth, his fingers testing the dry carpet of grasses before he lowered his full weight. He propped his head on his hands, and watched the path through the curtain of ferns and yellow grasses.

Voices, close and clear: he flattened himself deeper into the carpet of the forest floor. Doris Navidad and Lavinia Kitso, bound for the Vineyard, cooed to one another as they lumbered through the sand of the path.

"Sugar and rice, they say," said Lavinia, piping and breathless. "Rice and sugar."

"All manner of inhuman vagabonders bound herewards for sure," rumbled the gravel-voiced Doris. "And not a *po*lice for a thousand mile."

"The rice one can leave, but not the sugar. Or the butter, they say even butter. But the old bitch September make her own; may be she can use some extra coinage."

"All that a *po*lice can help is a fart in the sou'wester when they come, and come they will. Could be tomorrow, Lavinia."

"And not a larder full. Call me a damned liar if Mrs Flora St John got half a shop full of food. Less sugar. The pity, Doris…" She sighed deeply and it seemed that they had paused, halted by the bleakness of their imaginings. "The pity."

"Regina Bee not said anything to you?" growled Doris Navidad. The scraping of their heavy footfalls commenced, and Bee pressed his cheek to the earth and listened.

"About what then, would Regina Bee be telling me?"

"*Them*, madam; from *there*."

"Sugar and the like?" She tut-tutted disparagingly. "How would she be knowing?"

"The white garden boy, Lavinia." The emphysemic Doris broke down into a racking cough as they laughed.

"Matter of the fact she *did* say that much," ventured Lavinia Kitso. (He would not reveal himself and the woman's lie: the rustling of the canopy and the hedonistic secrecy of his voyeurism were tenuous and delicious, not worth surrendering to reveal that Regina and Lavinia Kitso would not speak under any circumstances.)

A voice whispered at his ear, and before he could take fright he recognised it as that of the girl. She lay beside him, a look of stern concentration on her high forehead.

"I said, they are gossiping about your mother," she hissed.

Her arrival had been utterly silent, and his quick scanning of his hide a moment before she spoke made her presence deeply unsettling. He looked for signs of her entrance – a bent branch, a track in the soft mulch beneath them – but the evidence suggested that she had nestled down at his side out of the warm air of the wood. The stately couple were drawing away now, and their words were indistinguishable. Another rending cough came down the path from Doris Navidad, and then they passed into the curve of the trees and were gone.

"You walk well for a city child," he said, rolling onto his back. The plant was hidden at his side. "Nearly startled us."

"*You* startled *me*," she said, suddenly becoming aware of her proximity to his body and propping herself up on her bony elbow. A fat blue pigeon settled on a branch high overhead with a clattering of wings, and a small feather drifted down towards them. Claudette reached for it, but the wisp coquettishly eluded her fingers and settled into the lush curtain beyond their clearing. "I thought you were a snake or a crocodile or something."

"Didn't think I was *so* ugly." She blushed, and Bee realised that she was mortified. "Myself, I was trying for more of a kind of panther impression. How did you get here so quiet?"

"I wasn't quiet. Everything else is so loud." She heaved her shoulders into a charmingly ham-handed impression of adult exasperation. "Those ladies were talking, you smashing around in the bushes. It was very noisy."

She would not look at his face, and her little ears burned deep pink. It was very flattering: he would not crush her. No doubt she had been told about Steven Bee, the cruel, selfish Steven Bee. Her grandfather would not have tired of embellishing any biographies offered by Muller – perhaps a touch of madness thrown in as a final deterrent? – and yet she had come anyway, kept their date so politely initiated by her neat letter left under his door. The grey ghost was not the only one who could turn it on when needed.

"Where shall we go today?" he asked, and Claudette looked very bored, stretching and shrugging.

"I was just walking around. There's nothing to do."

"I am hurt, Claudette," he murmured. "You forgot about our date? Me reason for smashing round the forest like your crocodile." He rolled away, sweeping up the plant, and stood up as if to leave. When he turned, smiling, the girl seemed on the brink of tears.

"I…forgot," she stammered, and suddenly brightened. "I was afraid from your noise, and then those ladies were coming, and I *promise* I forgot about our…plan." She beamed, absolved of her lie. "That's why I thought I had been walking around. A*ctually* I was coming to meet you and *you* were late." She giggled, and Bee bowed his head in confession. Then quickly he grasped her hand, and helped her over the feathery fronds that had provided their screen. She worked her little fingers loose at once, and Bee saw that he was not to afford her the assistance suggested by her apparent age. She gingerly plucked at a twig that clung to her dress, and scratched her rosy ear.

"Brung you a present," said Bee. "Picked it up in the forest about a half-mile back."

"Is it a dog?" she cried, and he laughed at the incongruity of her request.

"No it ain't no dog. Why would dogs be layin' around here for me to pick up?"

"I once found a dog in a drain at home."

"Big drain."

"Small dog. And it was quite squashed."

He produced the plant from behind his back. Her face fell, and she peered down her nose at it suspiciously. "Thank you," she said without relish.

"Know what it is?"

"It's a bush."

"Ever seen a bush that eats cows?"

She gazed casually at the plant, delicately worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. She badly wanted the plant to eat a cow, but Bee saw that she suspected a trap, or worse, condescension.

"That's too small to eat a cow. Anyway plants eat water and earth. Minerals."

"Hold it. Don't touch them buds." She took the plant with obvious distaste, and held it at arms length, her fingers stiff under the muddy support. Bee moved into the middle of the clearing, and waited. Presently, the fly he had been seeking whirred into earshot, a black streak jerking in an out of sight. He stood still, and smiled at Claudette. The fly touched his wrist, took to the air once more and did another frantic circuit of the clearing. It returned to his wrist, paused, squatted.

Bee's other hand came from below like a striking squid, a palm collapsing into a fist as he plucked the lumbering insect out of the air. He held out his closed hand to Claudette, and the fly buzzed angrily inside its cage.

"They got to fly backward before they go forward." A dozen quick shakes of his arm, and the fly was silent. He felt its tiny feet prick the damp skin of his palm as it struggled, dazed and earthbound in the darkness around it. "Bring us your plant."

Claudette grimaced as the hairy insect crept onto the largest of the buds. "That's disgusting. Flies carry dis…" Then it was gone, only a flailing leg visible as the plant closed with deathly swiftness about it, a smooth, utterly unstoppable cadence like the firing of a catapult.

The plant was seized, the remaining mouths closed with a teasing blade of grass, and Bee saw that his gift had been well chosen.

"How long till it will eat again?" she asked, her eyes wide with glee. Less enthusiastically she added, "I can't catch flies like that. Can I feed it ants?"

"Ants too small, just walk over them teeth and out the other side. It will get the flies, you don't do nothing." The look of passionate admiration that he found himself bathed in embarrassed him, and he swung towards the path. "So where we going?"

She led him into the heart of the forest, her golden head gleaming as she cut through sunbeams. As he stumbled over massive roots and crept under tangled knots of honeysuckle and jasmine, she seemed a beacon, bobbing ahead but ever drawing further away. He wanted to call, to make her slow down, but he could not. He struggled on, wrapped in the fragrance of flowers and damp suck of the dark earth. The creaking of frogs became audible, spreading

about him like a mist of sound, and just when it seemed he would discover the source of a particularly urgent cry, the thicket would fall silent and the chant be taken up on a branch overhead or in a fern behind him. Claudette laughed, but her voice was filtered by the jungle, and came to him as if through heavy rain. He peered into a veil of sun and leaves, slashed with colour as a massive bougainvillaea spilled to earth from a thicket above: a flash of light revealed her turning, waving. He plunged on, listening to the forest breathe below the chorus of the frogs.

This part of the wood had been dismissed as impenetrable by his playmates a decade earlier, a frustrating and ultimately impassable tangle of vines and boggy earth. And yet Claudette sped on, leaving only the most fragile leaves crushed in her path. Bee began to wade against the jungle, as if through waist-deep water, the vines and flowers resisting his weight before surrendering a passage. The jasmine was thick in his nostrils.

He saw her head pop up as she clambered over some obstacle, and then she disappeared out of sight. There was a silence now, beyond the frogs, and he realised that he had been listening to her progress. But now she had stopped. The forest beyond where she had appeared was dark, a tangle of suffocating creepers in the canopy expunging the sunbeams from the thicket below. He called, suddenly afraid that she had fallen. The frogs fell silent too, cowed by his shout, but the stillness that followed reassured them and the creaking cacophony swelled once more.

He renewed his efforts, pushing out rhythmically against the clinging growth. The canopy thinned suddenly, and he was forging through a glade, steamy and airless. Blackjacks bobbed chest-high, disturbed by his presence, or clung in bunches to his trousers and shirt. A giant butterfly, orange and black, flopped past and lazily entered the darkness ahead. The massive trunk of a dead tree, overgrown with bracken and moss and crumbling like damp plaster, had provided Claudette with her last vantage-point: it lay across his way, a boom lowered between the sunlight and the deep gloom of the tree-wall ahead. It gave beneath his foot, and an army of black ants – still frantic from Claudette's passing – seethed under the paper-brittle bark.

No human sound came from the wood ahead. He balanced atop the hump of the trunk, like a whaler on a foundering kill, and glanced back at the way they had come. The frogs were silent now, and Bee teased himself with the thought of a beast, undiscovered and hungry, padding through the silence of the jungle in his tracks. The horror grew, delicious and chilling, and he jumped down from the trunk, pressing himself against its dry decay to watch the path in the glade. But all was still, and another luminous butterfly, floating between the prickly

blossoms of the jungle plants, made the idea of fangs and flesh incongruous and shamefully adolescent. Bee turned his back on the sunlight, and groped into the darkness.

16

On all sides the indiscernible forest fought for life, grappling at the pace of the seasons for a toehold in the earth, a hint of wind or the touch of the sun. Water was everywhere, dripping in the gloom that enveloped him like night, and the tiny stars that glimmered above – the sun, poking through the desperately knotted canopy, too weak to illuminate the deathly struggle that raged in silence about him – shone also at his feet, reflecting in the saturated earth. The air was thick with moisture and the breath of the trees, a rank, choking texture that clogged his mouth and nostrils. He was drowning, not yet gasping for air but the moment was imminent, and he reached for the vines he had parted to plunge into this stifling pool; but the oppressive darkness drifted from his eyes, and a faint rumour of the wind cleared his thoughts and filled his chest. She had comes this way, and she had not returned. He stood still and listened to the liquid trickling about his head and feet.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the dim green night-time of the heart of the forest, he saw that the points of light from above were still and even some way away on the ground. He heard the viscous plopping of a frog slipping into water, and the stars at his feet trembled, shattered, and gradually reassembled themselves, drifting in their black sky: a pool, some twenty yards across, became visible to him, its smooth black surface oily in the half-light. He reached down to his feet, finding a suitably heavy twig, slimy and half-rotten; he held his breath as he tossed it into the underwater world before him, and once more the stars splintered and then lolled themselves back into their tiny sparse constellation.

At the far end of the pool the trees were less dim, a faint green glow visible through the hanging creepers that formed a curtain about the pool, and he knew that she had passed through the curtain, for the pool was absolutely silent. Slowly he skirted the pool, moving ape-like along the curtain of vines, hands bunched knuckle-bound about their slippery supports and feet barely touching the treacherous ground. The water was black and vile, and he shuddered as he thought of what blind searching things would caress his feet and ankles should he slip into its syrupy shallows. But the vines were ancient, and they held him safely as he reached the curtain.

The light was brighter now, and he saw a corridor, no wider than his shoulders, glowing beyond the draped mass of ragged vegetation. It parted easily, and he stepped into the passage. The heavy air was completely silent now, the cavernous liquid slitherings of the pool hidden by the fronds that hung down all about him. He thought he knew then what it was to be

deaf. He pushed forward, feeling the hint of warmth ahead as he parted the tentacles of the forest. The sun was ahead; and once again the frogs were audible. The vines were dry as they trailed over his face and shoulders.

He cried out in fear as a branch at his hand burst into a streak of colour and commotion: a great parrot beat its way clear of the corridor and surged into the sun. Under its wings he glimpsed a flare of green and gold leaves, a clearing, and then the curtain fell shut once more; but he was almost free of the gentle tug of the passage, and he broke into a struggling trot, the earth sucking at his feet.

The sun smashed him back against the forest wall, blinding him with its brilliance. The clearing was airless, a cauldron of heat, and the vivid green of the forest beyond shimmered and danced as he gasped for air. A mound, humped and incongruous as a refuse truck, reared up in the middle of the arena, and the dazzling hair of Claudette followed by her smiling face crested the grassy peak. He waved, angry and relieved, and fought his breathing.

She called for him to come, but the words were indistinct, muffled by the soundless air about him as if she had called to him underwater. He stepped forward into the razor grass, alone with his gasping and the hammering sun. His shirt clung to his shoulders and he caught a waft of his own rank smell. He quickly tugged the material away from the skin, feeling a moment of blessed cool before the prickling swelter seeped through. Claudette sprang out from behind the mound, jerky and soundless as a clumsy dancer in an old film.

"Close your eyes," she demanded. He watched her, his hands limp at his sides.

"How you find this place?"

"Close your eyes!" He saw that resistance was futile, and thankfully shut his eyes. Red and black swirls danced under the lids like whirligigs across the pond. His armpits itched.

"Now what?"

She did not reply, and he grew impatient. But before he could open his eyes to berate her, cool soft fingers were twining into his. He submitted, and she led him slowly as if guiding a footsore and aged horse along a stony path. The razor grass sawed gently at his ankles, and he tilted back his head, allowing the sun to sear half-moons of crimson into his eyes. His cheeks burned, and he hoped that Claudette would not find his clammy hands repulsive; yet her grip was steadfast and where her skin touched his there was only cool relief. Her arm and shoulder pressed softly into his stomach, and he felt that they had come to a stop. He waited, hers to command.

"It's a bit like yours," she said at length, and Bee opened his eyes. He was blind, the crimson coils spreading into black tendrils across his eyes as the sun-pool overwhelmed his

sight once more; but the shapes jerked into the wings of his awareness, and he saw Claudette proudly standing regarding the mound.

Beneath the mound, warped and baked almost bare of its original markings, lay the wreck of an aircraft. At first Bee thought it was large toy, a scale model, but with a quickening of his heart he saw that the earthy hue of the surfaces was rust, and that the blackened intestines of machinery that poked from the torn cowling into the base of the mound weighed tons, too elaborate a construct for an enthusiast. He marvelled at the delicate dragonfly lines, the stylish dhow-sail of a tail that poked no more than six feet out of the daisies. The flowers trembled under the weight of the bees that swarmed across them before alighting on the wreck with bulging yellow shins.

They stepped toward it, and Bee saw that behind the aircraft for many yards the grasses were longer, the flowers heavy on their distended stalks: a great trench had been gouged long ago, and he saw, looking at the engine peeled open like a sardine can that the aircraft had ploughed up the clearing with a violence and noise that would not be imagined in the sultry hush. Claudette was beaming, breathless, awaiting a reaction. He waited, drugged by the heat and the inevitable question that hung over the wreck. She answered it almost immediately.

"Do you like it? There's still someone in it." Her eyes were large and disturbed. He slipped his hand from hers, and waded into the blackjacks that crowded the nearer wing of the machine. He did not look into the baking hollow of the cockpit, its sharp edges gleaming with shards of glass stained the colour of beer by the dusts and pollens of the glen. The mound loomed up at his side, a crude headstone to the shattered machine. A rag had blown from somewhere and lay dirty and fraying, wedged into the small windscreen. At last he recognised the bones in the rag, fingers or a shattered arm, peeping white as maggots from the khaki cloth. The corpse – he saw it now, a hunched thing like a sack, flecked with lichen and spider webs – was slumped forward, as if resting from the ordeal of the landing. A helmet of a soft and rotting material spared him the sight of the smooth white dome that surely grinned beneath.

"Why you show me this?" he called back. At first he was afraid that Claudette would approach, would see what she should not; but she was obviously familiar with the clearing and its treasure: it occurred to him that she could have climbed onto the wing, stroked the dry bones of the splintered wrist or forehead with those cool dry hands. The girl's smile flustered him; someone was laughing at his expense, and the answer came to him instantaneously, as clearly as if she had pulled a curtain aside to introduce the grinning puppeteer. He swore and strode to Claudette, reaching for her little shoulders. Her smile vanished and she shrank back from his grip.

"Did your grandfather tell you to bring me here?" She was clearly afraid, and Bee briefly wondered if he had not overshot the mark; and yet the answer was too obvious for him to be mistaken: the aircraft, the body – some knuckles from the butcher, planted in a rag? – were clumsy and overstated enough to be work of Sauvage. He hated the pilot for using the child to practise his deceit. "Tell him I get it," he said. "Tell him I'm still going." He turned his back on Claudette, and plunged towards the green scar that marked the passage he had come in by.

But his anger could not be sustained in the stifling clearing, and his unformed vows of vengeance were soon banished by the rush of his breathing. He had noticed no slope when he entered the arena, yet now the ground climbed before him towards the trees, and he paused to gather his breath, the razor-grass pricking through his socks. He turned to glare at her, but there was no sign of her. He listened, expecting a call: only the blood drummed in his ears.

When the last of his fury had been burned away, and only the stillness of the clearing and the soporific heat remained in his ears and eyes, he let the slope carry him down towards the wreck once more. She was sitting behind the mound, her head in her hands, and she had been crying.

