

Obsession

Ronald Irwin

South Africa : [s.n.], [1999?].

184 leaves ; 31 cm.

Word processed copy.

Running title.

(MA (Creative Writing))--University of Cape Town, 1999

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

LINEAR LIBRARY
C01 0074 7205



*... the more he sees
Of pleasure not for him ordained: then soon
Fierce hate he recollects, and all his thoughts
Of mischief, gratulating, thus excites.*

Paradise Lost, Book IX 469-472

2000/13059

CHAPTER I

I have kept only one picture of Jenny; it is a picture of her standing in a long green coat, her blonde hair splayed luxuriously over the collar and down the back, on a street corner, where Main street intersects Elm by the shops downtown – she is, of course, unaware of the camera in this photo. I have kept no other picture of her and this one is in the memory of my computer, ready to be deleted at a moment's notice. But I print that picture from time to time and lean it against my books – it is there now, in fact, as I write this – Jenny looking far down the street on a grey day, just after the rain, pale, timid-looking but confident in her own way, tall, and beautiful. A woman whom the papers allotted a few paragraphs and that was all. Jenny played her important part in this story against her will, I understand that, it is a fact that I can admit to myself now that everything has been over for a while and I have had time to reflect on all I did last year without being horrified. I cannot say what follows is a justification of my actions during that time, but an explanation for what seems to be – and to many others – essentially senseless, brutal, cowardly and cruel but in fact was logical and, yes, reasonable.

My name and the relevant details. Reginald Humphrey of Apartment 10A, Elm Street, Niccalsetti, New York. I am the Head Researcher at the Niccalsetti Historical Society, philatelist, fly fisherman, avid reader, lover of classical music, six feet tall when not stooping, slim, sharp eyed and let's admit it, forgetful ... I am forgetful and a forgetful man cannot be secretive long, I have learned.

I am also a man who is exact and precise and have learned that there are certain subjects that I cannot forget

I am a man easily overlooked, which has been just as well. My sin was to have enough confidence in myself to think that Reginald Humphrey would know where to draw a line in the soil of his mind between that which is sane and right and that which is not. I am weak and I am haunted. But I am not a monster.

Jenny Haverhill Malinse.

There. I've written her name in full.

Twenty-three years old, assistant to Mr. Brooke Nuessbaumber of Veri-Tru Shipping, residing at Apartment 9A, 12 Elm Street in Niccalsetti, New York, across the wide street from my more majestic edifice. Hers is a modern, cheaper building than mine. It is a roughly thrown together red brick modern block with row upon row of windows, hers facing me exactly seventy-two feet and seven and a half inches from my office window (I speak of her long, three-piece living room window, or window unit – called a *triple unit casement*, I would discover later – as opposed to the single hung window that was her bathroom; her bedroom window, a *double unit casement*, is closer but at another angle, harder to view).

Late summer.

My apartment is cool in the summer. As Head Researcher at the museum I had been given the privilege of overseeing the acquisition of the Shawzin collection, the benefaction to the Niccalsetti Museum of Stella Shawzin, granddaughter of Marcus Shawzin: explorer, inventor and scoundrel. The collection consisted of over ten thousand pieces that had to be entered laboriously into the museum's database, to which my home office is connected by modem. As the senior researcher I could go home in the late afternoon. The college students and the others stayed on after my departure and catalogued and sorted and arranged and transmitted reports from afar to my

comfortable, small office where I digested the burps of information that periodically arrived from downtown.

Working from home eliminated fifty percent of the worst aspects of the job: the constant meetings, the prodigious waste of time men in this industry are liable to accept. Museology has only recently been called an industry, the Curator introduced us to that concept after flying to Dallas and meeting with his counterpart at the HD Hudson Museum. Most of the work carried out within the massive roman edifice that houses the Niccalsetti Historical Society is lonely work even for people who are relatively solitary. Most of us do not have social lives and only three people in the museum, of a staff of twenty not counting the fifteen interns who are basically unpaid, earn more than twenty-five thousand dollars a year. Meetings are, when they are called, mandatory for us and one earns nothing by attending. Sitting in the second floor conference room in the dull brown leather chairs we inherited from a revamp of the office during the Eisenhower administration we would sip our lukewarm coffee and meander through the day's agenda. A typical meeting would find us discussing the relative merits of air hermeticification on stamps minted pre-1875 or the morality of bringing what my colleague Leo Kannotski calls "consumer culture" into historical culture. These unpaid meetings seemed to me to be simply a ground for the airing of grievances more than anything else, and perhaps the curator – badger of a man that he was, in his rolls of tweed and his wide face and strangely spaced eyes in those ham cheeks – knew this and perhaps he too, sitting at the end of the meeting table with the Zoo Lake spread out behind him, had grown tired of the administrative bitching and kvetching dredged up from the basements of the building every time he called a meeting, and permitted us, one at a time, to work more from home and send concerns (complaints); administrative matters (salary bitchings and compensation requests); and research proposals (begging) to his office via email.

Issues that once were subject of frantic discussion were slowly relegated to a series of electronic missives. The real meetings were left for debates about the handling of our customers, the

business of the museum, topics that Leo once pithily remarked could cause a “complete administrative breakdown” if not handled with real human hands. The business of the museum had taken precedence. We could no longer count on the city’s elders to keep us going as a debt to the town’s past, today the city’s elders were less than middle aged, wore dark suits, carried cell-phones and had never been to the museum in their lives. Business was not the order of the day and the Curator jumped into it with both feet, sending us all a memo before I was granted home leave for research that indicated that exhibits will now be tracked for visitors. Computers and laser beams now enabled us to count the number of people who came to a certain exhibit and every time a visitor wandered into a particular room, he set off a ticker upstairs, this technology gave us the ability to gauge exactly what exhibits were drawing the most visitors.

Leo had scored a coup two years ago with his *Postcards of the Rich and Famous* – a series of postcards sent by various movie stars, authors, politicians and the like from various places around the country. He had earned himself six thousand visitors in one year, a fact that also earned him a congratulatory email from the Curator and a promise, casually made and seriously taken, that the Leo’s next project (or what we affectionately called The Great Purpose) would see light of day sooner or later. Leo had printed the email and shown it to me over a Styrofoam cup of coffee in the basement, standing in the doorway with his thick coffee and jam stained Norwegian fisherman’s sweater stretched over his paunch, his eyes glinting beneath ratted hair and behind round, gold wire rimmed glasses and rocking back and forth on tip toe in his brand new Air Jordans. “The Curator sent it to me because I took absolute authority in today’s meeting. The Curator watched me and I gave them a report of the third quarters visiting tally and there was my project on top, proof-positive that the people here have to be woken up to the realities of the museum world. It’s a business, Reginald, a business and the Curator knows I am in agreement with him on this, a business and we are the businessmen. We sell people their pasts. We ought to ask top dollar, my friend, and call downtown and have that meeting room spruced up. It looks like a prep school up there – it smells

like one. We ought to ban smoking and roll up our sleeves. That's what I think. What matters is that we can prove on an accountant's spreadsheet that people today are interested in the past, Reginald. We aren't a storehouse over on this side of town, a junk warehouse. I've been saying it for years. People don't come here, they get sucked in here."

And then of course, he had looked at me curiously and accusingly while loudly sipping his coffee, bending over it so as to avoid more spills, his little finger stretching outward with the quick contortion of his body.

My job as of late had become more complex. Mine is a job that was once a placid research post for an academic who mingled on good terms with the real world. In the last three years the job had completely changed. As senior researcher, part of my job was to encourage and engender donations and support for the museum. This used to be in an advisory capacity. Imagine a priest's attitude towards the collection box. Certainly that box plays a major role in his job profile (I have learned the jargon) but the priest sees himself firstly as an emissary of a higher calling. I was a priest whose calling has for all intents and purposes *become* the collection box. I was one of the many pilot fish who swim around the bloated sharks of this small town's industry, leading them above my hungry fellows and encouraging them with great swishing and to-ing and fro-ing to drop morsels from their jaws.

Most disturbingly, in the last two years I had been getting performance appraisals, though at the museum we called them "updates on donor funding". My name was attached prominently to the updates, and the productivity of each month was compared to the last. The understanding at the point where my tale begins was quite simple: I was given freedom so long as I was out there piloting the Great Whites, and on the second of each month that email came through to everyone's computer from the Curator's office with my name beside the scorecard. And therefore I lived under the guns of scrutiny. Leo, working alone in his ridiculous sweater and his worn corduroys in the stacks, had only contributed perhaps ten thousand dollars a year to the coffers with his famous postcard display while I had to leave the office, and bang the drums, wheedle, cajole, and caress potential donors. In one

good month I might find a hundred thousand dollars, I might secure a five year grant worth more than that or a private, anonymous donation of over fifty thousand. But I had losing months, many of them. That summer, when the rich of Niccalsetti had fled to Martha's Vineyard or abroad, was a lean time for museum researchers and my appraisals had come to be more and more accusing. I had eyed them sitting in my email inbox with the same trepidation I had once had when facing an unopened and inferior report card sitting on my father's desk before he came home from the University. June had been a losing month and so had been July and so had been August, when this all started. These were months when the appraisal came through with no improvement on the balance sheet and my name emblazoned in bold font right next to that lack of improvement for all to see.

Museology in Niccalsetti did not always work like this. One didn't even think of it as a business and researchers did not always get treated like losing horses. The museum used to think of itself as a worldly academy. My seniority gave me the position of beggar. So I worked from home, working against the second day of the month and that damned email, which had been an accusation for almost an entire quarter.

My office at home is an important part of this tale, book-lined, a *sanctum sanctorum* consisting of a beautiful 1845 Philadelphia banker's desk I subtracted from the Frenck Collection – no space for it downstairs at the museum – the damp of the storage rooms would spread a grey fungus called *Cronartium Ribicola* which simply cannot be removed without marring the furniture, and part of the “rust” family of fungi which attack wood. The Fungi that attack valuable furniture stay in the spore stage, making the furniture dirty and weakened and leaving the museum with the decision to either restore the piece, put it in a dry display, or sell it. So I took the desk as part of a casual loan – my dry apartment could keep it indefinitely, as the museum cannot sell what has been given to it. It was a roll top desk that closed with finality and was large enough to lock my computer away. As I sat in front of the desk I had my choice of a hundred different compartments: tiny drawers meant for the nibs of pens, larger drawers for stationery, various sized shelves for envelopes.

and letters and notices, even a thin secret compartment for personal letters and bills. I rarely used all these compartments but I had the utmost respect for the mind that foresaw their need and thought out their design. I had wanted one of these for years and it dominated my office space, sitting on the corner of my den like a wooden, yawning behemoth.

Here at home I had a comfortable red leather chair, a wingback reproduction of a 19th century club chair such as one would find in the Caledonian of London which sat next to the window beside my desk that looked over the river and over my neighbor's building. My neighbor owned the apartment on the top floor. The day Jenny and I became acquainted it was still warm, though winter was already in the air, you could feel the tentativeness of the heat, and the sun shone warm through dullish layers of clouds. I was tired and I had already had lunch: a bowl of split pea soup from the Soups n' Snacks near my apartment building that I had carefully transported home in its warm Styrofoam container, a half baguette from A Taste of Paris Café by the museum, all washed down with a glass of passable red wine, then an envelope of vile meal to aid the digestion of it all. I was content, readying myself for a load of afternoon work.

The reverie of mid afternoon was a luxury, a privilege of the man who lives alone, and there are many privileges to a solitary life. I looked over at the building opposite me, as I had a thousand times before, and only then I noticed the woman through the window facing mine. She was walking through an empty apartment and had obviously just moved into the building. Had the old tenant put up curtains or blinds to block my view in the past? I honestly could not remember, I honestly can say that the brick building in front of mine had never held any interest to me whatsoever until this day. The eye is attracted to movement, her window hadn't any curtains today as it would have in the past and I saw her, registered her, saw her come to the window, turn away from my view, then come back again. I realized that I could almost *not* help seeing her there, even when I resumed my gaze to the river. My brain had registered the movement, the presence and my eyes casually drifted back to her. I was not watching her any more than when a man watches others in his office or outside at a

bar while sitting alone. I *will* say instead that I was aware of her. I remained aware, I could not simply become unaware of her presence. My eye drifted back: she was wearing a yellow T-shirt that hung over her thighs, loosely, her arms sticking out thinly and awkwardly, (the shirt was from the store in the local mall, I later learned), and what must have been blue jeans. She was moving in, moving chairs and boxes, stopping, taking inventory, pushing boxes around and a pile of furniture. Cheap furniture ... a cheap futon, a couple of old chairs, a bookshelf, all incongruously matched, as if recently taken from a dorm room or an attic. I could not say if she was attractive or not, there was a pretty big distance between us. She *seemed* attractive, as if her movements and her way of holding herself triggered some kind of subconscious recognition within me. She was tallish. Confident in her movements. Light skinned, long, light hair, a face I could not see. But I say again, the angle I had was excellent, and I could see her moving around the drab confines of the new apartment, probably dusty from the former resident: her floors must have echoed around her as she walked. I scanned the other windows and saw only curtains or half drawn shades. There were plants on many window sills, dying in the heat of the quick Niccalsetti summer, brown fronds hanging limply out the windows. Many of the lower windows had tired looking blinds pulled to various levels. Most had curtains at least but this woman's windows were directly in my line of vision and they were uncovered.

I did not *try* to look in her window at all.

There simply could be no way one could miss what was happening over there. The windows were over five feet high (five feet eight and half inches by four foot 2 inches, to be exact – I would learn this later measure later). They were made of hollow metal and a thick glass glazing that literally seals the occupant in his house when they are closed.

I turned to my work, brought my feet to the floor with a thump.

Looked up.

Once again I could see her, make her form out and her movements, even identify the bigger objects in the room. She was moving a large brass lamp into position, then struggling to extricate

two chairs from one another. My impulse was to help: she was struggling against two fat chairs and the one on top was too heavy for her and had I been there, I would have lent a hand. The chairs were of different colors – they are called “marshmallow chairs” in fact but also weigh over sixty pounds each. Some marshmallows!

When she finally disentangled the furniture and set it properly I breathed a sigh of relief for her and realized I had watched for far too long, almost five minutes. I turned to my work and resolved not to look in on her again that day. My eyes ached: she was a vague figure beneath the afternoon reflection of the sun, and watching her, her form seemed to scintillate, to move by itself, an image where my mind’s eye did most of the construction of what she seemed to be.

But it was like a puff of cool breeze into this stuffy room, an unexpected visitor, and seeing her I felt an immediate and stabbing pang, a feeling that went right past curiosity. She was alone in there, pacing out her allotted space. What if I were to wave to her, I thought? Then she’d be aware I had seen her first, she would be aware I was watching her and the companionship was unasked for, uninvited. City living has its unspoken rules. And I was downright uncomfortable seeing her there, not so much because she might be aware I was watching her but because I felt if she were to look in and see me in front of my yawning desk and the demanding glare of the computer and my six empty rooms of apartment and my half drunk glass of water on the table before me with tired bubbles along the sides and my neat manila files and my disheveled hair ... would I excite her own curiosity? Or would I be too boring for a second glance – would her gaze, traveling up the white granite walls and deep set windows of this pretentious, 1920 Classical-Revival building, see me and find me about as interesting as the view of a sleeping cat or any other solitary man looking out with a weary face into a sunny day? If our eyes were to meet, would she hold my gaze our turn away?

I rolled my chair away from the window a few inches, hunched over my work, the sleepy afternoon breeze rustling my papers. I shuffled a few around, scrutinized one without reading its words. I turned to the box of files on the floor, dusty, yellowed, some smelling dank and moldy of

the basement of the museum, all needing to be organized. The files came with a stiff envelope with Leo Kannotski's name embossed in black in the top right hand side, his weekly report to me of the progress of the transferal and unpacking of Stella Shawzin's gifts to us. Leo Kannotski, my colleague – relentless man – had sent me this most recent report on fine white Hammermill paper, also embossed with his name and position at the Society (Director of Permanent Collections), as if to remind me that he and I were from an age before flimsy computer printouts and electric pulses (and monthly appraisals), an age that treasured the written word rather than shamelessly devoured it. I labored on, making notes from his report about those objects that had been unpacked and queried by one of the interns: a Fenzin Vase from China, 1678, Ch'ing dynasty, value at Sotheby's auction estimated at \$20,000. I settled into my chair and thought about how we would display the treasures of the Shawzin collection, if they were to be displayed as one collection or split up into the various other collections. The amount of work a gift provides is incredible, especially when the benefactor is a woman like Stella Shawzin.

I consulted Leo's missive. I smelt his cigarette smoke absorbed in the fine white pages. Leo had catalogued the most precious pieces, the collections within the collection, the expensive stamp collection for instance, the butterfly collection (many butterflies having wilted and shriveled on their pins thanks to the dry air in the Shawzin attic), the bottle cap and coin collection – rupees from 1920, dinars, rands, kwachas, shells, skindas, rubles. The senior Shawzin did travel but what an awful collector, none of the samples marked or saved in even a paper envelope, none of them placeable, just jumbles of old coins grown dun colored with the years.

I looked up again – to stretch my neck – but my eyes moved of their own accord to her window: where was she now, this new neighbor? She was still in the room reading something, sitting on the edge of one of the chairs, hair hanging over what seemed to be a clipboard. She stood up and I thought I could make out that she was looking out the window in my direction, though of course I could not see her eyes. I turned to Leo's work and the grey, slightly uneven words spat out by his

ancient Corona typewriter (the ass had a perfectly good computer and this file would have been better as a piece of email). I read but did not absorb anything and then moved the file down brusquely, coughed, shifted in my seat, dropped the file on my desk and glanced up to see if she had noticed me. She had not, of course she hadn't.

It was a view that afforded me the depth and breadth of her living area and the small kitchenette behind it. By then it had occurred to me that certainly the last tenant must have had curtains or perhaps louvered blinds. I myself have magnificent cream colored curtains in my office held proudly open and dusted weekly. I have not closed them since my wife's death. My new neighbor's bare-wood floors were glowing now, lit by what I later learned to be track lighting that she inherited with the place. The rows of lights cast naked pools of light on the barren floor and her boxes that made the apartment stand out against the rest. Even empty the apartment seemed inviting, with its boxes neatly piled against the window. A new life was beginning for her in that square room while my den was heavy with my past.

Had she looked out her window and seen me? Hard to tell, I couldn't make out her face. Did I even have lights on in my room and if she were to look up from her unpacking would she have the proper angle to look back into my window? Would she see the carved, pressed ceiling of my office? Perhaps not, I could certainly not see that kind of detail in her rooms. I had the superior height and yet seeing her at all meant that I could not be sure of my safety. Now she was opening boxes, taking out their contents, carrying things off into the adjoining room – the bedroom. I could just see into that room, only a tiny, empty piece of it. I thought I saw a closet door hanging open forlornly. But aside from that she could escape me in there, escape my gaze. Every time she returned to her bedroom or slid a box along the bare floor towards that room I returned to my work and when I looked up there she was again, rummaging.

I made a crude drawing of her on my blotter as I watched, a rude figure pushing boxes across the edge of my desk. I crossed it out. I looked away from the window and shut her from my consciousness firmly.

I stood and pressed the palms of my hands against the soft base of my spine and leaned backwards, feeling the muscles and flab there contract and shift. I left the room, padded in my socks down the short hall to the kitchen and poured myself a fresh glass of water and stood slurping among the hanging pots and pans. I have a luxurious kitchen meant for cooking for a family. The expensive pots complemented the kitchen's Spanish terra cotta floors and the wide billiard table lights hanging above the stove and food preparation area. The bachelor life I led had meant that these pans were largely unused as cooking for one person usually did not entail a great deal of thought or effort.

I took the water into the office. Avoiding my neighbor's window now took a conscious effort, an effort I felt obliged to make. It was like trying to ignore the ticking of a clock once one has registered it or an imperfection in a geometrical design or a curious movement in the corner of your eye, always there, demanding to be noticed. My vista from the office now included her window, it pressed upon me.

I laughed to myself. *At* myself.

Leo Kannotski had sent through an assortment of bold messages to my computer. The bulk of Kannotski's work had nothing to do with the Shawzin collection. He was a deltiologist, a lover of postcards, collector of casual missives from the past and the images that traveled with them. I had recruited him to organize the mess of coins and stamps I had salvaged from the Shawzin mansion and Kannotski was meant to sort, appraise and label these with the help of professionals he was allowed to hire by the hour.

Kannotski had lost no time in adopting the telegram-rudeness of email. I opened one of the electronic messages he sent me to be told brusquely that Stella's coin collection needed to be shown and it would require the same back lit cases we use for our Chinese prints in the upper rooms of the

museum. The coin collection would appeal to the Curator, said Leo, because it was “of note”. That is, it would be noted by people outside our tiny realm.

I read his messages with something akin to bemusement, and snapped them off one by one. Coin collections are relatively common and Kannotski was not necessarily an expert in that area. In any event there was much more to be done in sorting and labeling the Shawzin collection. Kannotski knew it and hated the fact as it distracted him from his Great Purpose.

The Great Purpose was his postcard collection which had been assembled over a period of eight and half years in the basement of the museum for a proposed display by the Curator. Small, stout Kannotski, wrapped in eternal tweed and a soft purple scarf, hopping from room to room and file to file and stack to stack in ridiculous, garish PUMP UP! Nike Air-Jordan sneakers. His specialty was postcards from the turn of the century, nude postcards usually bought by men who never intended to mail them. The collection was immense. It filled over a thousand small wooden boxes in the basement of the museum but unfortunately the San Francisco Museum had a yet larger collection and Kannotski could not bear it. He had continued collecting, vowing to match the San Francisco’s collection in size and splendor. It was the postcards that had finally ushered Kannotski into the computer age: his new computer, assigned to him by the Curator – a lesser model than mine – had gathered dust on his desk until he learned that collectors in his field were sending copies of their cards to one another through the ether. That prompted Kannotski to learn how to get the computer running and to petition myself and the Curator for a flatbed scanner. Kannotski was now able to receive copies of postcards he desired as well as send along to prospective buyers postcards he wanted to discard. Kannotski spent his off hours in the museum, working on the Great Purpose. His original assignment had been to catalogue and properly store a tiny consignment of postcards we had received from one of our benefactors who had left these things to us in his will, that was all, but Kannotski had managed to trade himself up and to wheedle money from the museum to expand the collection to its current gargantuan size. The Curator had once intoned something about “picketing

feminists” at the wrought iron gates of the Historical Society if ever Kannotski’s brown and grey nudes were to be put up for display. My own belief was that any women liable to picket the museum would hardly be offended by Kannotski’s postcards – perhaps the average aging feminist would be flattered by the less than winsome specimens that stirred the emotions of men living in the last century. Kannotski, for his part, felt he could put together the postcard collection as a “tribute to the female form” and also believed that once his collection had eclipsed the collection in San Francisco we would be forced to recognize him. It gave Kannotski great pleasure to know the West Coast Museum considered their collection “inactive” and it was stored away. Only Kannotski’s hoard was ever-growing.

Kannotski had sent through two samples of postcards he wanted to buy at fifty dollars apiece, two brown and grey images of the same woman standing at a shower. In the first, her backside was turned to the camera, the interior of the shower dark, the woman looking down, one foot raised as if to enter. The other view was a side portrait of the same woman with her eyes dulled by the camera into a strange glare and her face almost obliterated by time. She was an unremarkable figure staring unsmiling at the camera. Her side view showed her to be paunchy though she couldn’t have been over twenty-five and the pose the faceless photographer from years past had chosen for her was flatfooted, unflatteringly accentuating her pot belly and thick thighs and calves. Her skin looked fish-belly white and soft and her eyes looked positively bovine. A quotation from Hardy came to mind as I looked at the postcards and then up again at the window, seeing my own vague reflection framing the woman across the way:

What is commonly called love, namely the desire of satisfying a voracious appetite with a certain quantity of delicate white human flesh.

In Isabella's case, about twenty-five pounds too much of it for my tastes. Leo had once told me over lunch at the Museum Café that tastes change. An utterly bored, dough faced woman couldn't hold the attention of any man at any time, I believed. But I deferred to his better judgment. Any talk of Kannotski's Great Purpose was dangerous. The man had an annoying way of monopolizing an afternoon with his plans for the Niccalsetti Historical Society's *America Collection*.

The first of the two postcards he had sent to me was entitled "The Bath" and Kannotski had typed me a short note beneath its image: "The Lavender Collection, numbers 23, 26. Shall I ask the collector for more?"

Of course not, I thought. Look at her face, Leo, the face of a zombie, of a dead woman. How many other pictures of this woman were floating around out there being desperately searched for by Leo Kannotski through his thousand queries a day to collectors around the world? I printed the postcards, took one last look at the dumpy figure and wrote back to Kannotski, informing him that he'd need to source more cards from the "Lavender Collection" if he wanted us to spend money on these things. It was only a stalling measure, for Kannotski would certainly find more samples for me to peruse before we forked over another check to bolster his collection.

The phone rang. I let it ring four times until my machine picked up and I heard my own voice sounding tired and somewhat stuffy speak my name and request the caller to leave a message. I sat back in my chair, hands folded on my chest, and waited for the click, the beep and then the identity of the person calling me. In this case there could be no mistake.

"Helloooo Reginald. It's Stella Shawzin, pick up if you're there."

Loud woman, enough to rattle the machine's speaker. Her voice was deep, always cheerful, like a bright veneer of paint on iron. The woman was what my father would have called a "handful": rich, beautiful, leonine; she was my private beneficiary, the only woman left in my shrinking universe. I picked up the receiver, cleared my throat and said in a dignified voice meant to throw her off her afternoon gregariousness, "Reginald Humphrey."

“Screening your calls, Reginald? I’m pissed off at you so beware.”

“Hello Stella.” I let my voice sound only a shade more friendly, still professional, ever courteous, the helpful assistant on the other end of the line, always eager to receive more from her estate.

“You’re trying to get somebody killed, Reginald. You really are. I’m telling you that I could be calling right now to complain about a dead kid in my house and I’m pissed off about it, Reg.”

“What kid? Stella, what—?” My heart was pumping. I checked my watch. The woman wouldn’t be drinking this early, surely?

“I resent your sending those little children – those babies – out to my house to pick up dangerous old weapons. I’m not joking.”

She was speaking of the museum’s squad of Phi Beta Kappa graduates from the State University of New York at Niccalsetti, as well as our lone Yale woman whom I adored and our Harvard man who had appealed to the old boy network for a job and found me for his sins. All had been trained by myself and Leo.

“They were told to treat your belongings with great respect, Stella.”

“Who supervises these children, may I ask?”

“I do, when they have anything to do with anything of yours.”