"You don't know," he said softly. She raised her face and pinned him into the blackjacks with a glare of deep resentment. "I should have… me and your granddad don't dance."

"I know what you think," she said, and he felt that he had been weighed and found feather-light. She drew herself up where she sat and gave a stately sniff. "*I invited* you."

"You make me feel like a dog."

"Good."

They remained quiet for a moment drawn out by their refusal to collaborate. At last Bee said, "Hot in here."

She slid forward down the mound, her skirt riding up about her thighs, and he quickly looked away as a flash of white underwear came into view. "It's the best place ever," she said. The spark of coy admiration was alive in her eyes once more, and Bee felt ashamed that his accusation had been or was about to be forgiven simply because the child was attracted to him. Forgive us our trespasses. He smiled.

"Show me," he said, but this time she did not take his hand. With laboured nonchalance she slouched towards the wreck, stepping onto the wing. The aircraft groaned and Bee's stomach rolled lazily as the sack in the cockpit slipped lower. Surely desecration was taking place; yet the ground was not sacred, and the coffin was a weapon: under the girl's little feet still-visible smears trailed back from nettle-infested gun-ports.

"No-one has ever come here," said Claudette. "What do you think he was called?"

"It would say on him, somewhere, I reckon."

She laughed as if his answer was ridiculous. "No, *no*. *We're* going to call him something. You say it." Her offering hung before Bee, a daunting responsibility.

"I always been partial to let sleeping dogs lie." Her disapproval was palpable and he laughed woodenly to reassure her that he had spoken in jest. "How about Charlie?"

"Charles." She mouthed the word, and jutted out her lower lip. Charles did not sit right. "No good. Another one."

Bee slowly sat down upon the mound, feeling the pricking of sweat and rough flowers against his back and buttocks. The air was full of drifting seeds now, battalions of tiny parachutists hanging in the doldrums of the sky.

"Blackberry," he said, thinking of nothing. He closed his eyes once more and felt himself drifting into the earth, the sun following him, drying him into a yellowing tangle of strands and buds until he took to the air to float in the afternoon.

"Captain Blackberry," pronounced Claudette, and he opened an eye to see her salute awkwardly, her pale arm gleaming in the light, her grey eyes hidden in the sudden shadow created by the stiff little fingers that brushed her fringe. He grinned, and flopped a lazy salute at the pilot.

"Heyta, skip."

"You should write it." She searched the weeds around the wing, and not finding what she needed, dropped into the furrow beyond the delicate rudder of the machine. The blackjacks swayed about her, and her dress shone brilliant amid the darkness of the jagged leaves. She disappeared for an instant, bending out of site beneath a spray of coarse berries, and emerged brandishing a solid dagger-sized piece of wood.

She struggled from the gully, her fringe falling loose over her face, and Bee wondered at her rough agility, the goat-like clambering inborn in the Local children who scuffled and lolled through their childhoods. Like a snow-white Local, Claudette was. He laughed, and deflected her questioning glance with a wave, for she would not understand or care. Content with his dismissal, she handed him the stake.

The soil of the mound was dry and dusty, and the few plants that clung to its slope came free easily, revealing pitifully shallow roots. Claudette carefully wiped an area flat with her hand, and stuck her finger into it. "There," she said.

The sand tumbled down in little khaki avalanches to his feet, but the name remained. *Captain Blackberry RIP.*

"What's rip?" asked Claudette.

"Do not disturb."

She beamed, once more bathing him in unearned awe. He wanted to tell her that he had not patented the idea. Perhaps later, if it came up again. He found a patch of coarse grass free of nettles and blackjacks and flung himself down to watch Claudette as she went in search of a wreath to lay on the nose of the aircraft.

17

She moved like a grazing creature, entirely at ease squatting between the burdocks or creeping between the jagged blossoms and their hacksaw stems. An unconscious flick of her hand would tuck errant strands of hair behind her ear, and her search would continue. The flowers she liked were placed carefully in a pile on the wing of the aircraft.

Bee looked at the wreck from under heavy lids and tried to reconcile it with his own aircraft; but he could not. This ghost from a time long past seemed a thing apart from the problems of violent, premature death. It had always lain here, it seemed, while the forest grew up around it and the beaches crumbled into the sea far beyond this inland ocean of green and silence.

The beaches: how narrow and impotent they now seemed against this secret eternal chamber. The crows that picked the beaches clean would never penetrate this sun-bowl. Their black wings would beat helplessly against the syrupy air, feathers shrivelling to molten blobs on their thrashing bodies. They would stay in the wind that searched the coast, waiting for the dead to wash up. The pilot, ninety years old and sleeping at the controls of his delicate craft, had never been examined by the crows.

His family had no doubt waited, and as hope had faded their lives had settled into their old courses around the void. (Had a young boy been told of the loss of a father, and impatiently asked when they would be able to visit him?) A church service, perhaps, had buried the memory: purple drapes and stern black costumes, the pious crows gathering for the final laying bare. And meanwhile, far away, he sat here, the companion of bumblebees and daffodils, sunbeams celebrating his slow union with same elements that had struck his aircraft and killed him. A yellowing photograph of a diffident young man, watching a point behind the photographer, would gather dust on memorial mantelpiece, growing ever further away from the crumbling, hot sack in the glade. They would envy Bee his position in the grass.

Claudette was struggling to weave the flowers into a wreath: the stems were either too short or resisted her fingers with spines and sticky sap, and at last she relented and set about arranging them in a vague representation of a circle against the slope of the mound, below the

fragile epitaph. Quietly, so that he would not disturb her careful calculations, Bee rose to his feet and approached the cockpit.

Captain Blackberry wore a blouse, its clean lines still visible despite the debris in the kiln of the cockpit. Half a century of rains had stained it in the fold of the waist, and fallen leaves carpeted the small lap of the corpse. The leather helmet was almost indistinguishable from the lichen that had swarmed over the opposite wall of the fuselage and engulfed the cockpit and its contents. At first Bee avoided the white sausages that gleamed at the edge of his vision, but a sudden subsidence in wing where he stood tipped him forward and he gazed directly at the bones. Small, delicate and beach white; just bones, cushioned between feathery seedpods, soft and dense as cotton-wool. He wondered that the blouse should have held its shape while the sleeves lay flattened, and looked more closely. A bee dropped heavily onto the pilot's shoulder, and crawled out of sight down into the collar. Soon it emerged, tasting the air with delicate forearms, and laboured out of the cockpit towards the distant flowers beyond where Claudette hunted. Compelled, Bee reached for the brittle fabric. It was warm and rough against his fingertips. He tugged gently.

A skeletal arm jerked up at him with horrific speed, tearing the blouse and setting a swarm of tiny midges loose at Bee's face. He reeled, clutching at the long brittle fingers that clawed at his eyes, and cried out to Claudette. His heel caught in a hollow on the wing, and he was falling, grasping for the ground. He struck the wing and rolled away quickly.

In the cockpit Captain Blackberry had shifted, now slumped deeper into his shattered instruments; and from his collar stood a small tree, its flexible young stem festooned with the embryos of leaves. A delicate fork at the top probed the air, a timid V-sign bizarrely placed above the pilot's back.

"It goes right through him," called Claudette. "There are mushrooms in his shoes. Did you get a fright?"

"Lost me feet over here."

"It looks like wings."

Like the damp new wings of a predatory fluttering creature . In the sun-pool, saturated with heat and the courses of insects, it did not seem impossible that the aircraft was a cocoon about to release the moth king Captain Blackberry. The stiff wings, jutting out of the cockpit, would shake themselves into pearl-tinted veils of translucence; the back would straighten and the shrouded skull would probe with air with feathery white feelers. It would melt into the sky of the clearing and be lost in the forest. Bee felt a sadness settle about him that the little figure, dead and gone in the crashed aircraft, would undergo no transformation, that afternoon or ever.

"How's them flowers looking?" The wreath was magnificent, a cascade of blossom slipping down the mound to lie like silky fire against a buckled blade of the propeller. Claudette's hands hovered over the flowers, ready to catch any errant buds should they slip, but the arrangement lay still. Already the insects were baptising the new-created flower at the nose of the wreck, bees reconnoitring its textures while two frantic ants rushed repeatedly into a stem that blocked a favourite route of theirs, insisting with their headlong charges that the obstacle could not exist.

The girl approached Bee, and for a moment it seemed that she wanted to take his hand, but with burning ears she tugged instead at her dress before worrying a twist of hair with distracted urgency. She gestured to a break in the green curtain around them, some distance away from where Bee had stumbled in. They walked in silence, the rough leaves around their ankles shuffling and crunching as they passed. Bee felt suddenly that he was losing somebody dear to him, and turned to the wreck as they reached the first of the vines. The glare of the day and the haze of seedlings and insects made the aircraft strangely indistinct, and he struggled to divine its lines from the earth around it. He thought he glimpsed a metallic sheen from where the cockpit should have been, and perhaps the bowed head – but the shape separated into two great bumblebees, and he was unsure once more. Only the sapling was unmistakable, groping for the sky from the humped form like a warped aerial.

The track was level and clear of obstacles, and Claudette talked as they watched their feet. In the forest it was cooler once more, and Bee allowed the girl's stories and fancies to wash over him as he relished the chill on his back and neck. Then her eyes were on him once again, and he was being admired. He clawed at an itch inside his collar, and looked away.

"Did you like seeing it?" she asked.

What had she seen in the clearing? A broken machine, a playmate, however dead he may have been? She did not know the island, could not feel the heart that beat through the forest; nor could she know that she had led him right to the centre of it. And yet what had he been shown? If they turned back, peeping through the vines once more, would the wreck still be there; or merely a trench made by wind and rain, a clearing hazy with dandelions and bees? He wondered if Claudette would permit a return, a glance back to overcome the overwhelming impression of unreality; but to return would admit a lack of comprehension. There would be no satisfaction: unreality would have to suffice. Her question, then, was wiser than it had seemed.

"It is a good place," he said.

Claudette launched into a breathless account of a wild cat she had seen in the grass beyond the Vineyard, and as the track widened and the leaves overhead began to flutter, Bee thought of the mound in the clearing, and the bouquet resting against the rusted blade.

When Muller's flat voice called out to them from the shadows ahead, Bee was ready to ascribe it to a trick of the afternoon, a trace of the sun-pool carried back with them to bend the realities of the island; but the sweat stains under the arms of the dark shirt, the hat wedged back on to reveal a fiery forehead and angry eyes, brought Bee back from Claudette's world with disappointing speed. He felt the girl edge closer to him, and his knuckles brushed against her arm.

He greeted Muller, and the grey eyes burned into his own; but a trick of the light, a shadow etched across the old man from the trees above, made Muller seem unusually small; a tiny figure, dressed in inappropriate clothes and scowling at a forest that remained eternally unmoved. Muller was bowing formally to Claudette. Her little hand crept into Bee's.

"Did you enjoy your walk?" asked Muller, laboriously ignoring Bee. He bent down to lean on his knees, an affected avuncular gesture, but only succeeded in looking winded. Claudette shrugged.

"It was nice," she said.

"Where did you go?"

"Just around. Around here." She waved vaguely around the track, and Bee saw that she was not afraid of Muller.

"That sounds enjoyable. Did you show Steven your magical place?"

"It's just a nice tree, just in there," she said, her lie glaringly obvious, and she grinned sheepishly as if expecting immediate reprisal.

But Muller said, "There are some wonderful trees in the forest, they say," and smiled. His teeth were white and sharp, yet his eyes were gentle as they explored the child's face. "Would you mind if I speak to Steven for a moment?"

"Must I go away?"

"Not far."

She shrugged away towards a ruined termite mound in the dust of the track some distance away; they watched her go.

Muller's eyes were swollen and unfocussed when he looked at Bee. The cold sweep of their gaze was absent, replaced by a hesitant glance of watery sunshine. Bee started as Muller reached out for him, but the thin hands were slow and delicate, plucking blackjack seeds off

Bee's sleeve. Muller trailed the thin fabric of Bee's shirt through his fingertips, looking but not seeing.

"It was inevitable she would find you." He smiled hopelessly at Bee. "I thought it was a rock-pool or something. With Harold Phillips." He smiled ruefully at Bee's shirt. "I underestimated her."

"She been safe, Muller. We just seen an old mahogany through the shrub yonder." Bee was hesitating a smile when Muller's hand cracked across his cheek with a force that spun him half around. He laughed out loud as the stinging pain spread across his face. He thought, *we're making this a habit*, and wanted to tell Muller. The man's eyes were wide and afraid, blobs of grief in the suffering and contorted features around them. His outstretched finger trembled as it jutted at Bee's chest.

"Don't lie to me again." His voice deserted him, cracking into a whisper. "She is a child and lies are games. You must never lie to me again. Not you."

With the smooth inevitability of reaching for an outstretched hand, Bee returned the slap across Muller's face. He felt the scrape of the rough jowls, the silky loose skin of the cheeks. He smelt Muller, an old man's scent of leather and rank breath.

"Don't lay your hand on me no more," he said. "It ain't right."

They looked at one another, nursing their stinging cheeks, choosing and discarding words with frantic haste as the inevitable distance crept nearer. Soon they would be Bee and Muller of the Vineyard once more, he knew, and the time for truth would be past. Muller's liquid eyes were those of a man drowning, imploring and mute. Sun and shadow scudded across his face like the cloud shadows across the grass plain in summer, his mouth working like that of a dreamer, hard lips collapsing into unformed words before clamping shut in a futile bid for control. Bee watched and waited: he would speak if the moment came, speak and speak and tell Muller many things both longed for and feared by the old man. But the moment was not yet, and he watched Muller flounder.

The distance was upon them now, undeniable and familiar; but as they withdrew Muller toppled forward, as if breaking loose from clutching captors for a wilful moment of freedom. He pressed against Bee's chest, grasping his shoulders in his strong fingers. Muller's breath was hot in his ear.

"Don't go."

Then he was standing tall again, with his dark eyes and mouth set in stone. "You endangered the girl," he snapped. "It was irresponsible." For a moment Bee thought how tiring it was to be hostile; how tired Muller looked. He thought of the sun-pool, its soporific sheets of colour and heat.

"How far you follow us?"

"Enough to know that you took Claudette too far." Then he had not seen the chase, the cave of watery night. And he had not seen the clearing. Bee was grateful that the grey eyes had not swept the clearing.

"Sorry. Got carried away."

"She is very impressionable." Claudette was watching them, and she waved as they turned. They waved back. "She admires you greatly. A childhood crush." Muller beckoned to the girl, and hesitantly she left the object of her attention. "This is one you must not be cruel to, Steven," he said softly.

Protest was futile: the old man had made him impotent with his casual observation, a devastatingly casual indictment of Bee's character that made him deeply ashamed. There were reasons that Muller should know before he cut so deep so easily; but Bee knew at once that excuses were redundant between himself and the shadowy white man at his side. Take it like a man, his schoolteachers had told him as they swung the cane at the bare backs of his knees. Yet persecution had been worn like a badge, each stoic refusal to yelp another laurel. Now Bee bit his lip.

"They do not see things as we see them, these women," said Muller with dark and gentle eyes. "They see invisible things. What is true and plain to us is an irrelevant detail to her, Steven. We move slowly and carefully through their world, and they tolerate our stumbling because they find it endearing. Love and pity are separated only by the fear of men: the women do not fear what we fear." He became self-conscious suddenly: a hand slipped into the pocket for the knife-haft, and he adjusted his hat, frowning at Claudette. "What happens between us has happened, but she is different."

"Have we been cruel to you Mooler?"

The ghost of smile flickered across the mouth and eyes. "Steven Bee is his mother's son."

"Regina hitched you to the chair again I'm guessing. Using old Mooler for a husky to pull her to the sea." But Bee's grin faded quickly as he saw that Muller had retreated once more. The frivolity was over when Claudette rejoined them. She did not hide her apprehension.

Once more the transformation was faultless. "Did Mr Bee look after you?" asked Muller. He was calm and interested, yet now the aloofness that marked most of his intercourse in the Vineyard was missing. It struck Bee with startling clarity, and he wondered that he had not realised sooner that Muller had become attached to the child.

"I don't need anyone to look after me," she said. "I'm not a child."

Muller laughed, his face cracking into what seemed a genuine smile. Like this, he was almost handsome. "Even young ladies need looking after, Claudette. And you are very much a young lady. Mr Bee is the best person for the job, isn't he?" She blushed, and Bee saw that Muller knew he had hit close to the mark. The smile was still warm, but the eyes were gleaming now as Muller pressed on.

"Many young ladies on the island think Mr Bee is very handsome," he said. "They would be quite jealous of you that you had captured his heart for a whole afternoon."

"Muller…"

"Now I have embarrassed him. Such a gentleman."

So it was jealousy, ridiculous and bankrupt. What promise had the old man seen in the child that he should abandon his citadel of ice and venture into the hot bright world? It was immensely sad, and he wanted to comfort Muller, tell him that he was admirable in ways not understood by a girl not yet ten years old. But pity would drive Muller away and make him impossible: he would have to suffer at the hands of the girl and be done.

"Look what Steven gave me," said Claudette and Bee winced as she produced the little plant. "It eats flies."

Muller admired the gift, pointing out its fine colour and the fierce nature of its clutching spines, and asked her if it had to be fed often. She said no, it ate very rarely; then an unbearable silence as Claudette was content to poke the still-shut jaws. Muller hung over her, and Bee could not look at his face as he waited for another word or glance. None came, and the old man straightened slowly. He adjusted his hat and tugged his loose tie back into place.