“You were not supervising them today, when they came for Jerry’s father’s gun collection. I watched one young man empty a .702 cartridge on the living room floor before he chastised me for keeping loaded weapons in the house. That rifle hadn’t been fired in fifty years, Reginald! They also manhandled the Martini-Henri, my god, Reginald, that rifle was brought back from Isandwana. It fired upon the Zulus at Rorke’s Drift. Do you realize what I have been offered for that rifle?” She paused. “Hell, Reginald, that thing could blow somebody’s head off. The cartridge is about the size of an indelible *marker*.”

“Which one did it, Stella? Can you remember? I’ll talk to him, I promise.” It was almost certainly the Nimrod from Harvard, Alan Kamski. I could easily imagine the scene out there in her palatial mansion, the mountains of stuff she was giving us, handled by college kids who had smoked pot on the way out to Stella’s leafed suburb to pack ancient weapons that still fired deadly rounds. Lawsuits on the wing.

“They would have behaved themselves with you here, and if you send them out again I expect you to accompany them. Next time I’ll give you books Reginald. Try and display these boring damned things at your museum.”

“I will tell them you called me. I will. I’ll raise Cain”

“Well, don’t bully them too much, Reginald. I only was so hoping to see you out here. There will be a cocktail party at my house in two nights and you will be there, I hope.”

Guilt, accusations of professional negligence, then the request. The pilot fish began to make plans, sharks sighted, grey in the distant ocean. “What time do you want me there Stella?”

Her voice took on an annoyed tone. “The Curator will not be there, though. His secretary left a message on the machine. I’m disappointed.”

“Well, I’ll be there. That has to count for something.” That damn museum and its damn inefficiency. One doesn’t disappoint Stella Shawzin. I wedged the phone between my neck and cheek and scrolled down on the email window. The Curator had not sent me any message about his invitation. “We can catch up, Stella.” Stalling. She was being very quiet but in fact was probably distracted by something. Hopefully not one of the kids bayoneting a maid. I checked my watch, they should have been heading back to the museum now. And there was nothing from the Curator on the email scroll. “I accept your invitation, if this is an invitation and I’m in the good books ...” Nothing about a Shawzin cocktail party and she had sent an *invitation*, for god’s sake. A cocktail party in Niccalsetti was a playground for pilot fishes, and Stella knew enough of the players in Niccalsetti to bring me up a few notches on the next assessment. I felt like a gambler being offered another turn at

the wheel, one more hand at the same table and this was the big table in Niccalsetti, Stella Shawzin's house.

"Well, there are people you should meet. Have you a guest to bring?"

Inadvertently, despite my earlier resolutions, I glanced over the way at my neighbor, saw only the bright sheen of evening sunlight reflecting from her windows, blinding for a moment before I looked away. "No guest. I'll be your guest. Is that OK?"

"That's fine. I'll take care of you. As I always do." Pleased sounding now. Stella, alone in that mansion planning her cocktail party throughout the day. Living for visitors. Stella and I were now falling into our half-facetious roles of wooer and chased object of affection, though at some point I had assumed the latter role, after years of badgering her for more donations she had assigned me an attractiveness I only sometimes felt I still possessed. And so I began to walk the line between professional interest in my benefactor and my own real friendship with her. And I confess here I am not sure where one ended and the other began. Every losing month brought me closer to outright begging.

"Don't be late, Reg," she said. "And wear your tuxedo. I love your tux."

Reg. Even my mother called me Reginald. I said goodbye, smiling into the receiver.

I looked at the gently ticking, somber face of my Dutch grandfather clock behind the office door. Almost five. My eyes drifted once more to my neighbor, but she was gone from view and the late sun still reflected brightly from her windows.

* * * *

I enjoy napping in the afternoon, with music softly wafting through my lonely corridors. My indulgence is my stereo system, a beautiful thing from Germany. I enjoy playing Mozart while I nap and when I awake I can switch the compact disk to a recording of Bach's unaccompanied cello suites. My wife used to call them "brain massages".

I do not mind eating alone. My wife could not eat alone. When I went away to other cities on museum business that did not include any social forays she went out with her many friends every night, could not bear to face an empty apartment. But I am a man who enjoys his own company. On the eve of Stella's party I dined on sole and brown rice and a good glass of Stellenzicht Blanc de Blanc taken from my private stock. I had installed wine racks along the tops of the cupboards long ago and I pride myself on my selection. I listened to Mozart's clarinet concerto and read *The Niccalsetti News* as I ate. I chose not to return the phone calls from the museum that had been duly recorded by the voice on the answering machine as I napped.

After thumbing through the paper I turned to read one of the laborious journals sent to me daily – the *Chicago Historical Review*, vol. cxviii – and I unwrapped four more, left them lying on the table. Reading and eating seem to go so well together that I am sometimes baffled that I have never cottoned on to this pleasure before. When my wife was alive, of course, there was the conversation we shared, the mulling over of daily events, the chatter that keeps a marriage together. We were married for eighteen years and had no children, so I cannot say that we ever indulged in the round table of dinner discussion with the kids present. My wife was a Classics scholar from Harvard who taught briefly at the local private high school and then at University before the cancer became too much for her and she retired to the apartment, which bore her character for years more than mine.

But reading with a few good glasses of wine – there was a pleasure indeed! Music playing, the papers spread out across the paper, it was blissful. The thought of eating while staring blankly at a wall or, worse, at a television, frightens me. I have even brought books to the local café down the

road, a place quaintly called The Touch of Paris that really isn't very Parisian at all, with its white plastic chairs and its exhaustive list of Italian coffees and its Greek and American foods and its luxurious muffins in the morning. I have sat there many evenings over decidedly un-French fajitas reading in the corner when I did not wish to cook – I don't consider myself a lazy man but any one who has lived and cooked for years with a loved one sees a certain futility in preparing meals for one: every dish has a sense of being unfinished and the effort that goes into feeding oneself seems ridiculous. That night, for example, the sole I had battered and fried sat lonely in a pan slightly too large for it in a morose pool of oil and I had prepared a salad that would go to waste unless I forced it down with lunch somehow tomorrow. I had microwaved a potato and oiled it with a substance that claimed to have all the health benefits of margarine and the taste of butter. Now the dirty Creuset pan and the plate I used for the potato and the salad bowl and the cutting board and the snippets of vegetable matter all were in a pile on the island counter, a mess enough for two. I would not have minded company while I cooked – or even while I ate and read – but did not want the bother of a guest who would appear before dinner and insist on helping cook the food and a guest who would need coffee and drinks afterwards. I had once thought of asking Kannotski over for a few brief dinners – if he didn't live across town I would be tempted, though he is a talker and that counted against him as it would make him harder to kick out once we had eaten. So I had begun to cook foods that went well with reading matter. Fish is a decent reading food because it allows one to lift meat off bones with one hand while reading. Another excellent reading food is steak, with a good bottle of red wine (steak's good for reading scathing book reviews, for some reason).

I finally stretched and went back to my bedroom. I showered, shaved, then wrapped my long seersucker robe around my body, put my feet in my slippers, and padded back to the kitchen for another half glass of wine, to fortify myself for Stella's party. Behind the kitchen was the small hallway to my office, and I could see the lights of the city. I drank in the kitchen, gazing down the hall, my body warm in the robe.

Jenny's apartment was dark. Had I been thinking about her? I looked down the hall, through the office, and saw the winking lamps of a thousand other apartments and rooms, in the buildings looming up out of the darkness. I walked into my office and did not switch on the lamp. The green indicator of my answering machine patiently flashed. I ignored it. It was time to dress now. I looked over at her apartment window expectantly, idly. Nothing. If my new neighbor had been there, she might have offered a companionship of a kind, I told myself.

I am vain. I enjoy wearing a tuxedo, mine fits me well and makes me look my best. It was made for me in London, through three fittings, and it is indeed perfect. There was that wonderful old exhilaration to be savored as I assembled the tuxedo, exhilaration that stemmed from the smell of the pressed wool jacket, the paper feel of the starched white pleated shirt and its tie, the vest and its golden buttons, the knife edge crease in the pants, my box of cufflinks and onyx studs. There was nothing that makes me feel more expansive than slipping into my evening clothes. I could see the gleam of the lights in her apartment in the buffed patent leather of my shoes and somehow, though my jacket smelt clean and fresh, it brought back memories and visions of past parties, of revelries ended and revelries to be, a scent of expectancy that the dry cleaner downstairs could not squeeze out of it. My wife had been a great one for social events, and so there was that sadness to feel while I laid out my evening clothes, that sense that we were not preparing together, the sense that I was alone before the festivities, and would be alone once again after. I could have easily hated such useless ceremony, the dressing up and undressing for the eyes of others. At this point in the night my rooms would be filled with fresh, lingering scent of perfume instead of the dusty smell of Reginald. I would have fixed my wife a drink and myself a double drink and we would have music on and would most likely be late. Now the ceremony took on the guise of work, it took on a deliberateness that used to be terrible but now was routine.

As I drank the last of the Stellenzicht in its cool glass, went through the ritual: the removal of the tuxedo in its plastic wrapping from the dry-cleaner, the pulling of the tux shirt from the

cardboard dry-cleaner's box. I located the studs and lined them up on my bureau, found the black socks and laid them out next to the suspenders sprawled next to the cummerbund. I also laid out a suitably jaunty tartan bow tie but changed this to a yellow paisley tie Stella had sent me a couple of years back.

After all was laid out I stepped into the hall, glass in one hand, patent leather shoes in their cedar trees in the other and peeked through the doorway into the night, saw the bright square of my neighbor's apartment but she was not to appear. I chastised myself again for my curiosity.

I left the office and went into the stark light of my bathroom, groomed my thinning hair and washed my face, brushed my teeth hard enough to draw blood. I returned and dressed at the foot of my bed, cast my khakis and sweater on the reading chair by the bed. I had closed my own drapes in here so that the prying eyes of the world would not see my still powerful body. I was trim, this was a good thing, for the tux is meant for trim people and makes penguins out of the rotund. I stood in my oxford cloth boxers, admired my clothes on the bed, turned to the mirror and stood straight. A brief run-in with the physiotherapist two years ago had left me with the injunction to keep my back bowed inward at all time and I bowed it and grinned raffishly at the mirror. I dressed, and attempted to ignore the fact that the tuxedo, now ten years old, seemed to be in fact *growing* on me as the years went by and I shrinking within it. I found the shirt cuffs lower than they had been in the past, the collar a shade too loose (I tightened Stella's tie a notch to make up for this), the shoulders of the suit coat gave a fraction of a millimeter at where they creased into the arms. I dressed, tightened, adjusted, admired myself in the mirror. I would not need an overcoat tonight. I set the wine glass on the plate in the sink after taking the last swallow and casting the empty bottle into the garbage beside the fridge. The phone rang just as I had splashed water over the cup. It was my driver from the museum, who asked politely if I was ready, his voice fading in and out from below, creased with static, calling from the phone in the car. I snapped off the lights in my apartment and I felt a mixture

of shame and disappointment in myself as I took one last glance through the office at my neighbor's empty window, her lights burning like a beacon.

CHAPTER 2

The museum has two cars and a driver. I had reserved the driver and the better of the two cars for my ride to Stella's. I avoid driving when I can though I am in fact an excellent driver. I walk to work and the taxi and subway systems of Niccalsetti are adequate for my needs. The driver was a college kid wearing jeans and a white T-shirt and a black suit coat above it. He wore sunglasses out in the dying light and drove quickly for Stella's. We left the city behind in silent, glittering splendor and the roads became smaller, winding through pastures and country that Stella enjoyed riding through astride one of her Kentucky Morgans or grey Arabians. The driver and I reached the beginning of the great circular driveway close to eight-thirty. I was dropped off at the rich green front doors and my driver was directed to park and wait on the back lawns.

Stella's husband's family made their money selling weapons to the American Revolutionaries and molasses to the British. Their descendants armed the Northern Armies during the civil war and invested in whaling ships and then in the building and shipping on the Erie Canal after an unfortunate event took place in Nantucket involving Cornelius and a woman named Wadsworth whose whaler husband was a man of even greater means than Shawzin. It is therefore no surprise that Stella's possessions are roundly coveted by the museum. Stella's house had been built in the days when Niccalsetti had been the Silicon valley of the United States, that is to say just at the end of the nineteenth century, a place where a man from the east coast would feel he had really moved West into the hinterlands. It was a mansion built to Cornelius Shawzin's exacting specifications, from

locally hewn lime and granite. It had its own stables, a polo field, a tennis court and even a squash court which had been built in one of the older horse barns. Stella, unlike most of Niccalsetti's rich, actually used her servant's quarters for servants, for grooms and gardeners and for her maids. The money from her family had filtered down many generations and the twentieth century had seen her father as a major traveler and businessman – a shrewd investor, unlike many of the twentieth century's rich descendants who had failed to live up to their parents' acumen. He had invested in a very simple product back in the 1940s, a product called desiccant invented by Jack Coleman, his poker buddy at the Niccalsetti Club, which was meant to keep things dry in storage and was handy for the shipment of precision parts which turned out to be very useful to the United States Government which used his precision formed desiccant to ship everything from battlefield medicines to ammunition to tank coolant. The local company that produced it also produced it for air conditioning units and there was only one competitor in the entire United States that made the product. Desiccant capsules could even be found in aspirin bottles, marked, loudly, DO NOT EAT. Every time one tumbled out in my hand as I treated a hangover with a liberal dosage of painkillers I thought of Stella and her unquenchable millions. The house was of stone and somewhat castle-like, the pretentiousness of the place comforting in winter and coolly enveloping in summer. I was sure she would never sell it: like so many other white elephant houses in a city that was long dead the market for mansions had long since disappeared. The upkeep alone on a place like this must have run easily into the tens of thousands a year.

Stella had married Jerry Shawzin early and he in turn had done her the favor of dying early, at fifty-nine, only a decade older than myself. He had fallen prey to rich man's plagues: what seemed to me to be a combination of heart ailments and then a cocktail of cancer that hit him in the bowels and the throat, revenge of the body for all the poisons imbibed on tranquil green lawns. Jerry Shawzin was a man cut from the same mold as his grandfather but his lust for expansive and expensive living had displaced the lust to build and conquer. He had thrown magnificent parties out here or so I hear,

for my entrance into Stella's life came after the demise of Jerry and his transferal of the fortune to his much younger wife.

I stood next to the valet Stella had hired for the evening and soaked in the warm night before I let him open the doors for me where I was transferred into the hands of a maid in a white dress. I was led into the house through the near empty front hall to the lounge area where the cocktail party was going full swing. I walked through the front reception area hearing the burble of Stella's party, satisfyingly engulfed in her wealth, my shoes tapping on her marble floor.

I used to enjoy these things. Perhaps this is why I have done so well under the Curator's stewardship at the museum: I can attend to people like Stella, I enjoy mixing, I enjoy small talk, I can make my presence known and yet I am unobtrusive. But now I looked in at the room with a sense of unease. The party was in many respects a playing field. This is essentially where I could change those damned monthly emails into reports of success. This is where I could make a contact (vulgar word, I know, I know) that could net the museum ten thousand, even a hundred thousand. I looked into the crowd now and saw only people who needed convenient ways to dodge the tax man, looked for people who would be most likely to want to see their names on the monthly newsletter the museum sent out to the members of Niccalsetti Society. Charitable giving, I have learned, has nothing to do with charity or giving, thank god. It has more to do with eager people who want to buy part of a past their forefathers were excluded from, from the old rich looking for ways to avoid the 52% tax bracket they lived in, from new important to this small town who wanted a gateway to the upper echelons of the society, rich newcomers who knew that sitting on the board of the museum for a mere 50 000 tax deductible dollars, or taking a sudden interest in the city's glorious past by the support of a central exhibit (again, 50 000 tax deductible dollars) could inject one into the bowels of the social shark pool wherein I lived and thrived in my small way. Even ten thousand bucks gave one the right to attend meetings and museum functions, made sure even Stella Shawzin, whose Niccalsettian roots were thick and golden, would have to have one at her table at least once a year.

Niccasetti did not have the entrenched positions of New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. We were very egalitarian here. We had to be. My father had been a University lecturer in this city and his father had been a clerk at the Gold Dome Bank of Niccasetti, both now long now dead and buried, the bank exactly fifty years following the death of my *pater familias*. I had as much a right to the roots of Niccasetti as anyone but my roots were fragile and withered. I didn't truly care, truth be known. In fact, there was a time when I would have laughed at myself in a tuxedo, back when I was getting my master's in History at Harvard and sitting in the square discussing my thesis with my advisor explaining to him why the past of Niccasetti was showed the classic sign of the first stages of a Marxist struggle and the booming steel industry would soon usher in an era of worker control over the means of production.

Ten years later the Unions would be broken in Niccasetti and fifteen miles of steel plants would begin a process of rusting while the erstwhile workers fled outside the city and took make-do jobs in the local shops and local factories. I cringe to think of it, would love to drag my long-haired, goateed former self to this party, pick myself up out of the bullshit of thirty years ago and force myself to look in at the humming, chandelier-scintillating room of Stella Shawzin with its hundred or so Great Whites swimming through clouds of top-shelf booze with morsels for the taking and show him a progress appraisal from a museum that lived from hand to mouth and tell that fool of three decades ago to forget the Marx and love his wife who'd be dead in a blink of an eye and to learn some basic accounting before talking about a worker revolution in a city that history itself was beginning to forget. I'd love to ask him where he believed Harvard had gained its wealth – I had seen that spreadsheet and the donors and had learned that back in 1969, as I was sipping my cheap coffee at the café with my battered copy of *Das Kapital*, Harvard was earning upwards of a hundred thousand dollars a year from Dow Chemical who were busy manufacturing napalm for Dong Lai and the now long dead rain forests and jungle of Cambodia.

But standing at the threshold of the party, with the Great Whites so close at hand and the classical music softly soothing me and a long silver salver of hors d'oeuvres floating towards me held by a tall and furiously beautiful college student in a white T-shirt and clinging long black pants and a forgiving smile. My vague rages dissipated and more than revolution or time machines I wanted a drink – a big drink – and a clear shot at someone who owned the means of production and wanted to see his kid at the museum's Charity Cotillion this fall. Tonight I was looking for someone from the East Coast, from New York, or, better, from a fly-over city like Phoenix or Cleveland, someone who either was buying what he couldn't have before or what he had never known was for sale. On nights like these I wanted the WASP founders of Nicalsetti, who had wrested the city from the Mohawks only to fight the British in 1812 and then the Mohawks again until the middle of the nineteenth century, to spin in their graves.

Stella does invite an eclectic crowd to her parties: businessmen, artists, writers, even singers (she sponsored the Metropolitan Opera House tryouts for Upstate New York one year), as well as academics I know from the University and the many business people whom she meets through her frequent redistribution of her vast stores of money.

I pressed through the tuxedos and suits and long dresses to the bar and asked for a light scotch and soda from a spotted boy who took my order with a serious frown and a nod. Stella saw me immediately. She had seen me when I had descended the few stairs into the living area. The bar was set away from the main crowd, so she could keep an eye on who desired refreshment. She sailed easily through the crowd, a domineering and impressively built handsome woman, her hair still a luxurious light brown, her eyes deep set and intelligent – she was tall and imperious, and I suppose overweight, though this only gave her a bearing, a solidity. It also seemed to make her yet more desirable, gave her an impressive and bounteous cleavage to hold her heavy necklace up. She was wearing a grey dress and jacket combination and was drinking champagne. A magnificent set of earrings and a matching brooch glittered against her, I would remember to compliment her on these

later. She moved through her guests with a commanding grace. Stella had no children that I knew of, but I expect she would have been the kind of mother a daughter would either emulate or despise.

“Reginald. You’re late. Come here, I’d like you to meet Mr. Brian Fenway. Brian is an admirer of the Historical Society.” I shook hands with a short round man with a red face and a satisfied smile who had traveled to us carried in her wake.

Stella gently touched my shoulder with her finger. “Brian runs a company called Fennel Plastics. He’s interested in getting involved in the museum.”

The pilot fish adjusted its sounding and began to swim cautiously. This particular shark was half inebriated but he looked at me with a satisfied face and grunted twice as we shook hands. He sipped from a glass full of bourbon with a forlorn floating ice cube in the middle that made the amount of bourbon seem ridiculous. “I’m a World War II buff. Love anything to do with it. I have some stuff my father left me, might make a good display.” His eyes were half focused Stella’s well defined breasts.

“We might want to talk about a few other projects that you would find interesting, Mr. Fenway.”

“Brian. Yeah, well, my father’s stuff is up for grabs. I haven’t been to the museum in years but I figure maybe there’s a war room you have.”

“We do have a collection of fine rifles that might interest you.” I was losing his attention. He was paying more attention to Stella than to me. I had made the mistake of not expressing enough interest in The World War II memorabilia and now was backtracking frantically.

“Well, that sounds like something I’d like to see ...” Almost a tone of genuine interest.

“We can meet at the museum for lunch this week.” I said it quickly. “Monday is free and I’ll give you a quick call to confirm it. Does that sound all right?”

“Sure.”

I handed him my card and asked that he phone me. He fumbled in his pocket for his own bulging wallet and produced a card with a shiny symbol beside his name, an amalgamation of an F and a P. I asked him to come down to the museum, arranged a nebulous lunch for the future. Fenway might be convinced to finance other projects, I thought idly, and rich men are never to be lightly palmed off in a city of 300 000.

“Call me, Reginald,” he said, looking directly at me and sipping. “Just call me and leave a date with my secretary.” He winked at Stella. “Maybe you should come.”

“But I don’t know anything about history. That’s Reg’s bag.”

He looked at me with a kind of half smile of camaraderie. “Yeah, get her to come Reg. We’ll have a few drinks and talk history. On me. You chose the place, OK? But get this lady out of the house.”

Stella abruptly led me away from him into the crowd, pushing her way through with a tilt of her jaw. “He’s rich, you know. You have to be nice to him. Drink more this minute, damn you. Stop being such a damned cold fish. Have you had dinner?”

I lied, told her I had not.

“Good. These people will be out of here in less than an hour. I’ll have the cook make us something. I want you to meet some other friends of mine and be polite.”

And so I followed her, dutifully on the periphery of her many conversations with the captains of Nicalsetti industry. I met a man whose company made tiny screws that fit into eyeglasses. I met another man and his teenage wife whose company supplied power to Western New York. I was handed two more drinks by Stella’s maid as I stood with my patent leather shoes making their imprint on her fine nineteenth century Iranian carpet and fended off an old woman who wanted to press upon me a collection of rare prints of the city one hundred and fifty years ago. I referred her to my colleagues at the art museum. I collected business cards and phone numbers and arranged

lunches for myself all the way until the end of the next week. The Curator would be pleased, I was sure (The email, I thought ... let these lunches come! The email!).

The crowd began to disperse quickly with much waving and kissing and shrugging on of coats. Stella had the door thrown open and the summer breeze blew in, wafted the smoke around the rooms and blew out, spilling the party on to her lawns. I was beginning to feel light headed. The servants moved about the room picking up glasses and napkins and colored toothpicks. I remained on the periphery admiring the dusty suit of Maximilian armor standing guard over a corner of the living area, shipped in fifty years ago on the elder Shawzin's whim from Landshut, Germany, the armour over four hundred years old, its complex gilt inlays and floral patterns about the shoulder pieces identifying it as a rare Artura Del Taega – mint condition, never worn. But I wanted to wear it. I wanted to crawl inside and clank around the end of this party and lop off heads and lift dresses with the ax.

A feeling came of disappearing. I began to feel invisible, as if I were to look down at my hands I would see nothing, as if I had slipped out of the room, my existence had acquired a liquidity. I stood very still, breathed shallowly, drank through clenched teeth breathing the alcohol fumes. I was willing myself back into the world. I pressed the bottoms of my patent leather shoes with my toes, pressed again, rocked my heels into the carpet. My heart was beating weakly and insistently under my jacket like an antiquated fibrous machine running hot.

Stella efficiently took elbows and guided half drunken men and their consorts across the halls, speaking, guiding, nodding, smiling. Once the final pair had left she turned to the maids and issued instructions with her hands clasped before her, then found me disappearing and half drunk, my hands sweating. "Come, Reginald. We have to discuss something. Marie, please have cook serve us some cold chicken and a bottle of champagne."

I choked, flexed my toes and began walking unsteadily across the carpet breathing heavily with my head thrown back, looking directly at her, insisting on my place in the room. I walked with

clumping steps across the worn and unrestorable carpet. She did not notice my effort to cling to the room and when I reached the end of the carpet and the heel of my shoe touched the shiny wooden floor I felt a slight wave of relief and a feeling of good hearted lightheadedness that made tears spring to my eyes. My left hand was balled in a damp fist as I walked.

Marie disappeared into the rear of the house and we sat at the long dining room table while one of the lesser maids set our places and poured wine. I vowed to limit myself to one glass of her fine Brut champagne. I had come into a feeling of exquisite well being, as if the party and the house itself shielded me from the world. The long dark room, set by our small militia of friendly servants, had an air of jovial conspiracy to it. Stella sat at the head of the table, myself beside her. The lights were dimmed and the long dark candles were lit. I felt as if the house had grown around me, impossibly huge and cocooning. Stella and I were finished with our respective jobs, hers as the gracious host and matron of Niccalsetti society and I as the efficient collector of lunches and meetings and future acquisitions. There was a sense of achievement between us, of something accomplished with panache and grace.

“Now, Reginald. We must discuss something my accountant brought up. I want to be fair to you. I have decided to let you have the full stamp collection this year, and the coin collection, that’s a finished deal, I know. I would also like you to take the rest of the rifles and that is it for this year.” She drew a pattern on the table cloth, a figure eight with a perfect red fingernail.

This was an emergency that broke through the mellow atmosphere. I sipped my wine. “Stella. What about these wall hangings on the second floor? The Curator has made space for an exhibit already.” I did not say that the Musée des Tapisseries in Angers, France had shown a great amount of interest already in her 1367 *Woman With Swan*. She was perhaps one of only three people in the United States to own two Flanders tapestries (*Man and Child* and *Woman with Child*, c. 14 cent.), and they sat upstairs in this house, encased in plastic.

“I will give them. Of course. But not this tax year. Oh, Reginald, I get only 100 000 dollars a year to write off to these donations. The hangings are going to be almost half a million dollars. My income doesn’t permit it. I can only make that donation officially next year.”

“And if the museum was willing to accommodate you. To not file the donation until the next financial year ...”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I wouldn’t ask you to do that.”

“We’d be storing your belongings. You could pay us a small fee, a nominal sum.”

Dinner was served, chicken, some kind of salad that complemented the champagne. I turned to my food. The table had held plates of hors d’oeuvres and booze, it still bore the imprint of wine bottles and salvers. Stella seemed distracted. She leaned back in her chair, tucked one hand under her elbow and drank from her wine glass thoughtfully. “All this junk of mine. A house with centuries of it, Reginald. I don’t even know what’s in the attic, beyond a few things.”