"Goodbye, Claudette. I must be getting along." Still he waited.

At last she glanced up and smiled, sweetly and dismissively. "Bye," she said and returned to her plant.

18

Muller's body was cold once more, and he settled deeper into the stiff jacket, shuddering as the chill streaked up his back to tingle his shoulder blades. The chair was wet under his cheek, and for a moment he feared that he had soiled the lapels. The room was dim with the forgotten gentle light of the rainy season, and the plashing of great raindrops came through from outside the kitchen where the gutters had rusted. A hush lay over the house and the island.

The man in the cupboard door was obscene, an abomination. A lank strand of hair had slipped down beside his face, and the cheeks were grizzled and unkempt. The jacket, bunched and folded into sharp creases where his body had crushed it into the chair, bulged crazily over

his shoulders. A vile hunchback gazed sullenly back at him. He shivered in the cold room as he fought the garment back into shape, stroking it straight across his shoulders and arms. The medals glinted in the mirror and he clutched at them, holding their cold solidity in his palm, squeezing until the point of a small bronze star began hurting his soft flesh.

He smoothed down the trousers, slipping a finger along the red strip that ran from belt to ankle. The material – his wife had known its name – was perishing, and he hesitated, unwilling to rub away further at the flash of colour in the midnight blue fabric. Beyond the window the rain whispered down. A brief lifting of the curtain revealed massive clouds, squatting softly over the mountain like an artist's fancy of a pastoral landscape, and then the veil was drawn closed once more and the invisible world dripped and rustled.

His knees grated audibly as he stood and he resented his frailty. He ran a hand through his hair and straightened his back: the creature was gone, and the man, although old and sunken, was correct and relatively neat, no more tousled than a young lieutenant struggling home after a successful party.

His old white shirt and grey trousers were soft and warm as he pulled them on over the sagging stomach. The smell of mothballs faded as the mirror swung away, smearing his reflection into a flash of the wall, the window; and then the cold plastic of the uniform's cover was gone. The oak-leaves jutted from the great doors as they had through a hundred seasons, frozen in their perpetual summer, growing darker with the stains of the island's climate. A satyr, its eyes inscrutable and its wicked beard pitted with worm, winked at the window beyond Muller.

It was indisputably paranoid to entertain the notion that Bee and the child were in league: Harry Orange at his worst would barely harbour such terrors of ego. And yet what had they spoken of? Would her precocity have been kept in reign by the taciturn bitterness of the boy, or had there been – the idea, shamefully, pained him – the same awakening in Bee of something that sought to deny the appropriate enforcement of distance, as had happened in his own home, in the same chair that even now sighed back into shape? The boy was raw, unschooled in the delicacies of distance: it was more than likely that indiscretions had taken place, unspoken promises of companionship that could and would never be fulfilled.

Being replaced as the object of confidence had naturally been unpleasant, and the discovery that the boy was the favoured party had awakened a deep and satisfying rage in him, made sweeter by the apparently innocent savagery of Regina Bee's elaboration on what she regarded a budding romance. But not until the forest had closed in around him and the laboured breathing of Bee had melted into the chorus of the frogs had he felt the full extent of the fiery jealousy that wracked his thoughts. She had taken Bee deeper into the secret heart of

the forest than any man had a right to go. She had taken him out of sight of the world and the island, and away from Muller's eyes; to be alone with the boy. To talk of things secret from Muller.

In the night, the pistol clammy against the skin of his cheeks, he had observed the moment again and again: his quivering legs, incapable of thrusting on through the brush, his breathing threatening to betray his pursuit. Then the indecision, a genuine dilemma, as the pair drew further away with every heaved inhalation, yet carried him closer to their secret destination and the bitter satisfaction that observing them would bring. The moment had seemed acceptable then, but its poisonous defeat had multiplied unbearably since then: the slow walk through the forest, away from the admiration of Claudette, sat with him now like a memory of a horrific crime, a castration.

The hiss of the record calmed him, and for a time the familiar melodies allowed a respite from Bee and the child; but the imperfections in the recording began to hook like nettles in his consciousness. The half-formed metaphor of the ticking record was crude but nevertheless unpleasant, and Muller went in search of the cat.

The clouds were lifting when he approached the rosehouse, but still a fine drizzle swept across the island, muffling sound and softening the dust of the roads into clinging mud. The curtain of the forest around Antoine dripped and gurgled, and the blossoms festooning the old woman's house hung limp and drained of colour, leaking from every fold under the misty waves of moisture.

She was waiting at the door, a long red shawl folded about her head and shoulders.

"Don't Mr Muller look handsome!" she cried. His hands fluttered to the pockets of the black jacket and quickly smoothed the garment flat over his sides. He felt naked. "It's Fred Astaire or we're a lying Pharisee!" She wagged her finger at him, delighted. "Who you plannin' to waltz, Mr Muller, because we know it ain't us unless you include wheelin' chairs on your card."

"You look lovely, Regina," he said and took the hand that was offered him. "That is a very striking shawl."

"Sewed him ourself in case we ever got stuck on she mountain out back and needed something for watching eyes to snag," she chortled. "Lord knows nobody would note Regina Bee missin'."

"Nonsense. You are indispensable here."

"Like our Mr Muller," she said, and abruptly dropped his hand. "Two smileys in the kitchen. Thought since you had the motor, we'd bring the pair."

The two sheep heads, purple and rank where they gazed with horrified surprise from a great iron pot, were carried to the doorway and then wrestled through the damp air into Harry Orange's car. Muller hesitated as he searched for the most stained part of the rear seat to place the greasy pot, but the upholstery was torn and evenly grimy.

Regina Bee carefully settled her shawl about her once more, and smoothed her dress, a dark blue sheet flecked with a thousand tiny white flowers. She came from the chair easily, no heavier than a young child. They moved in silence: he was embarrassed at the pressure of her wasted body against his, and she was intent on saving the great sweep of crimson from touching the ground. It was better that way.

Few islanders possessed cars, for the pitted roads and salt air took a heavy toll on any machine not fanatically cared for, and Muller could pull up to within a few paces of the ornate portal at the front of the Premiership. A fifty-year-old sedan, svelte and massive, squatted beside a new vehicle with a licence plate revealing it as the latest acquisition of the civil service. Already the red rust had found the corners of the doors. A scatter of guests was hurrying through the drizzle, handbags held aloft over silken headdresses, tuxedo trousers hitched up above the muddy driveway.

The path was uneven where paving stones, worn loose of their foundations, jutted up like melting pack ice. Moss cascaded through the old stone balustrades, behind which a wild garden was dimly visible, the tangled remains of a formal herb garden. A delicate marble arm, fingers beckoning birds that no longer came, poked from the thicket. A snatch of music came from the looming house above – a piano, a violin – and then the squeak of the wheelchair and the whisper of the impending rain smothered it. The windows glowed against the mass of the sky.

A slick ramp, partially obscured by a riotous yellowwood tree that spilled untended over the path, led into the gloomy foundations of the house, and the noise and clutter of the kitchens swelled as he fought the chair towards the tradesman's entrance. How well it suited the plump bureaucrats to see Muller labouring towards the servants' realm, the ultimate butler in a parody of servitude. Mud was beginning to splatter the backs of his trousers. He glared at the house above, ready to stare down any mocking eyes in the windows; but no silhouettes appeared.

Three maids leaned on an ancient wooden counter cluttered with herbs and pans in the steamy scullery, their speech like the calling of doves around a water-hole at noon. They were northern women, copper-skinned with shy, heavy-lidded eyes and pretty mouths, and Muller greeted them in their own language; but they were timid in the presence of the old woman in the chair and curtseyed, tight-lipped.

"*Se zal ne hap*," he said. She will not bite. The youngest of the women giggled, but they would not be drawn. The willows of his boyhood seemed to belong to a dream brought tantalisingly close by these women, themselves out of step with the harsh times he and they had stumbled into. He longed to linger here, anonymous and easy, but Regina Bee was eager to join the party, and the bony fingers were pressing into his hand where it rested on the chair. He would return later.

A young driver, keen and neatly pressed, carried the old woman up the staircase into a small anteroom where she took pains to arrange herself and her shawl. The room seemed entirely forgotten: three paintings stood leaning against the far wall, their gilded and elaborate frames shabby with cobwebs and dust. Tall bookshelves surrounded the room on three sides, but their racks were empty save for some cracked mugs, a hammer and a packet of screws. A political pamphlet gathered dust on one of the lower shelves, and Muller brushed it clean while Regina finished her preparations. *The iron is hot*, screamed the front page beneath a stylised picture of a young black man with a sledgehammer raised above his head. Muller turned it over to examine the printing details, for the document was familiar to him. As he had thought: the Phoenix Press, a noble name for a stinking room housing three typewriters and a copying machine saturated with spilled ink. The pamphlet was old, for the press had been neutralised over twenty years ago: he delicately folded it in half and slipped it into his jacket pocket. A strange memento, he thought, and yet oddly reassuring.

There was a polite tap at the door and the polished cheeks of one of the better-known civil servants appeared, gleaming in the light. He looked through Muller and bared his teeth in an oily smile for the woman.

"Mother Bee! Miles wants to know where his heart-mother is!" He swept into the room, arms spread out to embrace her, but she turned to Muller.

"You know Mr Odumbe, don't you?" The Cheshire cat grin froze, and he hung over her like a ridiculous vampiric count transfixed by an unexpected sunbeam.

"Only by reputation," said Muller. He bowed stiffly. "Mr Odumbe."

Odumbe offered him a cool and limp hand, disdaining to close his fingers around Muller's. It felt like a dead fish. "Shall we go, my dear?" he cooed and wrestled the chair towards the door. Jolted and tipped towards the dark passage outside, Regina peered over her shoulder.

"Don't castaway an old lady in these sharkish waters, Mr Muller!" She laughed, and Odumbe brayed his admiration for the joke.

Somewhere the piano was labouring over an old dance tune, a beat too slow. Muller trailed his fingers along the dim wall of the passage as the music and the murmur of voices grew louder. He passed more paintings, languid colonial officers and stern missionaries standing on their heads where they had been removed from the walls. The plaster under his fingers was rough, as if prepared for a coat of paint, but no powder came away with his hand: the corridor had been abandoned to its state years ago.

The ballroom had been a magnificent epicentre for the residence, a room of rambling lines and secret niches with an ornately detailed ceiling wildly out if place over the black and white chequerboard floor. Some ornamental palms still crouched beside the great squat pillars that formed the perimeter of the dance floor, allowing those with secrets – both political and romantic – to meet unobserved for a time behind their limp fronds. Lank red drapes, their hems flecked with damp and the attentions of fishmoths, gave a cursory illusion of dignity to the room; but the light and shadows of the era which had created this playground of intrigue and display were banished by the massive chandelier overhead, refitted with electricity. Dozens of bulbs blazed down over the room, searing shadows away and leaching the colour from the throng of guests who moved like a single organism in the centre of the room, heaving gently like an uprooted plant on the open ocean. He saw the red flash of Regina's shawl amid a huddle young men bobbing like penguins in their evening suits, and then she was swallowed up by more voluminous well-wishers, important wives cruising the floor in their outrigger dresses.

A young official, no older than Bee, nervously appeared at his side. Mr Muller was wanted in the office, if Mr Muller wouldn't mind. The directing hand was polite but firm. It concerned Muller that he should feel nothing at the request, that he had felt nothing since their arrival except the desire to speak to the women in the kitchen. He followed the swallow-tail of the young man, and as he walked he entertained a diverting fantasy. He imagined that he was fading, growing dim with each step he took. A shadow would step into the office behind the messenger, and whatever reception was planned for him would be thrown into turmoil as his disembodied voice whispered from the shadow. He glanced at the floor at his own shadow, striding ahead of him like a predatory beast tasting the thin ankles that hurried before him. He lengthened his stride and the shadow crept up the trousers. The young man turned, resisting alarm as the shadow surged up his back towards his neck, and Muller smiled; and then the shadow was gone as the darkness of another corridor enveloped them. Here he could complete the metamorphosis into shadow unmolested and pursue unseen.

A return to the forest would now be possible. Let Claudette lead her favourite toy to the place denied Muller: he would track them just a step behind, listen to every word. Perhaps

he would reveal himself when the journey was over. Bee would be enraged, defeated by the ease of Muller's intrusion, but the girl was delighted by unconventional diversions and would surely desire the companionship of a shadow. His rubber soles moved soundlessly over the uneven carpet of the corridor, and once more the messenger turned, this time to reassure himself that Muller followed. Disappointingly, the young official smiled nervously and ushered him towards the bright outline of a door, standing slightly ajar.

"Into the light," he said softly.

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"How do I look?" He straightened his tie with laboured care and slowly pushed his gleaming hair back across his skull. "What do you see?"

"I see Mr Muller, sir. If Mr Muller will please…"

"Pity. When do you think old soldiers start fading away as they say?"

The young man's patience was at an end. Desperately he gestured at the door. Muller slowly produced his handkerchief from his pocket and carefully refolded it. It was puerile, this puppeteering.

"You'll carry me in there if I keep you a second longer, won't you?" The official grinned and nodded. "Well to hell with you. Here I go."

The handle turned in his hand and the door was jerked from his grasp. Quickly he stepped back into the dark of the corridor, treading on the toes of the young man who blundered into his back. He felt the sharp chin collide with his shoulder, and a hissed apology warmed his ear. The dwarfish immensely broad silhouette of the Premier stood before them, and instantly the moist hand was reaching for his own. He stood motionless, and the hand jerked to his arm, grasping the thin muscle with avuncular familiarity. He pulled free but the little man had already turned, grabbing for his jacket that hung on a hook at the door. Muller felt deflated that his defiance should go unmarked.

Miles Smallboy yapped a monosyllabic command at someone beyond the door and tugged the jacket over his broad shoulders, assuming the form of an outsized mushroom as he rifled through the pockets. "That's all of it," he muttered and turned an icy smile on Muller. Once more the hand fastened onto his sleeve as the tiny pig eyes glittered up at him. "Mr Muller, my secretary has something for you. Please excuse me."

Then he swirled past, sparing a lightning embrace for the young man, and stumped towards the distant glow of the ballroom. Muller heard a snatch of a whistle, a boisterous and unsuccessful attempt at melody, and then the Premier disappeared from view with a wet and elongated clearing of his throat.

The secretary, a handsome man with kind eyes and traces of grey in his cropped black hair, stood smoothly as Muller approached the wide desk. It was the only luxury in the room, surrounded by an empty hat-stand, a battered grey filing cabinet and small bookshelf cluttered with ring-bound documents. Rain suddenly pattered against the small window, and beyond Muller could see an ivy-covered wall, a drainpipe, and the dismal sky.

"Won't you take a seat, Mr Muller," said the man and turned his attention to seeking some misplaced document in a drawer of his desk. His accent revealed a foreign education, the lilts of the Local dialect erased in favour of a smooth and inscrutable inflection.

"I prefer to stand, thank you. I assume this won't take long."

"Correct." The man was special, obviously: a silky import into the menagerie of passionate and dull apparatchiks who grappled with all around them in the administration of the island; one of the new breed from the north. Once Muller had been such an import. This man had been how old then? Bee's age? There was more than a passing similarity between the two: the figure behind the desk – now straightening a handwritten letter under his broad hands – shared the boy's fine cheeks and dark eyes. Bee would do well to age as this man had done.

"To come to the point," he said, "the Premier has asked me to convey to you that you are not welcome at this function." He passed his hand over the letter before him, as if it would provide all further elaboration.

"I was under the impression that I had been asked as Regina Bee's escort," said Muller. The secretary smiled with a neat and consummately pitying tightening of his lips.

"As we both know Mrs Bee can be a wilful woman, and she has her own agenda as far as the Premier is concerned. The original invitation stated that she was welcome to bring her son Steve…"

"Steven. He is called Steven."

"…Steven was invited by proxy but that was the extent of the mandate. I'm sorry to cause you embarrassment, Mr Muller, but given your historical affiliations the Premier believes your presence here is inappropriate."

"And what do you think?"

"To answer that question would also be inappropriate." He smiled sadly and pulled pile of documents towards him. "Would you excuse me, Mr Muller, I have pressing engagements."

"Not going down to listen?"

"I wrote the speech," he said with a hint of pride. "You will unfortunately miss it but I can send a copy with you."

"I assume you've broken it to Regina that she will be wheeling herself home?"

For a moment the smooth face hesitated; but soon recovered as Muller grudgingly knew it would. "Mrs Bee will be escorted home by either myself or Comrade Omatoso at the door."

"Can Comrade Omatoso drive?"

"All our staff are proficient at operating vehicles. She will be safe."

"I'm more worried about him. Tell him to keep out of potholes."

Now there was unmasked irritation in the secretary's voice when he spoke, rising from his chair and ushering Muller towards the door where the young man hovered. "I don't know what you like to think your relationship with Mrs Bee entitles you to, but your familiarity is both inappropriate and offensive to many of our people."

"Tell them sorry from me," said Muller and quickly moved to the door. "Good evening, Mr…?"

"I am the Secretary of the Premier. Good evening." He returned to his desk and with a small sigh reached for the first of the documents.

19

The kitchen was deserted, but the sounds of laughter and voices raised in bawdy argument emanated from a small corridor beyond the massive hearth, now strewn with the debris of cooking. Muller's ears burned as he hesitated in the empty room: like spying on a birthday party one has not been invited to. Like spying on a meeting between Bee and the child. It was pathetic, without a doubt, but the alternative would surely be worse. He moved swiftly and silently to the little passage.