I had a few ideas.

She turned to me. “Do you know how lonely it is to live with all the debris of past lives? I never felt this way with Jerry here, but now things are quite different.”

“You loved him very much.”

“I’m getting sentimental I suppose. Things were a comfort, years ago. Now they’re a burden. And no, I didn’t truly love Jerry much at all.”

“Stella, that’s why I’m here.” It was the drink, the words came out with much more feeling than I intended.

She smiled. “Of course, Reginald.”

“We value everything here. And we value you, Stella. You realize that, don’t you?”

“Yes. I think I do.” She had caught me, her gaze was even and mischievous. I cleared my throat. “You should have come to me sooner, if you had concerns of this nature. I keep a few accountants in my employ, Stella.”

The mischievous look was still there. She put her glass on the table in front of her, tapped it lightly with her fingertip. I wrapped my napkin around the bottle and topped her glass, then my own, despite my earlier intentions.

Of course the Curator would frown upon a dalliance with Stella. The driver would recognize that I had overstayed my welcome and it is perhaps a testament to my small-town upbringing that I was worried about the servants and the driver being aware of our liaison. I chose the coward's route, I pretended not to catch her insinuations. I drank more wine, and tried to convince her to donate her wall hangings to the museum this year. The Curator was very interested in them, though I doubt he realized just how priceless they were, as my colleagues in France most certainly did. And Stella understood my cowardice and there was laughter in her eyes as she refused me. It was a game, the game of confidence one played with Stella. It occurred to me that perhaps she believed that if she gave in to me and the museum, I would disappear, and leave her to the lonely remnants of her parties and her dark, brooding rooms and the far off sound of servants washing up in the scullery.

It occurred to me that it might be easy for her to refuse Reginald the Ever Helpful Researcher, but not Reginald her Clandestine Lover. And her cold champagne made the idea yet more palatable. She was reckless, or, perhaps feckless, a woman operating under a severe time constraint.

I did not wish to alleviate her loneliness or share it with her. Part of me wanted the comforts of my den and my apartment, my computer and files and red wine and Mozart and the familiar smells of my kitchen. I did not wish to have more than a professional responsibility towards her. Part of me wanted to return to my den and my music and a glass of wine and my neatly ordered work and the neat view of the new neighbor. Yes, even at Stella's my neighbor managed to slip into my mind.

And another part of me despised the Reginald who hemmed and hawed his way through the rest of the champagne (she drank most of it, surpassing my healthy pace), who managed to wear her down in regards to the wall hangings and who protested the lateness of the hour when we had

reached an impasse. She led me to the door and opened it herself, so that we were alone in the foyer.

She placed a hand on my shoulder, stepped close. "Lovely to see you here, Reginald."

"Thank you for inviting me, Stella."

"I will be in touch."

"You throw magnificent parties."

She waved that thought away tiredly, and her shoulders gave slightly. "Just a few cocktails.

But it's always nice to see you."

I kissed her goodnight, quickly, let her coolly watch me make my way down the driveway where my car was now waiting to whisk me back into the city. She waved goodbye to me, framed by the warm light of her house as the car slipped up to the road.

* * * *

I went to bed at exactly two o'clock that morning. I had waited up to see if my neighbor had come home – actually enjoying my nightly ritual of a whisky and ice while sitting in front of the reassuring hum of my computer.

The files from the museum were spread in front of me. I had bought myself time with Stella, but how much? I did not know and I was half drunk from her champagne and the scotch I had poured myself upon arriving home. I was sitting in my evening clothes, the ice melting slowly from the warmth of my hand. I felt the absence of my wife. I felt it acutely.

Her death had brought me my first true disappearance. I cannot explain invisibility, of course, by I can explain the circumstances *around* my becoming invisible for the first time.

My wife had been complaining for some time about pains in her lower abdomen, and excessive bleeding during her period ... thinking of a woman's bodily functions once was difficult for me, but exposure to where the body ends up, and how it ends up, makes one hardened and indelicate. The body is such a frail thing compared to what we use to preserve it and what exists to destroy it. There can be nothing that we look at askance: the monthly passing of living blood is the most basic sign of life, indicative of the regular beating rhythms of warmth and flow that preserve us and keep us.

But the flow had been interrupted. She was experiencing greater discomfort than usual at these times. Agatha visited her gynecologist.

Who recommended her to an oncologist.

Who performed a myriad of blood tests and tissue tests for that disease he knew so well.

I, unknowing of the details of this, had followed them with a grim fascination. First the taking of the sample, then the wait, a week, three days – always my wife waiting by the telephone. The oncologist was a surgeon of great repute in my city by the lake, how shall I describe him? Heartlessly competent. Dr. Lawrence A. Feldmann was brilliant and well spoken and understanding in the way a secular minister must be to his flock – a man who deals in intangibles and dilemmas and horrible knowledge beyond us simple grubbers living as we do like ignoramuses by a great yawning black sea that we all agree not look to.

Our surgeon was dressed in an immaculate white shirt and a bright, red and green paisley tie that peeked out merrily from under his long white coat at me as he explained to the both of us what my wife was being tested for, and introduced us to how doctors think of the body and by extension life itself. We three sat in his quiet, modern corner office on the twelfth floor of the Niccalsetti Cancer Research Institute, with his view of the muted cars below, underneath his poorly chosen modern paintings on the wall as he explained in jovial, precise terms what was happening. It was all quite fascinating, really, from the point of view of someone who knows nothing about the sickness

and cancer and terminal disease and death and like everyone else would rather not be personally concerned with it. What he explained made me realize that our best science and our most precise and expensive instruments are clumsy and dull toys slashing with imprecision in the dark against something that grows with intent and deadly purpose and will not be destroyed. That cryptic machinery that can build life within a woman must be repaired using the crudest of means.

Dr. Feldmann began with this imprecise statement: “There is a ninety percent chance your wife will be fine.”

Her had a free standing poster of the cross section of a woman’s reproductive system. The colors were off-pastel and showed differently colored elements of the system, drained of blood. Here was the uterus, that sea anemone of human life. Here was the spot where the cells which enjoyed a ninety-nine percent chance of benignity had developed within the first walls of my wife’s empty uterus. Here was how far our surgeon believed they had penetrated. We could not be sure just how far.

I had asked how big they knew the tumor was, how deep it had managed to penetrate. He nodded thoughtfully throughout my query as if fielding a hypothetical semantic question. “We can never be absolutely sure, but it almost certainly has not reached the muscle tissue.”

I thought back to my wife being fed into a long, pale, metal tube manned by a serious young woman at a computer terminal, her insides brought up on screen in hot reds and blues and green hues looking for all the world like a radar image of a distant country where the scientists could pinpoint their attacks. I remembered the very accurate looking pictures and computer readouts and measurements that had been inserted into my wife’s file. Certainly our surgeon had a representation of those tiny cells that had gone astray, certainly Feldmann had a very good idea of their influence and size and the results of their burrowing?

Apparently he did not. He believed that only the uterus had been infected. He reminded us that it was a slightly more serious matter if the cancer cells had reached the muscle. It was a yet more

serious matter if the cancer cells had reached another region, the lymph glands. If the lymph glands were in danger my wife's blood could be invaded. Even I understood what that meant. I took my wife's hand under this calm onslaught of knowledge.

But, Feldmann assured us, leaning forward conspiratorially on his chair, "There is no chance it has gotten that far. All right, maybe half a percent chance the cancer cells have infected that area. We shouldn't even consider that."

"When will you know for sure?"

"During the operation, when we remove the tumor. We will be able to see exactly what is happening in there. Only then. And I'd advise you not to worry, not yet."

Apparently the computers and the machines could not compete with the human eye. It was not a comforting thought.

He described how he would cut, where he would cut. He described a simple operation that he performed twice a week. An operation that took two hours at most. An operation that had the patient up on her feet in two days. An operation one could do before lunch, before breakfast even. An operation that was not even rightly an operation but merely a procedure, yes, I remember, something done by rote, every day, something tangible and a product of rules and methodology. He would be finished in a matter of minutes. Nothing to worry about. But the procedure had to transpire as soon as possible. How soon? In two days time. Every day the burrowing cells drilled further into the uterus, heading for the red muscle surrounding the uterus; their ultimate destination the lymph cells. The procedure would stop them in their tracks. It would remove the cancerous parasite inside my wife. It would, or course, involve a complete hysterectomy.

Strangely, I was not perturbed by that thought. That unused and now infected machinery of my wife's was to be removed – that seemed fine to me. We had never planned for children. But the prospect of that removal affected my wife, however. I had not paused and think about what it meant to a woman to have her life giving power to be cut away.

I had believed all this to be merely a procedure, you see.

And so the hospital room was reserved. A time was set, early in the morning: my wife, accompanied by myself, was to appear at the NCRI at 6:30 a.m. The procedure would happen an hour later. I would be told the results two hours later (at the most!) and I could wait until she recovered from the drugs. She'd need a day to recover and could go home afterward. I almost wanted the doctor to cut out the cancer and bring it to me in a jar so I could see it for myself and watch it starve, shrivel and die.

I was quite proud of her. She had remained calm and poised throughout Feldmann's explanations, had sat dressed casually in her sweatsuit and sneakers (we had learned not to wear good clothes to the hospital) and daubed her eyes once upon receiving Feldmann's recommendation of a hysterectomy. Feldmann was good with her, he spoke reassuringly but in a tone of voice that would accept no argument, no bargaining.

We were good patients.

And of course we did not need a second opinion on the matter, time was of the essence now.

And we went to the hospital two days later.

Agatha wore her favorite jewelry despite the protestations of the nurses. We were not given our own room at first, but a room a floor above the operating theater to prepare her. Agatha was undressed and given two pills and a tube was inserted in her arm by a businesslike nurse who was our age and checked Agatha's pulse before going back to her station at the end of the hall.

We were visited by a priest, who seemed in a wonderful mood, despite the hour. He held both our hands and bowed his white-haired head over my wife. He asked the Good Lord for guidance in this time of sickness, and blessed the hands that were to open her. Agatha looked at the yellow stained ceiling throughout the priest's blessing. It perhaps occurred to her that easily performed procedures usually do not require priests. But maybe they sent a priest to every patient

and this jovial priest simply wandered the hallways above the operating theater blessing bodies regardless of their need for the Divine or the godlessness of that body heretofore.

We were not visited by Doctor Feldmann.

Two nurses came and lifted her on to a large gurney and she held my hand and squeezed it. I told her she'd be fine. She was already groggy, her eyes half closed. She raised her forehead for a kiss.

"I'll see you soon, my love. I'll be waiting."

"Yes. Of course you will." Her voice sounded distant, drained of emotion by the tablets she had consumed before the priest's visit.

She smiled and pressed my hand. And then she was wheeled away.

I went to the cafeteria and ordered coffee from a fat, dull looking woman behind a long metal counter. I sat alone at a table and stared at the coffee until it stopped steaming. I took the elevator back up to my floor and found a lone, rumped nurse and was told that I could wait for Agatha three floors up. It was a narrow room with a view much like Dr. Feldmann's, except the window was smaller. There was a bed with a rubber mattress that was made while I sat there, just as my watch ticked past two hours. At two and a half hours I went to the nurse's station and met another, younger nurse wearing a yellow smock that hung loose around a red T-shirt and asked if they had heard from my wife. I gave her my name and she smilingly went through some papers on her clipboard and entered the name into a computer and said they had not left the theater yet. I was told I could buy coffee downstairs.

I returned to the tiny room and sat in the chair by the door and looked at the freshly made bed. I looked at my shoes and my hands until three hours had gone by and then I went to the tired nurse and asked about my wife and was given the same smile as she checked her computer and made a call. "Sometimes they take a bit longer down there. Reserving an anesthesiologist is often the problem," she said as she dialed. But whoever was at home on the other end of the phone line had no

idea about Agatha and so I returned to my room and stripped off my coat and walked up the hallway to the day-room, where the news was playing on the television. I watched it without hearing. Across the room from me in a green vinyl chair sat a woman with white hair and a yellowing face. A tube led from one frail arm to a hanging bottle beside her and a blinking box below it. She seemed to be breathing very carefully. I paged through a magazine someone had left on the chair beside me. I walked back to my wife's room and checked my watch and told myself there must have been an hour and forty minute delay before Agatha was worked on. I tried to remember if the operation was meant to take two hours or shouldn't take more than two hours. I closed my eyes and tried to remember how to sleep. The room had grown hot. Electric tones sounded in the hallway and I thought I heard my nurse make an announcement, call out some code, ask for some intern to come upstairs. I opened my eyes and thought to get some coffee but now did not want to miss Agatha's arrival. A fan tiredly switched on in the radiator beside me.

I stood, looked out the window. The window was streaked and dirtied by rain. I looked far over the buildings and felt no cheer from the warmth, only the feeling of a merciless sun sending brutal rays down to a heedless, frozen city. I began to feel nauseous. I sat down and held the hard jut of my knees in my palms. I closed my eyes.

I had a feeling, suddenly, of something being torn from me, of something very fragile and delicate snapping close beside my heart.

I did not look at my watch again that afternoon. Sitting in that tiny room I was sure if I were to simply close my eyes I would drift off into a black sleep. The morning slowly turned into the afternoon. The nurse came by and sat down quickly next to me in the straight-backed metal chair they kept for extra visitors. "The Doctor has sent up no word. She is still in theater."

"Thank you."

"There is often a delay."

"Is there?"