Beyond the half-open door sat the women. Their faces were bright and set in wide smiles as they watched a hidden storyteller, whose voice seemed that of an elderly woman without all her teeth. The story was rapid and the dialect difficult to follow but it revolved around the efforts of the speaker's husband to remove a bible from the jaws of an adventurous goat. Every new plan – fresh hay to lure the beast, dynamite, dentists' pliers – was met with a storm of laughter and cries of disbelief. Tears streamed from the eyes of the youngest, and Muller smiled, drawn into the warmth of the little room and the fervour of the narrator and the increasing desperation of the husband.

They hung fascinated when it transpired that the local priest had been summoned. But the priest being white, and the goat being black, they had failed to understand one another and the holy man had left pouring spleen upon the wily animal. The women crowed once more, but Muller drew back into the corridor.

When had these fancies come to disappoint him? The child was greatly to blame, bringing with her to the island a brand of magic that loosened his tongue and lured him away from the foundations of truth. And yet he knew that his wife would have enjoyed the company of Claudette. They would have conversed easily, making effortless frivolity, and he knew that secretly he would have revelled in it, perhaps hidden behind a newspaper where he could listen unobserved. It was a natural consequence of age, this resentment of the superfluous. He had earned the right to reject any truths but those he lived by: the girl, innocent of everything but her own perceptions, still basked in the supreme egotism of childhood. All was equal to her, and those who refused to co-operate in what she considered an egalitarian world were rejected as defective. Once he had conceivably shared certain principles with Claudette, but now he was alone and the youth that nurtured such illusions was irretrievably past.

It was even more perplexing, then, that the fantasies came fluently, sat with such ease on a mind he liked to believe was still sharp despite his conscious decision to resist them. It was laughable to think that the condition could be medical: the destruction of personality and the collapse into feebleness that accompanied it were still years away.

If *she* were here, to laugh away his concerns and lead him into the only fantasy he had ever treasured, he might not feel so – not lonely, for loneliness had its merits – old. She would be grey by now, for the white streaks at her temples had arrived early, lines of silver that she carefully twined behind the darker hair when she was expecting company. If she could see him crouching outside this little room this evening she would shake her head and say, 'You are making a fuss.' It was true. He was making a fuss. Claudette's wilful conjuring was powerless beside the eternal truth of his wife. (She would be grey, but she would never be old.)

He straightened and knocked lightly on the door. The laughter stopped, petering out into coughing from the storyteller. The woman nearest the door rose quickly and opened the door. She curtseyed and cast her eyes down, asking if she could help. He answered in the dialect. No need for humility: he wished only to thank them for the fine food on offer. She gave a tight nod of her head while the two women behind regarded him quietly. He felt an oafish intruder, destroying the laughter that had seemed so plentiful as if he had thrown a stone into a motionless pool. Forgive me, I am disturbing. She did not acknowledge or deny, but curtseyed once more. The door was closed gently behind him.

He stepped into the chill air of the garden and once more the tinkling laughter struck up. For a moment he wondered if they were mocking him but soon accepted, with a tinge of envy, that the further exploits of the goat were being continued. He wished the women well and climbed the ramp towards the path.

The rain had retreated for the moment, and above a small patch of the night sky was visible: stars shimmered through the vapours. The darkness of the garden and the fresh scents about him were soothing and he lingered on the path, touching the leaves that glistened in the light from the windows above. Five steps, made boggy and uneven from moss and fallen leaves, led to a gateway, an ornate portico into the grounds beyond. Muller made no sound as he trod on the damp stones and stepped through into the darkness. The gardens were invisible and only the nearest trees loomed loomed pale against the gloom. Nothing moved in their roots or their branches, and the path, a ghostly ribbon visible only to the peripheral glance, was even. This was a place one could wander, a tame forest elevated to cater to the tastes of civilisation and stripped of the base seasons of the wood that lay dripping and suffocating five miles beyond the glittering windows of the Residence. That place hid only the hunter and the pursued. He walked happily into the silent grove before him.

A murmur became audible through the trees, and soon he heard the cold rush of the sea. The trees here were battered, bent and gnarled by the winds of the coast. Already the path was becoming soft, and white sand glowed in the starlight under his feet. He looked back, but the wood was dark. The bulk of the house beyond sat squat against the blacker sky where the mountain rose wreathed in cloud. He recognised the lights of the ballroom but the rest of the building was dark.

Muller stood behind an old iron gate choked with creepers. The ornate curls and delicate flowers of the gate were rusted into crude lumps, and he held it carefully to avoid the crumbling splinters. The surf was wild. Massive breakers peeled open along the dim slash of the beach, and dashed themselves into spray in the dark shallows. The surge swept up the beach like lava, probing for the tufts of sea-grass and the trunks of the palms that marked the extremities of the sea's domain. Once a wave broke with extraordinary violence and the black water rushed towards the gate so that Muller hopped back, fearing for his shoes; but the little grasses broke the onslaught and the sheet of water withdrew once more, dragging a dead shrub back with it end over end. Then the water released its booty, and the plant lay pathetic and abandoned on the smooth apron of the beach before it was manhandled by the next surge. At last a wave claimed it that had the strength to carry it back into the ocean, and the plant was gone.

Muller wondered how long the beaches would last under this siege. The wide warm expanses that he and she had explored were already gone: stepping from the trees, one was tipped into the shallows now. The slipway, half a mile through the darkness, was reportedly in urgent need of renovation: its submarine edge now hung out over the increasing slope of the beach as the ocean stole the supporting sand. Another mighty breaker towered ghostly white

over its predecessors and hurled itself at the shore with an overpowering thunder. Muller put his hands over his ears, diminishing the sound of the surf to a moan. She had revelled in the crashing of the waves, shouting back at the loudest, her voice cracking in gleeful resistance, but he could never become used to the eternal noise. In the calm of high summer, when the sea was hard and flat as glass, a walk along the coast was not unwelcome. But in the winter storms he remained at home where windows and curtains and his music could keep out the thunder of the surf. She had once questioned him (she had been gentle, with a ready smile, but she was insistent) and he had stumbled at last to the vaguest of conclusions about the nature of violence and the sea. She would not understand – and he did not wish to elaborate, for they were new to the island and talk of the Mainland between them was still taboo – that violence with control was order. The sea denied any thoughts of order, and the idea that Muller had hesitantly suggested was that the violence of the waves was wasteful and therefore frightening.

Tonight the sea was frightening, chewing at the land relentlessly. Drizzle was sifting down once more, and the stars had disappeared. The path back to the street was a long and wet one, and he would have to pass under the view of the ballroom windows. He would not run, for they must not see him as a fugitive, but if he was caught in the rain they would undoubtedly gather at the windows to point and giggle. He pulled at the gate and it swung open easily.

The palms provided adequate shelter from the steady drizzle and he hurried through the sand and over fallen fronds, uneasy between the pounding of the surf to his left and the dripping blackness of the bush. At last he found what he had sought, the little track rolled flat and hard by the bicycles and handcarts of the fishermen. He was exposed to the sky once more, but with the going firm underfoot the harbour was only minutes away. Already the fury of the breakers was being diminished, and when the dim pier came into view, its red beacon soft and indistinct through the rain, the swells were dark and smooth. A light flared for a moment beyond the jetty, and Muller saw the illuminated face of a shark man as he lit a cigarette. Then the match was gone and the dark mass of the boat rode its anchor in the bay.

A figure was stumbling towards him across the beach and he took cover behind a wide palm. He pressed himself against the rough unravelling bark and heard laboured breathing as the man struggled through the soft sand towards the tree line. He grasped the knife in his pocket and began to ease the blade open. The intruder swore under his breath as he tripped over a half-buried root and Muller paused: stealth was not important to the stranger, and it dawned on him that the man was unaware of his presence. He held his breath as the man crashed through a dead bush and came to a stop an arm's length from him. He heard a zip

open, and then a liquid splattering on the fronds in front of the man. A deep and contented sigh came from the darkness where the man stood.

The police van, crawling on its rounds through the vineyards, swung slowly into the access road that led to the slipway, lighting up the little grove with its headlamps. Muller shrank back into the tree but the stranger was transfixed by the lights. He saw a stupidly limp lower lip, a jaw dropped open in surprise: drunk and wet, his hands clutching at his groin, Sauvage stood and tried to stop the stream while the spotlight moved slowly beyond the trees as the car turned the corner.

Muller said, "It's darker on the beach," and the pilot yelled, thrashing like a beached fish as he tried to fasten his pants and flee.

"Jesus *Christ*!" Sauvage glared blindly at the shadows where Muller stood. "*Je*sus!" With a final violent effort he tugged his trousers into place. "You shit. Who is that? Is that Muller? Muller you fuck. Show yourself."

But Muller kept to his hiding place in the shadows: to engage would be to dilute the sweetness of being justified in his contempt for the pilot. He would watch while he could. The pilot steadied himself, and tried vainly to muffle his rasping breath. A lurching investigation of the sand at his feet produced a savage chunk of driftwood and Muller was relieved that he had not revealed himself as Sauvage tested the heft of the club and began to stalk a tree yards from his hiding place. The knife was opened silently. He hoped his palm would not be moist if the need for violence arose, but now the haft sat firmly in his fingers and he watched the pilot reach the tree. The club smashed into the rough trunk of the palm and jolted free of Sauvage's hands, rustling into the dead fronds in the darkness beyond. His strength apparently sapped, the pilot slumped down into the sand and hung his head between his knees. He began to cough and finally spat weakly. Muller could not tell if he wiped his mouth or his eyes.

"You could have got your throat cut," said Muller softly, and Sauvage nodded.

"How many throats you cut?" Muller was startled by the bitterness in the voice. When men stewed their disappointments in liquor as Sauvage had had been doing they became maudlin, resentful at worst. But the outline on the faintly glowing sand was poisonous. It grabbed a handful of sand and hurled it in Muller's direction, hissing across the fronds at his feet. "It wasn't enough. Mr Muller." He lay back and stretched out his arms with a deep sigh.

Muller's legs were tired, and he slowly sank to his haunches to squat against the stringy bark. Still the pilot lay, splayed in the sand. The rain had stopped entirely now, and the stars were appearing like smoke overhead. They danced on the still bay below them and Muller tried to identify constellations in the water, but the swells played tricks on him, the guttering lights disappearing or surging into other groupings as the soft water whispered onto

the beach. Far away the breakers hammered the coast, but the harbour was as still as he could remember it.

"They're not letting me stay," croaked the voice from the shadows. "Company's folded, so no more visa." So it was true: the relief aircraft, already a week overdue, was to be delayed indefinitely. Arrangements would have to be made, not taxing but nevertheless a nuisance. (He dared not ask the vital question, and to bring her into it with her grandfather in his current state seemed sordid in the extreme.) It was of course for the best: the Cape would blunt her through time, its winds and sun smoothing and hardening her into something intriguing but entirely wasted.

"Know what they told me?" demanded the pilot, addressing the stars. "They said I wasn't Vineyard material. Not Vineyard material." He barked a hollow laugh and spat, "Not fucking black enough." He rolled onto his side, brushing the sand from his ribs.

He must be careful not to sound anxious: the pilot was drunk, would remember nothing of their meeting, and yet how much had Claudette told him? The humiliating visit and the mildewed biscuits had surely been recounted. "When are you leaving?"

"Not long, not long." The shadow snorted bitterly. "Mr Muller doesn't know everything round here. Need to know. Remember?" Once more the humourless laugh. There were no ocean-going vessels headed north, he knew. The supply ship *17 December 1986* – a rusted tub pressed into service for the state a decade after it should have disappeared under the scrappers' torches – was delayed a thousand miles to the north, and no fishing skiff or shark boat would dare the three days necessary to reach the railway port where the mountains that faced the Cape subsided into the grass plains of the Mainland. He was bluffing, or he was walking north. Either way it was of no consequence.

The pilot was becoming drowsy, his breathing growing measured.

"You are taking Claudette with you?"

"Staying." He grunted, settling deeper into the damp sand. "Mrs Gerber."

"This is a permanent arrangement?"

"Two months, whatever. Her father will get her. Fucking troll. Arty cunt, money for every – all 'cept …" The conclusion was mumbled, and soon the shadow was soundly asleep. Muller fought the desire to kick the sleeping man. Sixty days: a doctor could not have given a more cruel estimation, and its crudity made it all the more distasteful. She would leave and he would be sane once more: the prospect was horrifying. The damage had been done, and only she could nurse him. She would leave him with only the acute awareness of his sanity, and viciously rational he would long for her.

He searched the man's pockets and found the lump of the wallet: Sauvage gave only a grunt as Muller tugged it free. He did not know what he hoped to find. A photograph would be repulsively sentimental, and besides the pilot had seemed eager to distance himself from the child since their arrival on the beach that afternoon. He remembered the interminable confusion of comforting her as she crouched on her suitcase while Bee watched him. He grinned. There was always Steven Bee. There was *only* Steven Bee.

The same beach shone silver in the starlight now as the clouds pulled back towards the horizon. The grey murk still squatted over the peak and across the black ranges of the Mainland, but to the south, over the great ocean, it was clear. He made his way down onto the shoreline packed hard by the diminishing swells. A fish leaped from the bay and plopped back unseen among the stars. Muller paused and looked but nothing broke the oily surface. Harsher constellations blazed beyond the trees, the familiar lights of the outskirts of the Vineyard. The windows of Meyer the schoolteacher would gleam after all the others had vanished. The shark men, docking at sunset, called Meyer 'the evening star' where he sat and prepared his lessons for his thirty pupils in his neat, cramped hand. Beyond Meyer's little home the bulging Vogel warren, seven dirty children and two dirty parents shouting simultaneously; and three fences beyond, his own home. The cat would be agitated. He lengthened his stride.

An unfamiliar shape loomed ahead and with a surprise Muller recognised the lines of the simpleton's aircraft. Mercedes had crafted a fine toy, and he marvelled that he had failed to take notice of such labours just a hundred yards from his door. (He realised he could not remember when the hammering had ceased.) A fine replica it was: the floats were badly dented in places and crudely soldered patches gleamed raised and rough in the starlight, but otherwise it stood proudly near the top of the slipway, two great chains wound through warped struts to iron mooring rings in the concrete. He wondered how long the humour of the fishermen would last before the toy was dragged somewhere more appropriate.

The curtains of the houses were drawn and he was alone in the street. The cat flung itself at his ankles and ate greedily. Tired, Muller made his bed with a new sheet and smoothed the blanket that had slumped to the floor the week before. Sleep came quickly and he did not wake when the animal complained to be let out.

20

Marconi claimed that the matter – he was not eager to elaborate beyond calling it "this mess" – had arisen suddenly and caught him entirely unawares. Ordinarily, he said, he would never ask a busy man such as Muller to help, but as one of the bar's oldest customers (a great deal of gesticulation and florid flattery tried to undo the implications of the title) he thought

Muller "might enjoy to taste the sharper edge of the job maybe." So Muller stood behind the bar, awaiting Orange's next demand. The novelty of being served by Mr Muller had worn off mercifully quickly for Fat Mike and a taciturn Local man named Owlhouse, but the old spy could not contain his delight.

"Goddam!" he had been exclaiming for half an hour. "Goddam! You make a pretty barkeep. Hit me again." And Muller would oblige. Harry Orange was quite drunk, and the game would soon be over.

When Bee strode into the bar Orange was asleep at a table in the furthest recess of the room, unconscious of the gusts that worried the stretch of canvas roof over him. Muller enjoyed the sensation of weight and authority that the bar provided. The ranks of glasses, austere and attractive, were his temporary domain, invisible to the interlopers beyond the counter. He began to understand the Italian's free tongue, for this sprawling pulpit invited pontification. Muller was pleased when Bee slumped onto the nearest high stool, excited at the promise of conversation in this altered world.

"Me usual," said Bee.

"No game today?"

"Muddy as hell out there." He looked sidelong at Muller. "And Emmerson got no time for it no more. Playing with she plane." He stood up on the footrests of the stool and reached over the bar for the jug of ice water. They spoke amicably about Regina and shared guarded impressions of the pilot. The conversation was steered away from the girl and Muller was appreciative of this.

"I come about me money," said the boy abruptly. The tone was peremptory but he saw that Bee was uncertain of his words. The subject was taboo for Regina beyond the cliffs of the bluff, and he doubted if she shared any more with her son. Certainly he and the boy had never come close to it. For a moment he feared that Bee would confront him about the missing funds.

"Me ma say you keepin' it for me." Muller nodded. "How much me worth? Mercedes reckon a couple or three thousand but me not so sure."

Muller wrote the six-digit figure on the notepad under the counter and slid it across to the boy. He stared at it blankly and pushed it back. "That's a horrible lot," he said softly.

"Your mother has been very generous."

"It's a lot, man." He bit his lip for a time, turning his glass over and over in his fingers. Uncertainly he asked, "You don't want some?"

"It's yours, Steven."

"Just take a zero off the end."

"No."

The boy's face darkened and he banged the glass down. "Man, what me supposed to do with money like that?"

Muller left him and went to switch off the air-conditioner. The day was blustery, a weak sun filtering through clouds that scudded across the bowl of the sky, and the machine was making the room unpleasantly cold. He glanced back at Bee, but the boy's face was hidden. He saw him reach for the slip of paper, holding it gingerly in his fingers as he stared at it. He berated himself for not taking more of boy's money.