“Can I get you anything?”

“No.”

“I can get you some coffee?”

“No thank you.”

She left me in my tired bright room.

I'm not sure how I knew Agatha had died, but I was sure of it long before the time when the doctor finally appeared at the door, his face grey and his voice no longer jovial. He had changed into a bright white coat and shoes, but still wore the baggy green surgeon's pants above them. He closed the door behind him as he came in and looked at me with his hands clasped in front of his body. What he told me took only a few minutes: a hemorrhage, an unexpected difficulty, the tumor has gone much farther than he had guessed, my wife was weaker than anyone knew.

I asked to see her body. Then I sat sobbing desperately in the hallway below his office for a long while. I felt the disappearance then, felt my body leaving itself, felt that solid world of corridors and medicine around me evaporate, felt myself come apart.

I took the elevator down to the lobby. Outside in the street cars crawled through the innards of Niccalsetti. The taxi driver who brought me to my building demanded his fare. Phone calls tricked into the house, bills, letters and notices had been left with the doorman on his silver salver. So this is life, I had thought. This is how we exit, without any ado, without any fanfare, a turn through a doorway and one is gone. No preparation or rhyme or reason allowed.

Feldmann called me ten times, came to my house, more shaken than me (perhaps fearing a lawsuit of some kind, perhaps shaken by his inability to predict this death). I didn't return his calls. Didn't answer the door. I paid his bill.

The empty rooms of my apartment seemed like an accusation after this. My work had lost its appeal, so much so that I had asked the Curator for an additional week off and was told I could take as long as I wanted. I had even welcomed Kannotski's occasional, unbidden visits to my apartment

after work, Kannotski bearing files from the office and a bottle of scotch. I had listened to his reports about what was happening at the museum with a vague interest, looking curiously at the man as he spoke and wondering how the minutiae of such a dull, exacting life could fascinate him so much. I must have been sinking into what is called a deep clinical depression, dropping away from the world I had carefully built and ordered with only a few visits from a man I could not truly call a friend keeping me tethered to an existence I believed I no longer knew. I felt lost, my apartment a lonely desert island, the faces and bodies I passed on my way to the shops and to the museum as anonymous as grains of sand. Like a man utterly bereft I scanned my interior horizon's daily, anything to remind me that I had once been part of a bigger universe and that bigger universe had once made perfect sense to me, it was logical and predictable.

Any yet, I must admit that I slowly discovered that the new life I led had advantages. By the time I was working again I had found that life without my wife achieved a kind of orderliness I believed I had striven for for years. I had my very few vices: my fine wine, my whisky at night and perhaps my weakness for order as evidenced by many lists, my well filed and stored email, my files and manuals. The Shawzin collection had absorbed me for close to a year now, but I was in control of it, as much as could be expected.

The apartment, like my life in general, now seemed to be truly mine. Each room bore my stamp of character. I could sit with my glass in hand and know where everything stood in the private universe of Reginald Humphrey. It all smelled of Reginald, it was all ordered for Reginald's convenience and greater comfort. I told myself that the presence of women in a man's life leads to anything from simple disorder to absolute chaos, their invasion beginning in the bathroom, spreading to the bedroom, engulfing the kitchen and finally taking over every room and the house before assaulting every inch of closet space, leaving the husband with nothing save, if he's lucky, a few drawers in his office and beside the bed that are subject to unexpected inspection.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons I hesitated to entertain Stella's advances. I had come to covet the simplicity and order, indeed the privacy, of my life. I had learned to savor my perfect solitude rather than look upon it with horror. The desert island became a paradise for one. The world may be just as murky as ever but on Reginald's island, order reigned supreme, predictability was achievable, sorrow could not be banished but it could be contained. Guilt could join sorrow. Fear, ah, well, fear was another matter; fear of that sense of loss, fear that at any moment I might slip off a very high precipice without the world caring a jot, my loss as insignificant as the suicide of a man living on a dot of land in the center of the sea.

That night, after Stella's party, as I finished my whisky and turned the yellow page of my 1865 edition of Fowley's *Sinister Street*, my eyes casually flicked every so often towards the apartment across from me. Just as I was about to finally fall sleep, the lights came on inside the bare room and Jenny Malinse appeared in a black dress. She kicked off her shoes inside the door and poured herself a glass of something – wine I think – from the lone bottle waiting for her in an empty refrigerator, and came to the window. I toasted her from my higher plane.

Is it possible that I felt close to her, with her casual flat footed stance and her distracted gaze out at the city? What was she thinking? Of a doomed affair? An affair lost before it began? Nothing at all? Her left hand gently massaged her back as she stood amidst her boxes and covered furniture. I watched her for quite a while, the two of us in our own private silences, the city spread out beneath us, not cold, not dirty, lights twinkling up at us from other private rooms. We finished our drinks together and then I left her to her barefoot musings. I walked to the hallway and switched off the light and closed my door knowing she would be kept safe within my view for later consumption.

It was a feeling of luxury such that I had never known. I had gained a window to another's life, to be opened and shut as I pleased.

CHAPTER 3

It took Kannotski exactly three weeks to locate all the postcards in the Lavender Collection. He met me at my office door each morning I had to come in – he arrived each day at seven and even I don't know at what time he let himself out of the building to take a taxi to his tiny, dusty apartment on Christopher Street, a mile or two away. I would not be surprised if Kannotski slept in his office most nights. Each day we met – at least three times a week – he assured me, in his pleading way, that there would be “closure” to his search and each day we shared coffee together while he outlined the importance and relative value of this new addition to his collection. He had been to a conference in Charlotte, North Carolina (the International Deltiologist Confederation) that had extolled the virtues of this particular group of photos: the model had been none other than a Ms. Abigail O'Hara, who would later marry the famous financier Alex Osborne III. Both would perish seven years later on the Titanic. These photos were taken a month before Osborne met her, a dancer in a gentleman's bar in Chicago. It titillated Kannotski to ponder the fact that he had the wherewithal to collect images of Abigail during her reckless youth, that his eyes could feast upon the same body presented to the multi-millionaire Osborne less than a year later. I wondered out loud if Osborne knew about the cards and Kannotski slyly winked at me over his coffee. “Oh yes, he did. Made a point that others saw them as well.” He said this and shivered in the damp basement air. I nodded sagely upon hearing this particular tidbit of information.

Kannotski collected each image and the name and address of the buyer and sent them to my computer. There were thirty cards in all, all of Abigail in a variety of innocuous poses, most of the cards in “good” to “excellent” shape (his terms). I had the impression of a woman who was very tired or a woman thrust unexpectedly into the role as a sex object. There was a certain lost nobility in the way she posed, her heavy body and uplifted chin offering a challenge of sorts, her smiles full of a vague derision. It was as if she had posed for Kannotski himself.

Looking at her photos spread out before me on the computer screen, some exploded by Kannotski to show certain details such as “the pubis is slightly exposed – *rare*”. I did not get the impression of a woman enjoying the peak of her sexual powers but instead the same impression one has when viewing female bodies consigned to a death camp. In his photos I regarded those same lines of lumped flesh meant for numbering, corralling and incineration in the eyes of the last men to behold it. I could not bear to open his later emails to me and permitted him to collect the whole series and buy it at a ridiculous sum. Kannotski, by the end of that week, had begun to sicken me though to his credit the value of the Lavender series has since skyrocketed. The Niccalsetti’s collection may be the only complete collection of Abigail O’Hara’s pre-nuptial form.

* * * *

I had found that my afternoons at home were becoming more and more valuable. I do not sleep well as a rule and I found myself arriving early to the museum each morning and after fending off Kannotski, I had my daily meeting with the interns who appeared, some the worse for wear from the night before, fresh from the dorms and squalid apartments clinging to the sides of the University. The Shawzin collection and its constant need to be categorized and filed took all our time and

Stella's forebears had left us many things over the years. The stamp collections, the books, the vases, the rifles, the bullets with the rifles, the hunting and fishing and military gear, the boots and shoes, all of them needed to be tagged.

I have the ability to be lost in my work. Certainly, the museum had claimed time, had claimed its part of history. The Shawzin collection was merely a part of many other collections: the Tindale Crimean War collection; Reverend Arthur Hoelkov's newspapers from before the Russian revolution, yellow and curled in the heavy binders; and the many vases we had collected over the years that had been packed away in freight and had to be labeled and restored.

Take for example our collection of antique, display-quality furniture, our fine examples of early southern and the other American antique pieces including a weathered sideboard from General Rose's old mansion on Lake Niccalsetti where he drank from during the war of 1812, his huntboard and his assortment of mule chests plus a fine Civil War rocking bench.

Add to this the towering list of other things, including our assortment of side tables, corner cupboards, side chairs, stands, writing and school masters' desks and drop-leaf tables from colonial New York. Each piece of furniture had a history to it, had been owned by some illustrious Niccalsetti character. Or take a moment to look in on our American Pottery collection, which was renowned as one of the finest in the Northeast, samples of all types, including Rookwood, Weller, Roseville, Fulper, Sand Mountain, as well as Bennington, Majolica, Faience, Royal Doulton, Delft, Wedgwood, Staffordshire, Gaudy Dutch, and Gaudy Welch and others. How many people in the past had used them? What place, what meaning did they hold for us? Our job was to sift through the stacks, the boxes, the shelves and bring order to the tangled web of lives that we call history. Through order we would find some sort of truth, a knowledge of these things themselves and of the people who bought them and used them. Dates, time period, historical backgrounds, as well as the personal history of all previous owners were crucial to the work we did in that basement and my crew of interns took to it under my watchful eye. Exactitude became Reginald Humphrey's motto. Tell me the date of that

Sand Mountain server, where it came from, why it was important to its owners, what its context was, I demanded of my interns.

The computer was a fine thing for this kind of work, for we could cross reference serial numbers and makers' marks. Slowly, surely, we began to untangle the history hidden in these rooms of objects, to create it, to understand it. But most importantly we became entitled to proprietorship over the history we discovered. It was ours once found, ours because we claimed it through our meticulous research.

Gretta Mackintosh, the Yale woman who daily appeared in my warren beneath the museum dressed in her hardy overalls and T-shirt and her sensible boots – she insisted on the boots – troubled me one afternoon about a fine 1843 Virginian sugar chest, still packed in its crate, which had fallen on her toe while we were sifting through pieces in the museum's reconstruction of the South. Standing in the dust alone with me she asked, "How is the history ours, exactly?" She brushed her wheat colored hair back from her head, smudging her forehead with the heavy leather gloves I made her wear for the physical work of moving things in the basement.

"It is ours because we claim it. We place a stake in it. We create it." I was standing under one of the naked bulbs. I was cold and tired and did not feel like being questioned.

"Don't we simply discover it and pass it on?"

"Discoverers can claim history for themselves, Gretta. That is the magnificent part of this job."

"I don't feel as if I own anything. These things make me feel farther away from history. Full of respect for it, yes, Dr. Humphrey. But they are not my things. It is not my personal history."

I reached into one of the crates we had been unpacking and uncovered from the torn newspaper a fine pressed glass marriage lamp, circa 1827, from England. I held it up so she could admire the fine workings, the movable wick, the pressed glass, the delicate pink base and tapering blown ends, the ridgework along the chimney brim. "Over a hundred years old. Brought over to the

United States from England by a woman named Marion Desman, who's great, great grandson owns a house a mile from here. How did this lamp survive the perilous journey of time and space to arrive with us? What kind of woman was Marjorie? I can tell you. She was newly married when she arrived here. Her son, Paul, would go off to war with the Federal troops and be killed. The lamp would pass to her daughter, Penelope, six months after they found out Paul was dead at Fort Sumpter. What did that moment mean to them? Did they choose to celebrate marriage at that time to stave off the sadness of Paul's death? Was the character of that family's struggle during that era somehow absorbed into this lamp? I believe, Gretta, that it was. I do. And in our researches we too absorb some of that character."

"But how exactly is it ours?"

"Because we are the bearers of history. We now dole out those years to the visitors who come to us, asking to see and touch the past, and the people who owned these things."

Gretta shrugged, unconvinced. She was a tall girl and she looked at me with something like disdain – her height gave her an imperious presence. "I say we're doing history a service. We're doing people a service. Nobody owns history, Dr. Humphrey. It's up for grabs."

"Then you have much more to learn from me, don't you, Gretta?"

She didn't answer. She had an exacting mind, an inquiring mind. She and I went through the entire pressed glass collection, cross referencing serial numbers and makers' marks to the records we had of the last century. She never made one mistake, could spot every inaccuracy, every error, she was an expert at putting history in its rightful spot. Standing there in the damp basement alone with her I believed she was stronger than me, and I was a bit afraid of her. There was something very unforgiving about Gretta. I sat beside her, next to piles of stained glass, jotting down each number, quizzing her, "Is it right we should date this as 1867?" Or, "Does this really look like colonial glass from 1767?"

“No, they didn't have this stain technique in the colonies and we have no record of it being important. It was made in Philadelphia too.” And she'd half smile, knowing she was right, still self-conscious in her knowledge.

But she simply would not take a possessor's interest in her work. She had not been at it as long as I.