When he returned to the bar the slip was where he had left it and Bee was composed.

"How far that much get a man over-sea?"

Muller said, "Have you heard that the relief flight is not coming?"

"I heard. How far, Mooler?"

"They tell me *17 December* is on a sandbar."

He must fight until Bee flung himself into the breakers and tried to swim. The pain tearing with surprising intensity at his innards was unpleasant but of no real concern: there was no reason why the boy would have changed his intentions despite losing the aircraft. Indeed, this discomfort was partly deserved, the result of allowing the cruel machinations of the girl to cloud over the reality of Bee's betrayal. Yet there was no way off the island but on foot towards everything Bee was trying to run from. Muller reviled his bitter triumph as the boy grew angry.

"I'll walk if I got to," said Bee.

"Carrying that money you couldn't die quicker if you gave it to someone to shoot you in the head."

Bee flung out his hands in the dismissive flap of extreme disdain that the Locals reserved for old women and white fools. He slipped from the stool and faced Muller, a foot taller and an imposing presence. Muller willed him to attack but the boy was wiser than that.

"You make it so I can get me money from the bank. Just do that, and leave me out."

"It's done." Bee hesitated, angry and impatient but fearful of some deception. "You go and say I said so."

"You say so, and it happens."

"Mostly."

Bee laughed and tossed back his head, making a silent appeal to the undulating ceiling of the room. The door opened: Muller saw a ragged page of newsprint flap down the street beyond, and then he was alone with the wind and the shuddering snoring of Orange in the corner.

Duty was relative. He had carried out the wishes of his state and its servants without question, even in matters that had disturbed him. In those days when he had drifted among young men and women his own age he had been known as fiercely loyal to his friends. It had been a sentimental interpretation, a ready explanation by those who did not wish to examine too closely his relationship with them. His true friends, a tiny group of nomads who never assembled at the same place and time, promised no loyalty and expected none. Marconi was diverting, an average honourable man when one put aside the bluster, but the idea that they were friends had never occurred to Muller. Besides, Orange was here: Harry still had a big mouth and could raise the roof if needed. Muller reached for his hat and, having peered through the banana leaves outside the window for any sign of the boy, hurried from the room.

A journey north was impossible: quickly he accounted for all the ships and ferries that worked Cape waters. And yet Bee's request had about it a sense of urgency that was deeply troubling. It was madness to walk inland, yet it was possible that the boy's insatiable and utterly obscure desire to leave the island had affected his judgement. Reason was useless in this case. Muller began to wonder how he might restrain the boy: the director of the island's little hospital still owed him a favour, and a fabricated epidemic to get the island quarantined was feasible. The tug pilots and ferry captains were poor men: he could more than match Bee's price. Arrest at the pass: narcotics in the boy's bag. He turned for the High Street, disgusted by the desperation of the improbable scenarios that came so urgently at this time when he needed to think clearly. The solution would be simple and ultimately impossible: he would hold Bee, and the boy would return the embrace. He would see his folly and forget the world beyond the Cape.

The clerk in the crumbling bank, struggling to be heard over the screech of three ancient ceiling fans that rocked precariously in their mountings, told him that the boy had withdrawn the specified amount. Large denominations. He had brought a small iron box with a key, and locked up the money right there in the bank. He had been very friendly. Was it for something special? Muller shrugged and thanked the clerk.

Across the road he sat on the shady porch of the hotel to tie his shoelace. Two men's voices echoed loud and hollow from the bar inside, and footsteps sounded in the eternally dark corridor that ran through the to a little garden with a plastic swimming pool guarded by hangdog asbestos flamingos. He quickly knotted the lace and slid from the raised veranda as a young maid emerged with a cigarette dangling from her lips. A voice called from inside and she rolled her eyes for Muller's benefit and took a long drag on the cigarette. Casually she held it out to him.

"Finish?"

He reached for it and she turned without further acknowledgment and disappeared. He had never learned to smoke – he had been the butt of an apparently inexhaustible supply of deeply stupid insults about this in the army – but was grateful for the generosity of the woman, made all the more touching by the boy's selfish blindness. It would give him something to do with his hands.

He walked towards the harbour, sliding his feet through the thin sprinkling of beach sand on the pavements of the Vineyard as little cloud shadows skidded up the slopes of the mountain beyond the town to disappear in the ridges of its summit. The matter had become distended in his mind, probably through the influence of the child. Bee was consistently unpredictable but the veneer of bravado was easily removed with a small measure of obstinacy, exposing the heart and soul of a boy of the island, inextricably bound to its shores and seasons. The world would waste him, for it would not take the time to sound out his silences or see his tender anger, and he, not caring, would be content to let the mass of humanity close over his eyes and ears and sink into the numbing high noon of the cities. He thought of the harsh light of the mortuary and the bloodless skin of the corpse, but the air was fresh off the sea and Muller was content in the prospect of reasonable negotiation with the boy. If that failed, civilised interrogation would do much to untangle what threatened to become an intolerable situation.

An ancient truck wobbled into the street from the harbour. Its narrow wheels, canted precariously inwards, seemed about to buckle beneath the weight of the rickety vehicle, and Muller could hear the shriek of its fan-belt above the buffeting gusts that made the sand about his feet hiss. A fisherman's boy leapt nimbly onto the running board and spurred his new mount on with a sharp slap to the roof; but a hand fumbled from the window and the little figure slipped out of reach, skipping to a stop under the awnings of the ragged bait shop. The hand flapped at the boy and retreated into the rattling cabin.

The pickup began to squawk, a wavering moan that strengthened into an unmistakable blast from its horn. The hand was waving now, pointing down the road towards Muller and gesticulating wildly. Martin Anjari, a pink bud of tongue pinched between his teeth, peered earnestly through the steering wheel and nursed the vehicle towards Muller in hesitant bursts. Melker Kwingila sat back and surveyed the passing town from behind gold-rimmed sunglasses. He waved cheerily at Muller. The pickup gave a violent start and stalled, shaking loose a plank from its side. Muller stooped and handed the plank to Anjari through the window.

"We come to fetch you to the harbour," announced the driver resolutely.

"Step into the wind-maker," murmured his enchanted passenger, lovingly patting the perished dashboard. "Engineered like no other."

"What fool gave you this?" asked Muller.

Anjari crowed triumphantly "Electrics Jeremy. Said if he didn't kill us, we would crash him and take him off his hands. Either way he win, he says. But your man drive smooth as silk since he was born."

"As silk," concurred Melker. "Driving pleasure."

"We come to see the thing at the water," continued Anjari unabated, "but boy Bee says you want to see what's going down. We come for you because that were the quickest, with the machine and all."

"That's truth," nodded Kwingila.

Muller laughed and patted the rusted mudguard before him. "I'm sure it can wait for me." He tipped his hat to the pair and set off once more for the bay. Anjari fought the car back to life, kicking the pedals as he grappled with the starter, and the flaking hood shuddered alongside Muller once more.

"Blue Tar in Antoine put money on she blowing up in the swell," Anjari said through the wheel. Kwingila waved regally at a woman beyond a dun picket fence. "Melker and me won't even put none on her starting. She'll sink, for sure."

"Ton of scrap like her," concurred his passenger and shut his eyes, his face rapturous in the afternoon sun.

The boy's bluff was amusing but charmingly amateurish. A 'chance' meeting with the old men and their conveniently borrowed truck could conceivably have alarmed him, but they were poor actors, too obviously dispatched, and their lines were rushed as they tried inexpertly to lure him into the spotlight no doubt painstakingly prepared. Which entry had been scripted for himself, he wondered. A precarious perch on the truck like so much fodder, followed by an awkward disentanglement down onto the sands? A flushed and breathless charge through the palms? No: theatrical reactions were likely only from those party to the play; and entirely gulled – so Bee had constructed it – Muller would have underplayed his part, unaware that he was alone on the stage. He would have stayed close to the trees, watching from their shadows, and his caution would have been ridiculed from the beach. The boy would not get what he wanted. He waved brightly as the truck pulled ahead of him and its occupants arranged their report.

He remained impassive as the aircraft came into view, floating gently at anchor beyond the slipway and over the shoulders and sunhats of a murmuring throng of people. The sun glinted off the thousand dents about the pretty form, and a little swell slapped across the

nearest float, sprinkling the dark torpedo-shaped mass with sunbursts. Sunshades sprouted like mushrooms in the damp sand, and the wall of distastefully full buttocks and sharp elbows warned him to keep his distance. Somebody threw a handful of sand at the machine, and it fell pattering into the swells short of the floats.

"What do you think, huh, Muller?" Fat Mike loomed up beside him. "The mongo did it good."

"Emmerson worked very hard," said Muller. The sun blazed from the bubble-like windscreen of the machine, and he held his hand to his eyes. "He has done well."

"You and me were here when it came, remember?"

Muller nodded. He remembered the girl on her suitcase, the fine lines of her little chin and the terrible slowness with which it had crumpled as the tears had come. He searched the band of admirers on the beach, but she was not among them.

"What does Sauvage think about it?"

Fat Mike shrugged. "He said it looked good enough to fly."

"Emmerson will have enjoyed that."

The little crowd broke into ragged applause, and Muller stiffened. The door of the aircraft had opened, and a leg and an arm had appeared. The glare of the cockpit was intense, and the dark shimmering lines swam in front of the sea. The little anchor came up to another half-hearted cheer and the door was closed. The arm and leg were gone.

Muller began to move towards the beach.

"It's OK if it sinks, right, Muller?" called Fat Mike. "It's pretty shallow there, right? The trawlers say they won't stand for scrap in their channels."

Martin Anjari grasped at Muller's arm and he pulled free, moving slowly around the outside of the group. The aircraft winked through the parasols.

Muller said, "Why is there someone in the machine?" and two Local women at the rear of the little gallery stared back suspiciously. "In the aircraft. Why is there someone in the aircraft?" He thought he could feel the ebbing away of time, a tangible spilling like water from a bottle. The aircraft wheezed twice, and with a harsh popping and spluttering roared into life. It burned silver and moved to the water's edge. A swell ran about his shoe and he felt its clamminess on his socks. The aircraft was growling now, belching sound and oily smoke as if clearing a cavernous white-hot throat. Still he could see no shape through the fiery shadows on the bay. The machine turned its tail on the beach and the backwash of its propeller gripped his tie and streamed it over his shoulder. Hats billowed rolled and cartwheeled towards the road and the crowd cheerfully surrendered the beach to the deep reverberation of the aircraft.

He called the pilot's name against the growing whine about his ears, but the prop continued to build to its vibrating note. He called until his voice failed him and his throat burned. The people stood stupidly among the palms and halfway up the slipway, staring. He slipped his feet from his shoes and stepped into the sea. A swell climbed his shins and splattered delicately over his knees, and he paused. A fine spray was stinging his cheeks, whipping in snaking billows from the shimmering disc of the propeller and he raised his hand to shield his eyes. He waded deeper until the cold stung his thighs and his groin ached. His trousers moved softly against his skin as the gentle tug of the shore surged through him and he turned to the beach. Only a suggestion of the sand glimmered through the swirling vapour, and he could distinguish no faces beyond. He grinned back into the gale, finally invisible: the circumstances were poetic without being sentimental, which pleased him. He moved deeper to be entirely obscured in the gleaming vapours and gasped as the swell enveloped his buttocks. He suspected that if the watchers had not been on the beach he would have bent his knees and struck off into the magnificent dunes of the ocean. Had he ever swum in this bay? His wife had tugged him deeper into the honey-warm swells of a cove. Her bathing suit was tied up around her neck with a simple bow: it aroused him, the fragile illusion of propriety, and he did not pull the teasing strings to reveal her breasts. The strap was under the water and her neck was exposed. A stern warning not to wet her hair; a weightless leap lifting them safely over the swell, the light landing as of birds alighting on a strange shore. A rogue wave, drenching her hair, shrieks and laughter, an embrace and a kiss. (He suspected that the delightful submersion was a creation of his memory). The circumstances of the day were lost to him.

The aircraft moaned and wagged its tail at Muller. He remained still, for he felt that any advance or retreat would startle it into irreversible flight. The shore beneath his socks was sloping steeply now, and it was foolishness to swim. He would strike out blindly at the floats – to cling? to drop from an unremarkable height and break his back on the concrete swells? Once again the rudder flapped skittishly and the windows became clear. Two figures bobbed inside the aircraft.

He stumbled for the shore and the people shrank back. His hair was streaked across his face and his teeth shone white, his lips stretched back like those of a trophy head, shrunken and defiant in death. Like a man saved from the gallows he swayed across the beach, bent almost double as the severed noose of his sodden tie dripped into the sands at his feet. The respectable women in the shade of the palms turned their gaze away carefully, but the boys stared at his fingers as they probed ahead of him and at the cleavage of his buttocks peeping over his trousers.

He came to a massive old tyre by the slipway, discarded from the bows of a fish-vessel and left to the tide and the beach. His breath came in sobs as he tore the rough wheel loose from the sand and dragged it painfully towards the water. He urged his muscles to heft the weight – come now, come now, it is nothing – and they bunched like bundles of reeds beneath the yellowing skin. The awkward mass crushed his hips as he fought it to the sea, and he regularly dashed his chin against it as he stumbled in the sand.

The aircraft skimmed across the bay gathering speed, and then with a joyful leap it left the water smooth beneath its floats. The terrible lightness of that bound made Muller cry out and he could not believe that such a profound shattering of the bond between the aircraft and the ocean could not leave a tear in the air behind it like torn canvas. The wake ran to a stop and became a little swell, soon enveloped by the next. He lifted the tyre to his chest and heard his shoulder tear. It was on fire, but he felt only its malfunction as he watched the pale white reflection of the machine skim the waves. With all his strength he pushed the tyre into the air. It plugged into the wet sand a yard ahead of him and rolled into the shallows. The sea crumpled over its ridges and swirled down into its hollows as it settled.

The wing was dipping now, flirting with the diamond water, and he willed it to stroke the swells. The aircraft would somersault lazily, chunks detaching like birds dropping from a telephone wire. There would be a gout of white water, and the boy would struggle to the beach, soaked in oil like penguins on the television. He would lead Bee into the town – tenderly, for he had suffered – and his triumph would be noble and poignant. Bee would hate him for this final necessary humiliation, and assume that ridicule was the motive for the slow, weary parade under the eyes of the Locals and the young civil servants; but the boy would never have predicted the mercy of moment, and he would be lost when Muller emancipated him. Bee would feel the nakedness of freedom and come to understand him in some small way. Go, Muller would say. Go home and be happy in it. He would think of something to say. Perhaps he would tell Bee to leave and never return. It was possible. He smiled as he walked, his shoes oozing salt water onto the dry tarmac of the streets. The aircraft wheeled overhead, its engine surging roughly. A thin trail smoke streamed suddenly from its snub nose, and Muller shaded his eyes and squinted at the sun; but the smoke stopped and the sparkling shape droned on out of sight beyond the great red building that loomed before him.

Bee's door was open, and he paused to touch its handle. Minutes ago the tall thin shadow had climbed this wall as his own now did. Extreme destruction could burn such a shadow into a wall: he bent slightly, but the dark shape was his own and mimicked him. The wall underneath was unblemished. The room beyond was dark and hot. The white mosquito netting over the bed undulated gently in the breaths of air that moved warmly about his face.

"She crashed yet?" asked Bee, sitting up from his pillows behind the veil.

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Bee saw the shadow sweep across the little landing beyond the doorstep. He had left the door open: to creep from his bed like a fugitive run to ground, to peer through the widening crack into the accusing eyes of the law and its accompanying retribution, would be terrible. If they came, they would find him at ease. If they did not come – there would be time for doors and locks later.

But it was Muller; and as if by some deliberate magic on the part of the old man, the aircraft muttered overhead once again on another pass. Once again Muller had slipped his thin white hands into the cogs of his life and held him fast, but he felt no rancour towards the bedraggled figure in the doorway. The matted hair and sad clothes had a simplicity about them and Bee was glad that amid the impossible take-off and the wild fantasies of guilt and incarceration that coursed behind his eyes, the old man should come with his steadfast ability to mystify.

"You never been here before," he said and Muller nodded slowly. "There's a towel by the door."

Muller fingered the towel and neatly wiped his hands before hanging it back on the little hook. The surge of the aircraft's engine drifted into the room from far away, a brief mutter, and then they were alone once more with Muller's breathing.

"What's the form?" asked Bee. "You going to sit down?" He gestured at the chair by the window. Strange that he had never considered that this meeting would be so matter-of-fact, even dull. It was a pleasant anticlimax. Muller settled neatly onto the chair, squeezing out a bead of shining water onto its metal seat.

Muller marshalled himself. The desperation of the forest was entirely gone: he was self-possessed, even detached; but he was always detached. There was something more, and Bee decided it was an absence of motive. Muller had washed up onto his doorstep in this state not to make one of his dark and deeply felt points, but simply because there was nowhere else to go. It was perversely flattering, and he began to feel reassured: nothing malfunctioned on Muller's island but the heart and mind, and these could be compensated for by silence. The forest hid Captain Blackberry from Muller. Once more the machine rumbled by and Bee wondered what charm the thin hands and grey eyes had cast about the clear skies of the Cape.

He rose and went to the little washroom beyond his bed. He sat on the toilet and shut Muller out.