More disturbingly, sitting day by day in the gloom with her, I began to realize I admired her in a way that was not fitting for a man in my position. She was indeed a beautiful woman, despite her casual clothes and her abrupt ways and her great height, which I suppose might have made her seem somewhat fearsome. Yet working with her as closely as I did I began to realize, with some concern, that my attraction to her was a new curiosity. I wondered perhaps if she somehow knew my new neighbor across the way – who must have been about her age – or what Gretta would think about this new fascination of mine. I was sure Gretta would find it laughable, would find me nothing more than a pathetic voyeur. This knowledge made me enjoy the power I had over her in a way that might be considered somewhat shameful in retrospect. I was much more demanding with Gretta than I was with the others. I gave her much more responsibility, especially in the cataloguing of the Colonial South project. I wanted to hear her protest. I wanted her to tell me I had given her too much work or to refuse to come in on one of the many Sundays I sent for her and then left her to complete a file and email it to my office. But Gretta was impossible to overcome. My attraction, I believed, was not the warm attraction I had towards Jenny, but something more vicious, something not worthy of me. I began to despise her very aptitude, her ableness, even the way she seemed to appreciate the mind-numbingly boring work I heaped upon her. Each day she was the first to arrive at my office door and so on she worked and I beside her and I never so much looked at her as a woman, and thus stayed within the proper boundaries of our relationship.

This type of work went on every day. The Shawzin collection would be the crowning glory, of course, but I had found that I wanted to leave things to them once we had the stuff safely in the

museum basement. I was happier to leave more and more of the work to the interns, to spend time in my office, going over their reports, letting the Harvard man, Theodore Lepski, keep me up to date on the activities of the interns. Of course I inspected everything they did. My concern, despite Gretta, was to reconstruct history from the facts I was brought. I had become more than adept. I had begun to enjoy the advances of the technological age, enjoy the fact that I could sit in the comfort of my den and do my reconstructing over the computer. And I enjoyed the fact that my trained staff was busy muling through the piles of debris in the basement, creating order, then sending detailed reports to me at home, where I would begin the final, most important stage of taking history for ourselves.

* * * *

Cold weather drew itself into the city and I remained working. I had let Jenny into my life – I had become used to seeing her upon my rising and upon returning to my apartment. I walked down the streets from the museum to my apartment late that same month and that night made a crucial decision about her for no other reason, I suppose, than the weather. Mine is a lonely profession, full of files and computer printouts and my own solitary musings. I had the luxury of operating without much supervision, of being left alone for days at a time. I walked from my apartment to the museum on some days in a trance, a professional reverie. There were times when I was not aware of the people whom I passed. I walked, shoulders hunched, head down, like some thoughtful, winter bird, past the stores, past the CJ Drugstore and the lurid signs in the smudged and fading windows. I sank my hands deep in my pockets and walked close to the brick buildings, past the people, past schoolchildren running home late. The 7:00 p.m. bus sighed its way past me, spattered with grime,

its lights weak and orange in the gloom, like some ungainly and sullen beast sliding along the curb breathing its wheeze upon me as it passed. I knew the street well and that day I stuck to my own path, passed people with drawn and anxious faces rushing past to catch yellow taxis. Lights fell across my face from the Marcus Superette and the Niccalsetti Fish store, and I walked on, collar rough against my cheeks. I believed I could feel the cold from the sidewalk rise through the leather soles of my shoes, through my silk socks into the palms of my feet and then through my body. I felt unequal to the weather on those winter days. The evening seemed to darken as I walked, the lights of the cars became more fearsome, the smells of steel and people and fumes wafted almost visibly and I walked on, towards the comforting, towering structure that was my building ten blocks away from the museum.

The city seemed to have its own conception of weather, it seemed to want to create some kind of weak simulacrum of rain – sooty drops that touched my face and hair, forcing me to hurry, speed my gait. If I were to look up through the looming buildings around me I believed I would see a sky devoid of color and stars and even of clouds. A shroud.

I slipped down those streets like a long and awkward animal swiftly moving from one burrow to another. I felt myself to be surrounded by hundreds of other souls who had taken the same course.

I reached the doors of my building this day and pulled one open, stood in the foyer, the sounds that I had been accustomed to on the street, the sounds of cars, of honking and engines and people calling and radios from within cars and skidding and sighing, and the false wind rushing between the buildings suddenly and abruptly cut off. I stood, slightly out of breath, an ancient heater breathed tired warmth into the small anteroom, the silence and the earthy smell of clean stone in the building a luxury beyond all luxuries. I pushed through the door into the entrance hall, darkly lit for evening, the green glowing shade above the night doorman's grey hair and newspaper another comfort. The night doorman looked up at me, smiled under his old fashioned glasses as if he had

been waiting for me to appear so the workings of the building could continue apace and as scheduled. "Evening, Mr. Humphrey. Mail here for you."

"Hello Paul."

"Cold out still?"

"Indeed. Very." I took his mail from the counter, thumbed the envelopes without looking at the windows and words. Paul could not have been on duty for more than half an hour yet he seemed to have been built with the room. I could not imagine Paul outside the building in the confines of his own life. Above the two of us, in the dark, mahogany gargoyles stared leering. I hunched my shoulders in my coat and nodded at Paul as if to say good night, to affirm also the comradeship of two men facing twilight each alone and he nodded back, his eyes falling to the pool of light over the lines of print.

I walked across the hall and pressed the button to the elevator. I heard, far away, the elevator slide along its rails to the dull, scratched brass doors. The car inside the building paused and rumbled, shifted and then the doors opened with a hollow, choking rattle I stepped in and pressed my floor, my shoes sinking into the soft pile carpet. There were velvet ropes to either side for my fingers to touch, as if the elevator might suddenly shift sideways or plummet.

I closed my eyes once I was alone in the elevator and it paused as if collecting itself, and began to move. I undid my coat and took a deep breath. I squinted, tried to remember the street I had just walked down, the minutes I had spent in the company of other humans beings, lives intermingling with lives. I could not. I twisted my fingers together in my pockets, thinking. What was the weather like outside? I felt the coldness in my fingers, felt myself shivering in the long coat which had ceased to wear well, which had become slightly frayed along the collar where my chin rubbed daily, roughened with a day's loyal bristles.

The apartment smelled comfortingly of me, of my body and the food and drink I cooked to keep my body alive. The city lights reflecting against the tall dark windows cheered me as I lay the

coat over its hook and straightened my clothes. The room was warm, all my rooms would be warm. I picked the mail from the counter and walked with it into the office, the mail a series of white and windowed envelopes that seemed to come from the same faceless and mechanical sender. It had been a long time since I had received a piece of mail with script on the front, or a postcard, or an invitation.

The office looked out into darkness. I stood in the comfortable dark. Her lights were on. I sat in his heavy leather chair and looked out into the night, into the room of the woman across the way.

I looked into the apartment. I could sense the woman would be there. I kept looking, waiting, patient. Finally movement, then her form in the window. She was wearing a sweat suit. Her hair was up. I could barely make out her form, I had begun to place in my mind her features. I believed her to be attractive by now. I was sure of this. I believed she moved as an attractive woman would, with a lithe confidence and an arrogant care of herself, a cockiness. A certain lightness. My hands moved over my soft paunch. My breath was coming shortly. I pushed my shoes along the floor, curled my toes twice, my knees spread in his chair.

She moved around her apartment as if looking for something, then paused, then sat. She would be facing me directly if she were to look up and see but she did not look up. She was reading something, her head bowed over some white pages. The bright light from her kitchenette reflected off the glass of her apartment leaving a square of orange to look through and see her distorted figure. I sat as if in the company of a stranger acutely aware of my presence, a stranger who in some way was beneath me, whom I had a responsibility towards. I felt my jaw go slack. I squinted, finally, attempted to see her details, could not. I reached into my desk after a few minutes and shuffled through my files, extracted a foolscap marked with lines and scribbles and my neat handwriting. I looked briefly at the clock on my desk which glowed an eerie red line of numerals, wrote a time. She had not varied her schedule yet and neither had I.

Outside the apartment I heard a door open, down the hall, feet padding along the passageway's threadbare carpet, then nothing. I looked from the window to the sad pile of mail, picked up the envelopes absently as the woman across the way moved about the apartment. Bills, bills, notices, offers for more bills, my first name in each small, cellophane window merely an initial. Rarely do they ever remember to write "Dr. Humphrey", usually it is "R. Humphrey", my apartment, my city, and my zip code. I looked at these letters and imagined them sitting in the doorman's brass platter all afternoon, waiting for me to idly thumb them in the darkened room.

I watched the woman, sitting now, as if in a trance, before a flickering light of her television screen. I carefully set my elbows on the table and the slight movement of my body on the desk jiggled the computer to life. There was a line of missives from the Curator to myself. A steady stream of news flashed underneath my electronic mail, new headlines that appeared, traveled across the screen, disappeared, replaced by new disasters, investigations, events, milestones. The email from the Curator was in boldface. Curt messages from his own computer in my office. Other messages, too.

Curator Msg. #1

Curator Msg. #2

Curator Msg. #3

adelph@harvard.com History news/Colonial Update

Leo_Kannotski@NiccHisMus.com New Cards Sourced

S_Shawzin@compuserve.com GREETINGS

Gretta_Mackintosh@NiccHisMus.com Report?

As I scrolled through my mail it occurred to me that I had not seen the Curator's face in a while. Over a month. I closed my eyes and saw only a red faced man with tiny eyes, a rodent in a heavy coat and a fur collar, fat and waddling. The Curator had ceased to attend meetings. He no

longer summoned me to his office. It could have been that I was no longer invited to the meetings he attended. His tastes had been drawn towards Roman History, to some other compartment within the fastness of the museums innards. I opened the Curator's messages one by one. My work and presentations from the week before have been satisfactory, my requests for a showing has been approved. Approved? Had he shown my documents down the line to some other group? Some other Curator whom I have not been made aware of? Approved. By whom?

Finances. A receipt. Payment of wages transferred into my bank account. Payment, tax subtracted, allotment to the retirement fund, \$1 to the staff association, Final payment, Authorized, receipt. I could now turn to the Internet and buy any number of items. I could ask the computer for food. Within the hour a visitor would arrive at the door with a bag. I could demand in my message to this visitor that the food be left at the door, with the doorman. I could remain here in my room for months in this way. I could become a redundant man, as redundant as any man marooned on an island. My reports would continue to filter up to the Curator from this computer, cast into that silent sea. His money – no, the museum's money – would continue to find its way into my account and my receipt would appear in my computer's inbox every month as it has for years now.

I looked beyond my computer, through the white streaked window to the silent world outside. There was a sheen of street lights reflecting off the window opposite me now, and as my eyes adjusted I saw her moving about her apartment although as usual she was not easy to make out. She was performing some deliberate act, cleaning, I thought, straightening up. She might have been listening to something, perhaps she still had the television on. I could see her clearly only a second at a time, and she was wearing loose sweatpants and a loose T-shirt. I moved the mouse on its pad, brought up her schedule on the computer, copied down her clothing, the time, from the foolscap. I sat back in the chair with my fingers interlaced and realized I could not see her face, had never seen it, and had to imagine it. I did so quite easily, something easily conjured up by my mind. It was not a face I knew. It was a unique face, a face colored by my own emotion, of my own construction, my

own design. I reached idly into a cup on my desk and found a pencil, gnawed at the blunt end, the paint flecking off, grit on my tongue. I drew an oval on the yellow foolscap paper that was beside my blotter, drew her hair and eyes. I drew her face and eyes in great detail. When I was finished a stranger looked up at me from the pad, smiling. I must admit that as I am not an artist it was not a real face. Nor would I want it to be.

I had begun now to feel an acute sense of possession in regard to this woman. I looked at her moving about her apartment. I had already begun to sketch her clearly on paper. Of course, it had become necessary to know more about her. That was my decision. To learn.

CHAPTER 4

As you approach the museum you are aware that the museum is a frightening place, the pollution darkened fluted columns and the Greek revival porticoes seem ominous, the long dark windows give the place a funeral air in the rain. Rain brings the schoolchildren with their teachers and on days like this I have seen trepidation on the faces of the teachers as they come into this place where history and time has been so carefully trapped and catalogued by men such as myself.

I hopped up the dark, slick stone stairs, past the great solemn lions that guard the heavy brass doors and plunged into the warm dark of the museum. I was glad to get out of the rain and the warm, dark smell of the museum was comforting and familiar and unchangeable with the weather. I nodded to Hank the guard, who glanced up at me over his funny papers and coffee. Hank had settled himself comfortable under Durgess's *The Battle of Lake Niccalsetti*, a huge painting we had acquired some years ago from the grandson of the artist (Johan Strauss) who had moved to Pittsburgh. The painting was done in reds and grays and that told of a smoky cannon fight in 1814. I plunged onward past the paintings and the displays to a discreet door that led to the basement, then descended into the wet smell of papers and books and dusty florescent lights. The museum was empty this early, save for Kannotski, whose office door hung open at the end of the passage that led around the books and boxes. I could see him working over his computer, the smell of his coffee in the air. He heard me come wetly down the hall in my dark overshoes and heavy coat, he turned, waved a finger. "The phone rang for you a minute ago. Mrs. Shawzin. The students will be here soon. One is sick."

I walked into Kannotski's office. The office was thrice lined with books, books that rested on the shelves in their allotted places, then books that rested upon those first, then the books that sat atop each shelf, precariously balanced. Kannotski had five different atlases in the room. He had assigned pride of place to the postcards and I paid little attention to the lined brown bodies in the corner. I could feel the eyes of those women upon me as I watched him work, listing, labeling his cards. Soon he would make some kind of proposal for me.

I poured myself coffee. I had eaten at home, earlier that morning. Jenny's apartment had been dark. Perhaps she had been dressing or showering, there was no way for me to tell. I sipped the coffee and felt the heat returning to my bones. Kannotski continued working.