"It didn't look bad, in the end," he called. "But he's retarded, you know? How the thing going to fly when the boy can't tie she shoelace?" No sound came from the room, only the creaking of the little weathervane on the roof outside. It was pleasant, this talking to Muller from the toilet. He rattled the paper dispenser to prolong the illusion.

"Mercedes thought Sauvage leading him round the bush when he say she'll fly. Poor fool lose skin and bone on the old wrack, and then won't believe that he done good work. He some stupid kid." He tore off a strip of paper and began to shred it, letting the fragments float onto his feet. The room was very still beyond the door. Quickly he clapped the lid of the toilet down and pulled the rusting chain. The plumbing drummed and coughed and he counted three. Pants up, hands washed, let's see if he gone.

Muller sat slumped down in the chair, asleep. One hand had slipped from his lap and hung limp at his side. Its fingers twitched and he sucked his teeth gently; a pearly drop of seawater hovered at the end of his thumb and then sank into the floor. Bee could smell the sea on the old man, a heavy sweet-and-sour odour in the heat of the room. He coughed and the damp hair bobbed gently. A shuddering sigh came from Muller and once more the lips moved. They'd never believe it: he should take a picture. And over here we have Muller, sleeping on my chair, no it's really him – observe the burnt ears and gannet-foot hands. Photographic evidence that Muller slept.

He approached the chair and extended his fingers. To poke the head would be too harsh. The shoulder would need to be grasped and shaken gently, but he could not bring himself to place his palm on the slack slope. A touch on the forearm was too intimate; the bare hand was out of the question. He straightened and puzzled over the sleeping man. He cleared his throat once more but Muller had begun to snore now, compact little grunts, and he was afraid that he would begin to laugh. He returned to the washroom and slammed the toilet-lid down twice, three times. Another flush, and then he fought with the door-knob. When he emerged Muller sat straight-backed with red eyes, dabbing saliva from the corner of his mouth. The damp handkerchief was quickly put away and Muller was awake.

"And that's about the size of it," said Bee.

Muller clumsily fastened the top button of his shirt and dragged the tie into place. "I thought you were on the aircraft," he said.

"Mercedes had murder in mind when he tell me he's going on her first."

"So you are going later."

"Ain't going to be a later. This fooling around now all but shake her to pieces I reckon."

"And your money?" Muller stared at him sullenly, his face flat and pale in the light that streamed in through the open door. "I assumed Sauvage would ask a great price for taking you out."

"Just wanted to hold that cash-money in me hands, Muller. We're going nowhere today."

Muller seemed translucent. To Bee's imagination he was fading, and the shadow that had wrapped itself about the thin figure and drawn him with its periodic glimpses of destruction without consequence was gone. The eyes regarded his own with frightening resignation: they held no secrets, and could be trusted implicitly.

"I wanted to tell you something," said Muller, and Bee sat down on the bed, afraid of what the old man was about to disturb. "It occurred to me when I thought you were in the aircraft." He smiled apologetically, but gave no sign that he expected permission to continue. "You have a serious flaw in your batting technique."

"You been talking to Mercedes."

"Not at all. I know he has not noticed it because he has never deliberately exploited it."

It was only in recent years that Muller had become deliberately cruel. Perhaps it had always been there – yes, there was no doubt over the matter: the memory of the people was vague but his name lurked in sordid anecdotes too often to be coincidental. And yet there was the tireless patience with Regina, the memory for the minutiae of each day's passage that was more than the product of training or a fascination with regimentation.

When had he first realised the presence of Muller in his life? Had Muller given him a tennis ball once, long ago, or had it been another white man? He remembered the rubber smell of the ball and the lumpy gold ring that the man had worn. The old man's fingers were bare but for the slim golden band that he now rubbed absent-mindedly with his thumb. Always the shadow, refusing to be drawn into full view and denying Bee the satisfaction he sought. And their brittle conversations had been sporadic. Boy you go walk in the street 'cause your mam and Mr Muller got growdup items to prate. Yes mam, see you later Mr Muller. Go well Steven.

He remembered the day when his shyness was replaced by irritation. He had been – fourteen? Fifteen? Muller in the High Street, a parcel wrapped in brown paper under his arm, the hat tipped back and the slate fringe swept across the pale forehead. What you got there, Mr Muller? He had not answered, had not looked back to acknowledge the awkward figure at his hip, and strode on clutching his secret. Just a book, perhaps, from the Mainland; certainly not something dire and ugly, for Muller was deep into his retirement by then, and this nettled Bee all the more.

From then onwards? How slowly the weight of silence had built between them: if he had confronted Muller at any time what would have been said? There was no catalogue of affronts, barely even a tangible motive for his growing resentment. And he knew he was not guiltless either: in the close atmosphere conjured by their stubbornness he discovered each delicate strand to pull to flare the fire in the shadow. In the endless oven of the summer, when only agitation was easy, those strands provided fine sport.

Maturity would bring violence, inevitably. (Once, unobserved, he had driven his fist into a sack of potatoes hoping to gauge the feel of a jaw – where did one land that satisfying bongo-drum knock-out hook of the television heroes? That would be the manly way, to strike and concuss the taunting shadow that always slipped away. Bee had hoped he would not resort to the effective but cowardly combats of his boyhoods, of soft stomachs and softer groins. The potatoes skinned his knuckles and he was troubled by the dilemma.) But when the blows came – a woman's attack, flat-handed and infinitely humiliating – he felt only impatience. The time for hitting was past. Perhaps it had never come. At the very least they had touched each other before today. This, then, was the moment he had feared after the potatoes had exposed his frailty. And yet the day was bright, the room was warm and sleepy; befitting the first visit of the sorcerer who turned the elements with wicked kindness upon Bee to disarm and dissuade. When he was younger this moment had ended with a regal walk past a prostrate foe who ground his teeth and clutched at the heel of the vanquisher. Now he must watch and listen, or it would end with the wasting of the afternoon and surrender to sleep.

"It's your feet," said Muller. "You move too early."

"Just getting out to it. He only bowl one ball. You only got to get to it and he's yours."

"It won't always work. Someone else will see you coming and then you are undone."

"We still talking about batting?" asked Bee, but Muller's face was impassive. A look of dilute disappointment passed across his eyes and he shrugged.

"What else would we talk about?" He received no answer and once more knitted his fingers and gazed at the dark floor. "It's quite simple, really. You will not succeed by attacking consistently and predictably."

"So I should hold fire and let it come to me?"

"Exactly." Muller smiled, and Bee remembered the intimate, diabolical grin in the twilight of the Mainland. That was irrevocably past. "There are details," he ventured, but fell silent once more. "It is unimportant now."

"You know Claudette likes you." He had not meant it to batter Muller, and it seemed he had spoken unkindly as Muller stared at the floor intently. But the grey eyes lifted and were unwavering.

"I acted hastily around her because I feared she would be damaged."

"By me?"

"Possibly. You are not alone on the island. There were other concerns."

"She said you have a nice house."

"She didn't stay long." Muller spoke with uninhibited regret. "It is not a place for a child. There are my records…"

"Fred and Ginger."

"Rogers and Hammerstein. Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein."

"Cool."

"Not really." He smiled and painfully rose to his feet, brushing invisible blemishes from his trousers. Pale lines of salt were becoming visible along their seams. A little stream of sand hissed onto the floor as he straightened his collar, and he clutched at the source. "I'm sorry, I'll clean it up." He cast about the room looking for a broom but Bee quickly swept the sand away with his foot and Muller nodded his thanks. He turned at the door and paused. At last he said, "Thank you for coming."

"You come here, man."

He smiled weakly and shook his head. "You let me stay."

Bee was embarrassed and sent Muller on his way quickly. When the hat appeared in the street below and drifted slowly out of sight between the shops opposite, he wished he had delayed Muller's departure.

The aircraft did not crash and he lay on his bed until the shadows of night stole up the beaches and overran the buttresses of the mountain, thinking of the machine where it bobbed at its tether and Claudette crouching among the blackjacks in the forest. Later, he wrote three stilted paragraphs of a letter to Muller, but crumpled the paper into a ball and watched it burn in his little grate. He wrote another letter, to the girl. Dear Claudette. How are you? I had nothing else to do so I thought I would write you a letter.

He burnt it as well, and poked the black flakes into the ashen tray beneath. The wind had turned cold, and he closed the windows before he went to bed to lie awake.

22

The message would soon reach Muller, but the walk was not a short one; and time passed unbearably slowly. Bee sat still and examined the little room that he had known so well but that now seemed removed, a quaint piece of a doll's house. His yellowing drawings peeled from the far walls, fair representations of birds and fishing skiffs, and the floral sheet that served as a cupboard door still hung as if he might tug it aside and reach for the ragged little

shirts of his boyhood. The desiccated chameleon, glued to a twig in an eternal attitude of disgruntled immobility, had fallen over onto the windowsill but it had nevertheless remained. Chameleons were omens of evil to many in Antoine – why you let they boy play with devils, Regina? – but his mother had always been pragmatic about the creatures feared by her neighbours.

He lifted the lid of the little suitcase by the cot, but the stoat's skull and river stones had been replaced by old magazines. *Cook to fit your pocket*, read the top cover.

The roses surged about the window as the sea wind hushed through the forest outside, dappling the room pink and amber. He remembered jasmine from long ago. He had smelt it through his window on still evenings, when the sea was glass and the stars burned almost audibly. Now the roses were rampant in the thin morning sun, blanketing the little house in their secret buds like a living organ and pumping crimson air through the narrow passage and chambers. He heard the squeak of the chair and Regina appeared at the door.

"I keep him nice, just like you left him," she said. "I know when you gone up the road that you gone for good, but mams is fools for their kin." She kneaded her knuckles painfully. "Suppose they always thinking if, if, if."

"You had Muller, though."

She smiled, slighted, and drew herself up in the chair. Once again she was the woman who had roughly swabbed his boyhood scrapes, answered his innocent questions in the language of adults. He saw that he had underestimated her. The eyes were tired with the suffering of her joints, but they missed nothing. "Mr Muller is a bad man, boy. He know that and I know that and so we got no secrets. Everything else is only details, and no-one got time for them any more. Specially not him and me."

"And if he goes?"

"Me married your dad, not Mr Muller. Your dad been killed twenty year and if I wanted a man's help, you'd have seen him around here. Don't be ignorant. Your mam been around before she decided to cover her coffin with roses."

She drew back the sheet of the cupboard and carefully took down the little brass barometer.

"How long this thing dead for?"

Bee shrugged. He had found it in the junk crater out on the plain one morning, and thinking it an unwound clock had carried it home. When his mother explained its workings to him he had fought back tears of disappointment, but she had insisted that it hang on its nail behind the sheet. Its needle clung immobile to "Fair" and she tapped the glass and slowly tugged at the central knob.

"Want to take it with you?" She held it out to him, and he knew that refusal was impossible. The instrument was solid and cool in his hands, its weight comforting. They sat quiet and alone with their thoughts for some time. When he looked at his mother her cheeks were wet with tears.

"Give your mother a kiss, boy," she managed, and he went to her and embraced her.

It had rained in the night beyond the rosehouse and no dust hung across the porches that lay glowing in the little sun's beams. The sandblasted beams of Martin Anjari's cabin shone pink as quartz, studded with the jet of knots and flaws. The shadows of the forest withdrew, backing silently away from the dripping tap in the central square, but their departure brought no warmth. Three children, draped in ragged jerseys many sizes too large and stabbing with bear toes at a rough football, chattered and hopped in the sea air. They flapped their drooping sleeves at one another, leaving the muddy ball to the morning, and tumbled like otters out of sight below a porch roof.

In the harbour a sharp wind split the tops of the swells and slithered across the beaches and into the grass, driving cloud shadows before it. In the Vineyard only those with important errands hurried through the wild streets as the peach-light of the morning inched down the old stone walls and seeped through the cracks of dusty windows: they glared at the sky and held their collars tight, or thrust their hands into pockets and blew out their cheeks, grinning over the inconvenience of the weather with delicately chagrined passers-by.

The wind tugged at the crisp seams of Muller's trousers but could make no dent in their rigidity, and the dust that snaked across his path did little to dim the liquid gleam of his shoes as he strode out beyond the boundaries of the Vineyard. He squinted into the gusts and splayed his long fingers over his hat, forcing it down over his fringe. He pursed his lips to whistle, but the wild sky about him overpowered the air on his lips and he set about humming instead. Once he stopped, pausing as if before a mirror, and seemed to like what he saw. The jacket was beautifully pressed and hung well on his shoulders despite the inconvenient violence of the morning, and the shirt collar sat low enough not to draw undue attention to the slack skin below his chin. He ran his knuckles across his jaw and patted his cheeks.

There was a hint of a hesitation in his stride as the neat figure of Claudette stepped into the sun at the mouth of the forest path, but he marched on. They waved almost simultaneously and drew to a halt as the grasses of the plain slipped from the dull browns of morning into the sun-wind gold of the day. The meadow shimmered and whispered about them, surging about their legs with a brilliance that made Muller shade his eyes as he looked at the girl. She held a

small bunch of flowers, unremarkable daisies and a spray of lavishly purple blossoms already tinged with brown. She held them as if they meant nothing at all.

"Did you pick them in the forest?" he asked, but the wind was rushing through the grasses and she did not hear. He repeated the question and she blushed. Muller blushed too.

"Steven Bee gave them to me," she said.

"They are very lovely."

She shrugged and cocked her head at his suit. "You're dressed quite smart."

"I used to dress like this all the time."

She smiled and tugged at her fringe. Then she said, "You should do it more, all the time. You look nice." She gave a skip, and thinking that she had lost her balance, Muller reached out for her, but she was already trotting past. Her teeth were very little as she smiled. She waved brightly and turned away for the town starting to gleam white beyond the gilded pan of the plain. He watched until her hair became indistinguishable against the grass and her dress sank into the walls of the Vineyard, and even when she was gone he waited, knowing that she would not return but bound by some sense that to abandon the possibility was to do her a grave dishonour.

But at last he began to hum once more and carefully straightened his tie. *I been talkin' talkin' happy talk*... In the forest the air was chill but the wind was broken high above in the lashing fronds and he could remove his hat to dust its dark satin band as he walked. A secret bird burbled from the damp gloom beyond the path, and he turned to listen. He watched the boughs overhead, and his fingers snaked to fondle a protruding fern that cascaded from the little embankment above the path. Gently he rubbed the coiled leaf with his thumb and then let it spring back. The bird called once again, and he clapped his hands. There was no spattering of wings or crashing of undergrowth; and soon the call came again, lonely and distant like a horn blown on a foggy hilltop. Sun was sprinkling the path about him now, but he cast no shadow where he stood.

He moved soundlessly over the darkened earth of Antoine, and passed unnoticed: a dog, chained in the damp recess between the short stilts of the nearest cabin bared its teeth at him and he hurried on. Martin Anjari's porch was deserted. Only the rosehouse moved, pulsing like a melting ruby at the end of the little path as the wind ruffled its blossoms.

Regina Bee was taciturn and drawn, her hands lying useless on her lap as they did when the pain became too great to rub away, and he quickly made to wheel her out of the draught; but she shook her head irritably.

"Leave him, man, leave him," she muttered, gesturing at the warm square of sunlight where she had positioned herself behind the half-open door. "Put us back." Muller obliged and

carefully stationed her where she had been. At once she looked remorseful and smiled to Muller, her eyes weary and sad. "Unkind hands make mouth unkind. Forgive us, Mr Muller?"

He waved away the slight and she thanked him, clumsily pressing her wrist to her heart: her fingers were claws and she would not touch herself for fear of bending them against the pain.

"Was there something specific?" said Muller. "I came as soon as I could."

She shook her head slowly and it seemed that she was sobbing but her eyes were dry and no sound came from her tight lips.

"Are you in pain?" She nodded.

"Would you like me to get somebody?"

She began to weep now, great glistening tears rolling down the lines of her face to gather and drop from her chin. She fought hard, but the tight sobs would not subside and Muller held her shoulders for what seemed like many minutes, saying nothing. The forest hushed her sobs with its murmur and the loose windowpane in the bathroom down the passage rattled against the wind. Muller watched the doleful Christ on the opposite wall as the woman sniffed wetly and sobbed out a little laugh.

"He said he'd come back, but he forgot I teach him to speak. I teach him every godly word, yes sir, I teached it all and I know when he won't do what he say."

"Who has gone, Regina?" Muller's hands lay very lightly on her shoulders as he leaned forward, motionless.

She nodded, trembling on the edge of tears. "Ours," she whispered.

For a long time Muller looked into the desperate face in front of him, and then looked beyond to the open door and the tops of the trees swaying in the morning wind. He removed his hat and placed it carefully on the floor beside her chair, and knelt down before her. His fingers crept across her cheeks, and her head felt very little against his jacket as he embraced her. She smelt of snuff and spicy meat, and her hair was oily against his cheek.

"We'll bring him back," he said and she began to protest, fighting the tears. "No, don't say anything. I'll bring him back."

"We can't make – "

Muller cradled her head again, pressing her mouth to his shirt, and stroked the little neck. It felt like his wife's, like velvet. "I'll bring him back."

"I swear it weren't a trick," she stammered. "He say you'd think Regina was setting you a snare, so he can fly. I swear it ain't so."

"I know," whispered Muller. "I should go now, then."

Bee flattened his hands to the glass panel beside him and pressed his face to the vista that wheeling unwound beneath. The pilot was silent now after the incessant jocularity of the morning's shamefully hasty events, and teased the throttle in his gnarled knuckles. The wing still shuddered, but yet another enquiry about it would confirm to Sauvage that he was afraid, and that was out of the question. The little breakers stood frozen in their snow-capped ranks by the speed of the machine's passage; only the mountain moved, turning smoothly on its axis as it revealed its shadows and crags invisible from the sand of the island.

Bee saw the specks of the fishermen in the bay, even thought he saw a wave from a sharkboat, but the plain was deserted, its golden swathes unbroken by a shadow. He wished Muller had come, and then remembered that he had arranged it that he would not.

Sauvage leaned towards him and stabbed a finger at the scene below. "How about a run over the roofs?" he yelled over the drumming in the little cockpit. "They'll crap themselves." But Bee was shaking his head and Sauvage shrugged, grinning, and held the machine in its graceful bank. The rocky western shore was curling into view and Bee craned back. Only a vague scar in the wood and a suggestion of smoke, torn away by the wind over the trees, revealed Antoine. He looked to the forest beyond but its canopy was unbroken and he could find no sign of the clearing. He was glad that they did not seem likely to make a crossing of the island: seeing the broken machine would have unsettled him less than knowing Sauvage had seen Captain Blackberry and laid claim to a piece of that afternoon. He pointed for the barren coast of the Mainland.

"Go!" he shouted and the pilot let the machine slip onto the horizontal.

Mercedes was weeping behind the bar in the Happy Dragon, his head in his hands and his knees drawn up, but Marconi was boisterously incredulous. Muller spoke quickly, explaining that time was not on his side and that the matter was of great importance to both himself and the boy's mother.

"*Mi Datsun su Datsun*, but you got not a hope," said Marconi as he dropped the keys of his little truck into the waiting hand.

"I missed the first part," said Harry Orange. "So they went up yesterday and you say the thing flies?" Mercedes was wracked with sobs once more and Marconi bustled Muller from the counter. They shook hands and Muller made for the door.

"Christ, all I wanted was a yes or a no," said Orange as Muller closed the door behind him.

In the stillness of Muller's empty room the great carved doors of the wardrobe swung open, and the cat twitched an ear where it slept on the chair. He reached for the plastic shroud

where it hung on its hook, and the ribbons glowed as the mirror caught a fragment of the morning sun and fired light into the gloom of the cupboard. There were few garments on hangers, and the uniform slid across the rack unimpeded.

He could not feel it at first, and he became alarmed as his fingers found only the rough board of the rear of the closet. But it was there, leaning into the corner where it had toppled; perhaps when he last replaced the uniform. He tugged the rifle into the room, and the sun glimmered down the blue-black barrel. It was heavier than he remembered, and he suddenly feared that he would not be able to hold it steady, but the butt snuggled against his cheek as it should and the rifle bobbed no more than could be expected from an old man with a racing heart. The little cardboard box was in its place behind the shoe-rack, and he slipped a handful of the heavy gleaming cartridges into his pocket.

The ferryman leaned on his cane in the sand beyond the wading, and shrugged. For that much money he would take Mr Muller across ten times and back if he wanted. Muller stood on the flat prow of the ferry and watched the mountain tower higher and higher over him as the truck's aerial flexed in the wind.

23

The mountains were nothing in the end, a ridge of bronzed rock that threatened to dash them from their course only to drop away to the plain beyond: away to the east, where the sun was burning away the morning mists over the plateau, the administrative office crouched, still wrapped in shadows, but it was past before Bee could estimate its whereabouts.

The pass fell away behind them as the beaches of the Mainland marched north and north, wide and empty, yellow as the fields that stretched away into the heart of the country. They sank towards the beach, the delicate wingtips flexing against the descent, and Bee could now see the scar of the highway cutting through the hillsides and little bluffs of the uplands that led to the southern range. The shadows of telephone poles made neat stitches across the grey slash, a child's drawing of piratical disfigurement.

Massive rain clouds were withdrawing far to the north and ragged veils still hung from their bellies, but the wind tore at their towering tops and as Bee watched they became scattered and the land loomed dark in their shadows. A dam gleamed beneath them, flashing silver as they exposed its meandering arms that faded into the thick reed-beds blotching the land with green and lavender as far as he could see.

More roads were coming together, cutting across the land or emerging, dust brown, from the reeds, and like tributaries rushing into a single concourse, the highway widened with each new path that merged with its own. It was massive, a black strip unwaveringly straight

alongside the dunes that smoked sand inland off their crests as the wind drummed through the struts of the aircraft. Bee had never seen a road to match it, and he watched it and the shadow of their little machine, fluttering as fragile as a sparrow across the sand and pounding surf below. He did not see the barren expanse of the marshalling yard as it separated from the dunes, or when the first of the cranes detached themselves from the haze of the horizon and stood alone and haggard against the great bay beyond.

There had been a harbour here, once. For many acres the ground was a lattice of rails and roads, and ranks of sand-blasted roofs covered rusted sidings. A single boxcar lay where it had toppled, its ungainly little wheels choked with sea-grass. The wind was screaming now, tearing at the wings, and Sauvage pushed the machine lower as he battled to make headway. A ragged breakwater still broke the full force of the deep sea swells, ending their thousand-mile cruise in a gush of white water that hung in the air, too heavy to be whipped away on the wind. Beyond the churning chaos of the single concrete arm the bay was still, and Bee was afraid as he looked at the monstrous shapes that littered its basin.

There were ships, everywhere; and all sunken. Ships of every description lay broken and dead in the shallows of the basin: rust-red prows jutted from the calm water, poking into the air as their reflection lapped at them; buckled mast-heads festooned with cables and wires broke the surface like ragged fishing-nets snagged on a hidden obstacle. A neat oval hole jutted many feet out of the water, the funnel of the submerged ship that loomed dark and uncertain beneath for hundreds of feet, and beyond the smooth grey belly of some capsized leviathan provided a massive rookery for the gannets that wheeled about its sad shape. A great rusted chain plunged into the deep green water alongside the wharf, still binding some hidden shape to the harbour wall.

The cranes – grey and drooping like willows – loomed over the harbour, utterly still and abandoned. Not even their massive cables swung in the wind. One had torn free of its moorings and had plunged into the water to become entwined in the twisted mess of a murky superstructure. A bright row of gannets crowded its gently sloping tower, but the aircraft startled them and they slipped into the air and skidded away with the wind.

"Hell of a wind," called the pilot. "We're not making good time."

Indeed, it seemed that they were hanging over this wasteland, suspended as if from one of the melancholy cranes, and Bee huddled into his seat as if reducing himself would speed the aircraft on.

They beat northwards, accompanied now by a twin ribbon of railway lines that flanked the highway. Twice they laboured over abandoned trains, endless rows of empty cars bare as

vertebrae on a steel spine. The rains had been here recently, and the plain was full of white birds and reflecting pools. The ragged grey skies ahead came no nearer, and the miles crept by.

"Where are the people?" asked Bee. It dawned on him that perhaps he had made a terrible miscalculation. The highways on the forestry maps had been bright red, the service roads blue, and the little black snakes of gravel tracks had sprawled from coast to coast like a web, promising teeming humanity or at least the distant sprawl of a town, the neat patchwork of farmland. But the sleeping emptiness of the horizon denied the existence of humans below and once more he felt himself hanging motionless above a clutching wasteland that was as malevolent as it was magnificent to look at.

"Failsafe in about five minutes, maybe less if the wind picks up," called Sauvage, drawing his finger across his throat.

"How's that?"

"Point of no return." The pilot grinned at Bee, and he saw his face staring dolefully back at him, distended and timid in the black bug-eyes of Sauvage's shades. "After that no more island."

It had never occurred to him that the Cape was so far removed from the world, and that an aircraft – that limitless bounder of continents – should be beholden to the distances just as he had been as he lay on the top of the pass and felt the tug of Muller and the beaches. He was flooded with the shame of the morning's escape and the mean abandonment of the old woman; the old man. They sat in the rosehouse, together but alone, washed onto a sandbar at the end of the world, and he had left them there unattended. The aircraft would not have to land in the island's waters, surely: he had climbed the mountain range before and it would be a day's walk to the Cape if their fuel load left them short in some cove of the fire-swept western shore of the Mainland. Surely he had more than – four minutes?

What had she said, this morning? Alcohol and opium led a brigade of vices, childlike fears of a world intent on possessing the body and soul of her boy, made all the more desirable because they belonged to her most precious thing. The day had come too soon for her, and the litany of reminders – clean socks, respect to men in hats, avoidance of eye-contact with police – were disjointed and made his heart ache. She would say nothing that would make him stay out of pity for her, and the rough kiss on his cheek had pained him as much as it had her for it barred them from further, and perhaps kinder, sadness. The distance closed behind him like a wall of water, like the illustrations he had coloured in for her pleasure of the bearded man with raised staff commanding his vengeful god to drown the army that streamed ant-like into the unholy corridor of the sea bed. Ten minutes were past and Bee wished that the pilot had given him a final option, but there had never been a choice, not since the he had tugged the aircraft

into the shallows in the high summer: to turn was to be buried in the sands of the beaches or lie beneath the flowers of the forest clearing. Sleep would come later.

It was thrilling to be truly alone in the sky, the little umbilical cord of fuel cut and the island cast irrevocably adrift; and he could think of the island. Many would say good riddance. Muller would curse him out of the hearing of Regina. Mercedes – Mercedes would forget him soon and remember only the triumph of the first flight. Claudette would grow gradually bored as she discovered the confines of her new cage, and she would gaze eagerly north, as he now did, when her turn came to leave. The rains would drive the people into their houses to catch up on neglected conversations until a new summer could soften the mountain and evaporate the horizon into an uncertain haze, rendering speech redundant and time immaterial. The sharkboats could rock in the swells for all eternity, and the rusted cars could growl to a final stop to be claimed by the yellow grasses of the plain. These miles that he now traced were the great hedge about the sleeping kingdom, and he hoped that the awakening would not come soon. He had tiptoed away in the morning while they slept, unable to keep still any longer. He would keep the rosehouse and the secret green underworld of the swells to himself, and no broken cranes or drowned ships could loom over the dream.

Finally there were people. A little cart with two donkeys in harness inched up the highway ahead, loaded with scrap metal. On top of the heap sat a boy, balanced like a bird on a wire. Bee saw the driver turn in his seat and shade his face with his hand as he craned into the sky: Sauvage dipped a wingtip and the driver waved. It cheered Bee and he waved eagerly at the window but the little figure was turning to his reins once again.

A little white farmhouse winked in the sun beside a reed-bed, curling purple smoke across the dun heather that surrounded it; but as they passed Bee saw that the windows were hollow, and the roof gaped open to the sky. Charred beams lay across its foundations and a pair of figures, huddled against a guttering brazier, did not raise their heads as the aircraft grumbled over. In the heather outside a dog was romping with a flock of dignified egrets, barging into their midst as they in turn shuffled out of its path. The dog did not bite, and the egrets did not take to the air.

The land was becoming uneven, and the marshes were extending their glittering tributaries all about the little hills that began to poke from the plain; but the rails and highway cut unmolested through the pools, flanked by defiant tussocks of grass. A barbed-wire fence rose from the water like the rail of a slowly surfacing submarine and he gazed at the soaked land wondering how much water a continent could hold before it became a lagoon, a mere sandbar between oceans.

When Sauvage tugged at his sleeve he was alert and afraid, and quickly scanned the wings overhead, the pulsing blur of the propeller before them; but his companion was pointing beyond. The land was higher here, the naked clay had replaced the heather. The rains had torn furrows through the pale highland, and milky sediment still drifted into the wetland below like strands of fair hair floating on the water. The road mounted the incline – when had the rails disappeared? – and beyond the pilot's outstretched finger Bee saw a quarry. It was massive, its slick walls lofty enough to swallow the Vineyard's taller buildings, but it was the gaping black heart of the amphitheatre that drew him to the window, for it seemed that a giant amorphous creature, flat and wide like a great murky octopus, coiled and uncoiled itself in the heart of the cesspool. Sauvage was yelling, gesturing animatedly, but his words were smeared away by the engine.

Bee saw them now, slimy heads without features and shoulders uniformly bent by the weight of the mud, packed in ranks that seethed and squirmed like hatchlings in a hellish nest. Bodies clung to ropes like pupas, hauling themselves up the crumbling walls and into the sun on the lip of the crater, to ooze from their arms and legs, while still more slid down to join their comrades in the chest-deep mud. The featureless heads floated on the mud like bubbles.

The fire of the day was building, and the clouds to the north were fading fast to reveal the plains beyond the little hillocks. The rains were too young to have softened the tones of the land, and it burned brown and translucent, a landscape of stunted thorn-bushes: the desert was beginning. A solitary building stood by a dusty and crumbling causeway, its sturdy stone walls and tin roof a relic of another war a hundred years forgotten: its narrow portals were empty and uniformly dark but for one where a drab bird twitched its tail-feathers before slipping into the gloom inside. The blockhouse crouched by the road, a lonely border-post at the gates of the kingdom of thorn and bone that lay beyond.

Suddenly they were banking, the world rolling away under Bee's buttocks as the distant haze of the coast climbed outside his window.

"She's not pulling," called Sauvage. "Take the coast just to be safe."

Had Captain Blackberry been embarrassed as he ploughed into the flowers? When the earth tore at his seat, scenting the blood behind the delicate tissue beyond, had he blanched with the shame of having his miscalculation flaunted before him? Mercedes must never hear of a ruined machine in the sand along some strange shore. Better to commit the thing to the sea and sink into some dappled clearing where they would crumble beneath the seasons of coral and anemones than to be pinned to the beaches where the pious crows crowded. It occurred to him that he would not see Muller again, and he mourned for the old man dreaming away his

last years in the water-tank or doing his rounds like a clockwork soldier. Muller would have enjoyed this angel's perch: he would have liked to give this to the old man as a gift.

Then the engine cut out, so sharply that Bee felt deaf for some time before he heard the rushing of the wind and the thudding of pedals as Sauvage kicked at the aircraft and aimed the nose at the a point below the horizon.

24

There had been a first symptom, and unforgivably Muller had missed it. Somewhere she had coughed, or stayed in bed for a morning feeling unusually lethargic, the final separation had begun and he had continued to assume and assume and assume. When she had led him gently towards the reality of her condition and they had spoken frankly he could not remember how long the interloper had been between them, or what she had been like before the drawn cheeks and long private sojourns in the bathroom.

The wheels of the little pickup drummed on the uneven tarmac and he wrestled with the ragged dials of the heater in an attempt to banish the chill that still shrouded the vehicle. A gust of air spat a scattering of seedpods and sand into his lap and he fumbled the grilles shut. How could the first manifestation of the separation have escaped him, when his only true skill had been the understanding of the abstract tides of their union? He had asked the question so often that it existed now as a statement that no longer required an answer. They had been tricked by time demanding declarations from them, and there had been not enough time to learn the language of those promises and reassurances. (There was still no sign of the aircraft, nor should there be.)

There's a bright golden haze on the medder. How much more golden and bright the medder of the song was than the meadows of the dark books of his boyhood, cold green swards flanked by forests. He had been frightened for the unsuspecting lambs and shepherdesses who flaunted their fragility in the sun. Eyes had watched from the green curtains of the forest. He repeated the phrase, enjoying the muscularity of the medders.

Her uncomfortable tolerance of the music at the beginning had been appalling to his young sensibilities. He had hidden the few records he possessed, deeply ashamed that he should have found them attractive. When she asked if he did not like the newest show – it was still missing from his collection some months after its release – he assumed she was humouring him and resented her condescension; but later he stole to the record shop and bought it, greedily smuggling it back to the house and into the middle of the stack. Naturally she did not notice the first time he played it, a carefully timed week later, for she had not become familiar with any of the sumptuous melodies. It was easy to keep secrets, for he still

worked behind a desk. (He did not want to tell her of his outings when he left the desk, for they were ugly stories, and honest as they might have seemed under the neon lights, they turned to ashes in his mouth when she threw her arms about him in the evening.)

A lone walker in an old suit tipped his hat from the verge ahead and Muller slowed quickly: the tarmac was muddy, and the man's suit was clean. He gazed after Muller, slack-jawed and impassive; then he wheeled, tiny and vibrating in the rear-mirror, and continued his march. Muller remembered the aircraft, and determined to ask the next figure he passed.

Showboat, she said. That was pleasant, she decided; she liked that one. He could not tell her that Lerner and Loewe were responsible, and loved her all the more for it.

They had danced, perhaps only once but he could not believe that it had been an isolated occasion, for he recalled different dresses, different moods. A quarrel over a friend's philandering, and they held each other stiffly, gazing dully beyond one another as he smelt her hair and she heard his heart through the stiff white shirt. The death of her mother, and she sobbed into him as they moved, her grief moulding her into his body as she became light and graceful. And always they danced alone on an empty floor.

Ten years ago Regina had asked if he missed her, and had been shocked when he replied honestly that he did not. He had refused to elaborate, wanting to avoid the inevitable evangelising that would follow should she discover his conviction that she had never truly left him. But now he missed her. He had longed for her, to hear her drink soup or snore gently when she finally fell asleep; and the girl had brought it upon him.

Claudette wore her body like an expensive gift that she could not yet appreciate, basking in her physicality while she was still ignorant of its responsibilities, and even as he had resented her corporeal flippancy he had wondered at the creature so full of the promise of life. They had never wanted children, for as much as he longed for a manifestation of their love he felt unqualified to raise a moral child; while she openly disliked babies, finding only toddlers tolerable: perhaps he had merely learned what parents were granted when they took home their child for the first time, some unremarkable truth worn thin by repetition, about the nature of life and potential. She had died because her body had exhausted its potential, and the little spirit and form of Claudette danced about the island to remind him that not all beauty was transitory, that he had been unlucky.

And so he ached, missing her because she was gone.

He had heard about the fate of the stockyards and the port, but had imagined something more violent than the sad relics that towered over the dune-grass: even destruction was amateurish in this expanse where time stalked almost tangibly. Against the pitted walls of the

great siding shacks had sprung up, but their inhabitants were unused to the passage of a vehicle, and perhaps suspecting violence – legal or illegal – they darted away amid the massive coils of chain and hollow drums that littered the rails. Only a goat remained, chewing sullenly on some coarse grass: it looked with knowing yellow eyes at Muller and he waved to it, entertained by its stubborn bravery in the face of its owners' cowardice.

Sometimes his work took him away, and when he returned the world was dark and frightening. Acts had been committed in the pursuit of order, and he would have to force himself not to question their righteousness. It was not his place to question, and unlike the stooges who obeyed out of fear or bravado, he obeyed because obedience was discipline, an ironic triumph over the ignorant lieutenants of the power that held him in its iron grasp. But the promise of her innocence, waiting exclusively for him, would peel away the filth of his daily routine and he would come to her a man, whole and just and above all, loved.

What if he were returning to her now, today, on this barren road? The scene was plausible: the roads into the city where they had lived were broad and neglected, and the yellow grass of the prairies had been no more lush than the sea-grass that trembled in the warming sun beyond. What would he say? No, she would speak first and he would hear only the sound of her voice. She would be intrigued by the story of Bee's flight, the pursuit. But they seemed dim beside the prospect of her neck. Perhaps later. Certainly he must tell her of Claudette, the little ambassador from a time he had almost – unforgivably – forgotten.

It was easy to hover on the edge of a trance on a road such as this, asleep and dreaming; even the tiny adjustments in course came as if from an automaton. He rubbed his eyes and tried to calculate when he should stop to fill the tank from the two jerry cans that thumped in the bed of the truck behind his head.

A little shape shimmered into solidity from the road ahead as he mounted a rise: a child waving a stick. He slowed and searched for the inevitable lame donkey or a favourite dog oozing pitifully from its mouth onto the tarmac, but the road was clear but for the urgent little arms. The stick glinted sunlight into his eyes, and he slammed on the brakes.

The boy was no older than fifteen, and his arm strained as it brandished the squat heavy weapon. Muller saw chipped magazines, taped back to back and weathered. Quickly he threw his jacket over the rifle beside him and waved cheerily. The boy peered through the window. His teeth pushed through his thin lips, and he had the old eyes of someone close to starvation, sunken and wrinkled like a tortoise's. Muller saw the boy was deciding how to phrase his demands, but could not guess if it would be for all his possessions or a chocolate. The boy bit his lip with the prominent yellow teeth, and eyed the truck nervously. Muller still smiled and kept his grey eyes steady on the boy's wasted face.

"Toll," said the boy and hoisted the weapon onto his delicate shoulder. "You pay."

"What do you need?" asked Muller. The boy was very nervous, and Muller became worried that he would lose the child's attention, and that violence would ensue. The odds of getting the rifle up were unsatisfactory. He spoke slowly and deliberately. "Do you need food? Money?"

His words were anxiously considered, but suddenly the boy became distraught. He grabbed at the door-handle and jerked it open. The snub muzzle was levelled with some effort at Muller's stomach. "You come!" he shouted.

He could not afford delays today. He put his hands on his head as the boy shepherded him up the road to the top of the rise, but it seemed that his captor was not afraid of resistance, and his hands slipped into his pockets as the boy ran ahead and beckoned. Another man, dressed in fatigues, loomed up on the approaching crest, his hands hanging limp over the huge weapon across his shoulders. Bands of gleaming bullets cascaded from the man's neck and shoulders, and Muller thought of a water-bearer he had seen in a Greek town a forgotten time ago.

The cavern of mud opened below him as the boy dragged him closer. He saw the slick figures thrashing at the slime, slipping against one another as they passed buckets over their featureless heads to the waiting hands above. The boy gestured, beside himself with worry.

"Comrades!" he cried pleadingly and gestured at the towering walls that rose from the ooze. "Diamonds make them mad."

"You are afraid it will collapse." The boy's fears were not imagined: little avalanches of mud continuously pattered down about the workers where they toiled, and the sides were remarkably steep, sheer in places. He nodded frantically and once more his lip trembled.

Muller stood very still and hid his hands in his pockets. He said, "I will get help," and watched the boy. The ugly hole of the muzzle explored his stomach and groin. A brief conversation followed with the big gunner; the man chewed languidly and shrugged, setting the bullets jingling about his neck.

"You go," said the boy and hesitated a smile. "You go but you come back."

"You have my word," said Muller. The boy grasped his hand and shook it fervently. Muller retrieved it and wiped it on his trousers, turning for the road.

25

There were more soldiers, crouching in the heat as the landscape began to crack and crumble into small ravines and dusty flat-topped hills that shimmered on the pan, but they ignored him. A half-naked man faced out into the wasteland, firing bursts at the horizon as a

tiny woman, her head-dress ragged and sagging over her ears, clutched at his buttocks and peered from behind his arms, pointing urgently at the thorn-trees beyond. None of the other half-dozen soldiers seemed to be aware of the woman or the shooting. They sat with knees drawn up to their shoulders and scrubbed at faded items of clothing with splayed toothbrushes. The woman turned wide mournful eyes on Muller as he rolled past, but the metallic hammering of the man's weapon startled her and she hid behind him once more, renewing her entreaties for him to shoot at the bush. A thin man with no teeth raised his rifle and waved grinning at the car, and Muller returned the gesture. The soldiers laughed and jostled one another with their shoulders, and then they were past, floating in his mirrors above mercury highway.

She was left-handed: the scissors hurt her thumb when she carefully cut brown paper to wrap – what? It pained him that he had let fall another memory from the store he hoarded and he had not noted its absence. (There had been a first symptom). A message on the bathroom mirror, written from right to left after a sensuous argument the night before about the merits of an equitable compromise between the hands. Underneath a carefully pressed pair of smudged red lips. (He did not wash it clean, and when she discreetly swabbed the mirror the next morning he secretly hoped she would give him another kiss on a card to keep.) Her lips were pale as he read to her, and he plunged back into the book because it had amused her the previous evening and because he could not look for long without becoming afraid. Then she died; and the lips were the softest pink he had seen, and smooth and full. He would not kiss them, in case his own pressed their shape from them.

There was one fuel-can left. He tapped the instruments and the speedometer's needle slumped to zero. No more tapping would revive it.

Over a crest the world fell away into a broad and grand valley, almost painfully green after the glare of the roads: he had reached the river. It was smaller than he remembered, but it was possible that the dry season had been particularly cruel this year. But still it snaked brown and ancient past the sandy beaches and bent gleaming through and around the flat baking rocks that jutted from the desert's edge.

The aircraft sat on the road ahead, and once again he feared that an obvious approach would startle it into the air. He watched it for a long time, waiting for the prop to cough into life, but the shadow burnt into gravel underneath the wings was unmoving. Once he clutched at the wheel as the wings began to flex, like a pelican testing the air; but it was breeze off the river teasing the leading edge of the silver pinions. The hiss of the heat and the distant rush of the river were unbroken and he gained the courage to roll the car closer.

The skids were badly scored and the starboard struts were threatening to buckle, but the pilot had done beautifully. A silvery snail-trail snaked back many yards, but the line was relatively straight. Well done Mr Sauvage, well done indeed. A spray of oil covered the white flank, streaming back over the port window and now dripping onto the float and the road.

The pilot lay back in his seat, cursing rhythmically and dabbing a bloody rag at his forehead. The other seat was empty. Muller slipped up to the open door.

"Where is the boy?"

Sauvage gazed painfully at him for some time, as if fearing an illusion. Then he laughed and thumped his fist on the instrument panel.

"Jesus! Je-*sus*! It would be you, you shit."

"Where is he?"

"There's a party supposedly coming from Kamma," grinned the pilot, his eyes hidden behind the great green bubbles. "But you. You fucker. I am *very* glad to see you."

Muller reached up quickly and pressed his fingers into the rag, giving a sharp twist. Sauvage screamed and thrashed with his feet at Muller, but the figure had nimbly stepped aside.

"Where, Mr Sauvage?"

"The river. The fucking river. Why'd you do that? Why'd you do that? Jesus!"

"Why the river?"

"Fuck how'd I know? He took the raft, said he'd send help. You just missed him." He kicked feebly at Muller, but the boot went wide and bounced off the doorframe. "Shit," he muttered, glaring at Muller as he delicately turned the rag and pressed it to his head again.

He was undeniably frightened when Muller returned with the rifle, and shrank back into the seat, but Muller waved reassuringly and set off the for the water that gleamed below.

It was pretty by the water's edge. The river sucked and gurgled at the rocks that Muller picked his way through, and little midges, made incandescent by the sun, danced about his cheeks. The opposite shore – a pleasant few minutes' swim away – looked warm and dry and Muller hoped he would come across a similar beach on his bank. The rocks were worn smooth, and he stopped to remove his shoes, neatly folding his socks into his jacket pocket. He pushed his hat down firmly and hurried on to the promontory that jutted up over the water some way ahead.

Bee sat upright in the bright yellow bubble that turned slowly in the calm middle passage of the river. He had taken off his shirt and was wringing it over the side. A brass instrument of some kind lay opposite him. Then he lay back against the soft walls of his raft, and spread his arms to the sun. Muller smiled at the heart of the boy, and painfully lowered

himself to the rock. His jacket was awkward about the shoulders, and he quickly tugged it off, folding it beneath his elbows. It was warm in the sun and the river tinkled through an invisible rapid below him. A swift scored the surface and soared away into the air, and Muller smelled woodsmoke. It was quite beautiful here, he thought.

The desert air was dry in his nostrils, and the grasses below would help hom gauge the little gusts that teased his tie where it hung between his arms: the shot would not dip or deviate. It occurred to him that he had not tested the sight; but a second shot was available and he settled the sturdy butt against his cheek. The twin images of the barrel swam together and the raft wavered before him. Slowly, sensuously, he drew the weapon up. The boy's head was gleaming black in the sun, and Muller's heart quickened as Bee turned, as if alarmed by some noise; but he looked away beyond Muller, and the smooth temples shone at the end of the barrel. Muller said goodbye to the young man, and felt the boy die before he waited for the lull in his heartbeat and squeezed the trigger. It was very sad, but not painful. He wished he had brought Regina with him.

The shot was shatteringly loud across the valley and a flight of ibis took to the air in a tumult of cries and splattering water. Bee turned and looked at the outcrop, and Muller slowly clambered to his feet. He waved and Bee clutched the walls of the raft, not knowing if his eyes had deceived him or whether he should take to the water. Muller laughed and raised the rifle again. He fired until his pockets were empty and his ears sang with the reports. Bee had risen to his knees, and craned to see Muller as the raft slipped away beyond a new islet, and then Muller could see no more.

Ruth had not gone away on barge like an Arthurian immortal. She had died, many years before, and he had struggled bitterly without her. He wept for some time by the river bank, overcome by the tranquillity of the old stream of his boyhood as he honoured her with his memories and promises; and when he slumped into the truck again, dragging the rifle after him, he was eager to return to the island.

Claudette had enjoyed some parts of *My Fair Lady*: it was not impossible that she would warm to the livelier moments of *South Pacific*. *I'm gonna wash that man right outa my hair*, he hummed. The sky was high and bright, and soft clouds, bent into ragged sails by the winds of the borders of space, streaked the hot blue above. Ruth would have liked the clouds for their distance and disregard of the world. Ruth. Say it often enough and it sounds like a waterweed, she said.

The house near the harbour of the Vineyard had been a disaster on the Sunday. They had poked one another and stifled giggles behind the trim estate-agent's back as rotting floors,

broken windows, leaking taps were breezed over with confident pronouncements that a little loving care would do wonders. Later (had it been on the beach?) he was midway through an explanation of why the roof would not be economical to fix when she said that they must live there, and never return to the city and the Mainland.

Of course she had not known how she had broken his heart with tenderness that evening: he would not show her. He was laying mousetraps in the rotting kitchen cupboards – he remembered Claudette and the biscuits and longed for the miles to pass swiftly so that he could tell her that he should have bought new ones – and he had heard the soft hiss of a record. He held his breath, face on fire as he waited for the little exclamation of disappointment – the wrong record, where's mine, the Mario Lanza?

A figure stumbled into the road, fifteen, ten, five yards ahead and he swore, swerving to shuddering stop. Like a demon from a curse the figure threw itself at Muller's door and he reached for the rifle. The long barrel would not come free of the clutter of the floor and he threw up his hands in front of his face as the thing clawed at the window. Wild white eyes rolled in a face of black slime, and the lips were glossy and lumpy with blood. It was sobbing and retching as he stared at it through the glass. Then it collapsed, streaking the window with bloody mud, and the road was silent again. The car ticked in the heat.

And there it was: he had not recognised the hillock for the ridiculously obvious reason that the quarry had collapsed. You go but you come back. No doubt there was panic, inefficiency. He nudged the door open and the figure rolled away coughing.

The massive back wall of the amphitheatre was ragged, smashed raw by slithering rock and mud, and broken figures were being hauled from the roiling slime by exhausted colleagues, themselves naked and oozing. Muller loosened his tie and strode to the where dozens of heads screamed for help. No sooner would one break the surface and reach for the slippery ropes than he would be clawed back into the mob, sometimes pushed beneath the surface. There was no sign of the boy from earlier in the day, but the gunner still hung from his gleaming weapon and chewed impassively.

"They must listen to me," said Muller to the red eyes beneath the stained beret. "Your gun. Fire it so that they will listen." The gunner shrugged and looked away. Muller darted after him, grasping his arm, and with a terrible economy of motion the gun was unlimbered and pushed into his chest.

"No," said the gunner firmly. "They will not listen to you. We will help them, or they will die."

"Then they will die," said Muller. "Will you hold a rope?"

Again the shrug, and Muller wanted to beat the dull face with the machine-gun. But the gunner picked up the end of a blackened rope and gestured at the pit. The shouts of the men beat at Muller's ears, and he urgently wanted to silence them.

"One at a time," he cried at the lip of the crater, but his voice was weak and the eyes would not look at him as they rolled about in the slick heads. "One at a time." Two men grasped the rope and the gunner braced himself; but their hands were raw and weak and they slipped back helplessly amongst the heads.

Then he was sliding – his buttocks smashed into hard earth, perhaps a rock – and he gasped, winded, as the warm mud surged over his trousers and into his jacket. The suit would be extremely difficult to clean, and almost impossible to replace. A figure against the dazzling sky laughed, a cruel and insane sound, and Muller turned to find a hand-hold in the wall that had given way beneath him. There were none. The mud was firm underfoot, but slick. He realised he stood on a body, and he kicked for the walls, but there was no way up.

The gunner was yelling now, directing figures to the ropes or warning others away with the massive weapon and Muller moved into the throng, kicking against the mud that sucked at his shoes and weighed his trousers down. Elbows struck his ears, dazing him, as he pushed a thin body onto the rope; hands grasped at him and he punched them away. The pit was very hot, and he smelt the bodies of the men around him. The sky was white above and his head felt thick from the blows.

Bodies were crushing him, muscled figures overpoweringly strong in their fear, and his head went below the surface. At the same moment a hand grasped his from below and he tugged, feeling the weight of the mud that held this invisible captive out of the air. The fingers dug into his wrist as he pulled. But the weight of the men over him was stifling, and he fumbled for the knife in his pocket. Its blade opened cleanly, and he struck out blindly. It jarred in his hand but he held it. His ears were clogged with mud and he heard nothing but his heart and away, far away, the loudest cries. The sky was dark now, but still he pulled and pulled at the arm beneath his feet as he hacked and swung with the knife above. There was a roaring in his head, and his arms ached.

The record played, and he thought she must have left the room for he heard no complaint. But she was there, in the dark with the turntable. The sofas and tables, his great chair, the wardrobe, all were a week (a month? a year?) away.

"You can put on another one if you like," he said, but Ruth came to him.

"I found one I like." They danced close and without rhythm, refusing to allow their limbs to come between one another, and though he could not tell her what he felt, he suspected she could calculate it herself.

Don't dance all night with me – people will say we're in love.

26

Bee slept, despite the gentle rain that sank down over the little vessel from the west. The barometer had slipped from his limp fingers, and lay in his lap. In the half-light of the morning the crew spoke to one another, their language lilting and rapid, and as the gentle thudding of the diesel engine died out they moved to unfurl the patched amber sail and secure the canvases over the sacks on which the young man slept. They peered at him and softly joked about his seasickness of the previous night, and suggested bids that might be acceptable for such a decorative item as the brass mechanism. Never enough, said the cook. The boy is a prince who paid for his passage in hard currency. He keeps it there in his pants. They stood back and admired him, and then a breeze ruffled the sails and they padded across the sleeping figure and looked to the starboard where the horizon was growing grey and yellow.

The dhow moved north like a gannet beating towards its rookery, and Bee, half waking, fumbled for the barometer. He found it and clasped it to his chest; and settled himself deeper into the warm sacks and slept again as the sun began to rise over the boundless grey line of the continent.