Standing there sipping I was sharing something with Kannotski: the world of the museum, of the basement, away from what we displayed upstairs. *Time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.* We were preparing many faces for history down here. Here, in this basement, order reigned supreme. The museum was a fortress where we kept the rain and the world at bay and imposed order on a world that had long ago ceased to pretend to any kind of order at all.

I heard the door at the far end of the hall open, then the voices of our interns wafting in and violating the silence. Laughter, stomping, squishing noises as the interns made their way towards us. Kannotski heard some inane comment and rolled his eyes. I shouldered past him into the book area in front of the office where they were shrugging off their bright waterproof clothes. The students preferred outdoor wear in the city that would be best suited atop a mountain, or deep in a Peruvian rain forest. They seemed like explorers from another world, shrugging off their clothes in their filthy, bright colored and absurdly sloganed T-shirts and their torn jeans.

They brought a vitality down here that encouraged me. I looked at them with envy, not simply the envy of an older man looking upon what were fundamentally children though I knew enough to treat them as adults, as highly intelligent adults, but as people who had yet to look at life as a series of limitations. They were now fueled with curiosity and passion for self advancement;

independence from school and their parents was new and exciting for them though it came with a vow of poverty. These kids were certainly the best we'd had in years and in a small sense they frightened me with their vitality, they made me aware of my reclusiveness. More threateningly, they looked up to me not just as their boss or teacher but because they respected what I wanted to do, which was to preserve history for others, prepare its face, become involved in something greater than myself. I had begun to feel quite a fondness for these interns and like any insignificant demigod I clung to my worshippers. Once they had progressed in the field, moved on to Massachusetts or to San Diego or to Europe to work in the bigger and greater museums, how would they remember old Humphrey? It was to their more mature and experienced selves that I spoke.

“The first of your projects is almost finished.”

Cheers.

“I’m pleased. There is a good chance the Curator will permit us the opportunity to display this work, the work of colonial and post colonial history of this time in Nicalsetti history.” Ah, my voice, floating above these students. Why was it when I spoke in here my voice had such an air of confidence?

Lipski spoke up from the corner, dressed in a crumpled white T-shirt and a leather jacket that was too big for him. “When do you think we’ll know what the Curator thinks?”

“He’ll have a meeting with me later this week.” Fiction, pure fiction, I never met with the Curator. He’d get my report this week, my proposal, and he’d set his date and send me a typed memo in a used brown departmental envelope.

“There will be an article in the *Museum Monthly* and one, well ...” I let my voice trail off dramatically, “One *perhaps* in American Colonial History. The January edition. We’ll all get a mention, I believe. Something to cut out and put with your resumes.” Pleased looks all around, the students gravitating towards me, moving forward. Donald Wendy, the editor of the “Monthly” in

New Haven, would give me two pages, I knew, maybe a thousand words and a mention and we'd get a proper mention.

Gretta looked up. She pushed aside her thick blonde hair and her voice was challenging. "Dr. Humphrey, who will write the Colonial article?"

Now caught by surprise, I avoided her glance. Of course I had imagined writing the article. I smiled, mysteriously, but appeared, I suppose, only bashful or secretive. "Now, Gretta asked an operative question. Who will write the article. Excellent question."

The laughter now was now a nervous laugh. The academic competitiveness of these students had shown itself. "Who indeed, Gretta? Who indeed?"

She stood, her eyes quickly on Lipski, who I knew would be heading back to Cambridge himself in two weeks to finish his degree. "We would all be curious to know, I'm sure, Doctor Humphrey."

I cleared my throat. "Let's first get the article proposal accepted. Then I will assign it. But remember now that the object is to make the best display we can here at Niccalsetti, and then worry about what the antiquities community has to say about us."

Gretta looked at me and grinned. Seeing right through me. I turned to my plan for the day, already feeling that flash of camaraderie fading away, the pipes overhead creaking, full of hot water, feeding the hungry building.

CHAPTER 5

It was evening and I wanted another drink, I wanted the heavy feel of my cut class crystal in my hand and a scotch, no ice. But I sat on the chair in my den without a third drink. I had eaten nothing all day and was not bothered by that, either. I sat with my feet on the floor, looking out the window. I had the impression that I could remain at this vigil all night, I could remain there while the phone rang, while bills waited to be paid, while the apartment itself slowly covered itself in dust and waited to be cleaned. I sat transfixed in front of the window and all my concentration went into interpreting what I was seeing. I had not taken off my suit coat. I was prepared to sit here all night until I saw Jenny.

In the folder was a legal foolscap with her Friday schedule, she would be back now before going out to wherever she went. I had not seen her yet, yet her room lights were on and the lights in her kitchenette were shining brightly. I sat in my dark office with a feeling of expectation, as if I were playing a game that required patience and vigilance. I sat in my chair as if my body was only a huge mass meant to support my eyes and what they saw.

Finally, the door to her bedroom opened quickly and she appeared, wearing a black skirt, no blouse but a cream colored bra – I was too far away to see clearly. I felt an immense sense of achievement as if I had scared her out of some kind of standoff. As if I, the hunter, had waited patiently for his quarry to emerge from her hole. I collapsed back in my chair. I almost waved jovially to her. More than ever, I wanted that drink. I almost wished she'd leave the apartment so I could

attend to it, but she did not. She stood in front of the window and then seemed to switch on the television, the crazy lights making obscure pale patterns over her naked skin. She had a hand in her hair. She seemed completely absorbed in whatever drivel she was watching. It occurred to me that I had ought to get a TV guide and find out what she liked to watch.

She was indeed attractive, the harsh light outlined her face fairly well now and I saw she was well proportioned, she had deep dark eyes and luminescent skin and her shoulders were wide, her breasts gracefully presented in her bra. And, even in a skirt, even barefoot and distracted, she moved with a certain litheness. As I watched, my eyes began to ache and the image began to swim. I had to blink several times to see her, imagining I could make out her navel over the ridge of the skirt. When she turned to look for her desired object, the arch of her back was mesmerizing. I watched as she found her blouse or top or whatever it was and slipped it on, buttoning it from the bottom in front of the wired lights of the television. Far down below a siren started up. The clock chimed ten o'clock.

I walked unsteadily into the kitchen where I had left the bottle on the counter, the cap off, a ring where my last glass had been beside it. I found a new glass in the cupboard, placed it beside the bottle and poured a small drink, then added some more whiskey for luck and more for health. I walked with my drink to the office, sat in my chair, looked across the road at my neighbor and saw her widows wide open, lights burning in her small living area. My eyes blurred, I saw movement, saw her then standing in the light, a silhouette, looking out at the city and perhaps at me. She was standing in the room with a long open gown around her shoulders so that I could see the promise of a form.

Don't leave, whispered. Don't leave yet.

And she didn't. She flicked on the television, the white light playing off her body, making her skin impossibly pale, ghostly. Private ghosts, I thought. Ghosts of a private nature. I spoke to the image across from me, told her of my adventures, thanked her for sitting up with me so late, thank you, thank you. Receiving no reply. I continued on.

I toasted the woman in the window, and she looked up at me, suddenly.

I grinned. I toasted her again.

She stood, stretched, flicked off the television, stood there in the dark. I could see her form ... a dangerous time for me now as I was the one exposed. She then moved through her room, opened the door to the bedroom and was gone. I watched the orange circle of light in the kitchen for a long while, waiting for her to return. I finished my drink. When I stood up the room suddenly off kilter, cold, askew, threatening in its neatness. I walked carefully and soberly to bed. I sat on the edge and took off my shoes and lay down, then sat again to pull my legs up, swinging them up one by one, my socks lowered and bunched; my white, cadaverous ankles offered up. I switched off my lamp and lay with my eyes open. When the room had been warmed by my body and my breath and a sour white dawn light had softened the corners of the shade, I felt as if I had not moved.

* * * *

I limped through the rest of the week with a two day hangover and then life settled into its traces.

One slight change to the entire schedule was the pair of Zeiss binoculars I bought at a local shop. They were binoculars that had long, clean lines and whose rigid optical specifications drew in the light even in bad weather. They boasted top of the line clarity, magnifying things that were moving in tricky light situations and worth the money I paid – which I must say was incredible.

I must remark now upon the store where I bought the binoculars. “Siekel’s Optical Products, LTD”. I had found the address of the store in the phone book, and he had a very straightforward, businesslike add under Optics/Optical/Opticians, after I had failed to find anything under

“Binoculars” and had called two “Sporting Goods Stores” only to be transferred to bored-sounding teenagers who were not sure if they sold binoculars but they’d check, and could I call back in an hour.

But Siekel’s, there was a businesslike listing, a square in the yellow pages, up front, to the point. I was unsure why I had not noticed it before, or why I had never heard of such a fascinating sounding shop:

Dr. H. C. Siekel’s

Optical Products Surveillance

Extra Eyes Of All Kinds

Mounted Telescopes, Hand Held Telescopes, Binoculars, Monoculars, Opera Glasses, Field Glasses

Also Nautical Optical Supplier – Waterproof/Windproof Glasses For Sailors

Night Vision Glasses, Night Vision Targeting Equipment, Telescopic Hunting Lenses

Protective Eye Wear

Also Suppliers Of One-Way Glasses, Security Optics Installed By Professionals

Electric Surveillance, Banks, Hotels, Hospitals

Night And Day, Eye In The Sky/Time Lapse VCRs

Manufacturer And Designer Of Security Surveillance Equipment And Hand Held Optical Goods

False Eyes Upon Request – Choose Your Colors From Widest Range

Certified A. O. A

EVERY CUSTOMER GUARANTEED SATISFACTION

See Us To See It All!

Open 24 Hours, Will Deliver Upon Request, No Job Too Small

ALL DISCRETION ASSURED

I walked there after work, late, found it after travelling down some squalid looking side streets past a series of belching trucks. It was four blocks away from the museum. The neighborhood slowly deteriorated as I walked along the streets thinking it could not possibly be open, the stores in this area all seemed closed, boarded up, gated and locked. Yet as I walked towards the store I saw

the light from its window and the simple glass doors under the sign "Siekel's Optics". The storefront was smaller than I imagined. When I walked in I heard a low tone in the back of the shop but was left to my own for a disquieting long time. I walked down between two long counters – perhaps the place had been an apothecary from my boyhood. I thought I could smell some kind of chemical in the air, a harsh smell of forbidden things being mixed and mashed together. One part of the wall was lined with binoculars, under-lit, different sizes, some almost comically large, some small.

Beyond that were lines of menacing looking electrical gadgetry. Night vision scopes for riflemen. Different electrical equipment. Telescopes, some ridiculously large, some on special, a wall of eyepieces. Glasses. Lenses.

And one wall of carefully placed eyeballs of all different colors, in rows, looking out at the customers from white racks. I turned away from the eyes, examined the binoculars, my eyes then drifting to the different cameras, some new, some obviously restored. There were some very old hand held Rolleis for family movies. I turned and the lines of eyes still sat placidly and obscenely in the dim light.

I heard movement from the back and then a curtain was cast aside and a man ducked through the doorway. He was bald and so thin as to make me look twice. He was wearing a dark coat and a bright white smock. His knobby hands were folded in front of him as he came behind the counter to look me over with what must have been meant to be a welcoming smile.

"Ceramic. And sometimes porcelain."

"Excuse me?"

"The prosthetic eyes. Made of ceramic. Some are of china. I paint them myself. I don't expect you came to see one of these, but sooner or later everyone asks, and of course there you were looking at them with such fascination. These are not plastic. Not marble, either ... customers always believe the eyes will be glass, which also is not true. Glass would be the worst substance for an eye. Look."

He reached behind him, took an eye in his long fingers held it under a battered black lamp on the counter. I stood with my hands behind my back, slightly repulsed by the all too real looking organ in his hand. “The iris is the hardest to paint. Completely round. The colors of course must be natural, with dark flecks evenly spaced. One blue eye will cost you a three thousand dollars from me. I make my living from these, truth be told. From eyes. There are some that collect them, I hear. My mark is worth something in those circles, mister.”

“I suspected they’d be made in a hospital.”

“Oh, they are, they are. Shipped into the United States in plastic containers from overseas. But I guess most people are not happy with them. Matching the exact sheen of the light reflecting off the cornea, now that takes a real skill. I worked for three years to perfect a coating for the eye and I’ll tell you the secret. Egg whites. Egg whites mixed with a glaze, the formula for that glaze is my business. You could wear a Siekel eye for ten years and even your wife would start to ask herself which was real. I am an expert in the creation of eyes. Was it not for the eyes I would have closed my doors a long time ago.”

He turned the eyeball under the light, the iris a soft blue. “This is an eye perfect for a girl of sixteen. It is a feminine model slightly smaller than what I do for a man, clear.” He turned it and it shone, slightly, bright in the light. “She might change the eye as she became older, as her god-given eye became sharper, the many colors within became more dim. Oh yes, they lose their luster over years, your eyes do. Years of sun, years of use, and smog and grit. And maybe what you look at most days has something to do with it. I’ve sold many of these little beauties, sold these to parents, despairing parents and their doctors. It is not pleasant but it is something I can do for them.”

The man looked up at me, his heavy back crunched over, his own eyes a pale grey in the lamp’s glow. “You’re thinking of what kind of eyes I would make for you? I’m not sure yet. Not this one, of course. I would have you come for a sitting, talk to you, get to know you. You are a ... businessman?”

“I work at the museum.”

“In charge of old things? Dead things?”

“Antiquities.”

“The past. I might have stock now that would suit you, then. You do not have measurements out of the ordinary, I can tell right now. Maybe you’d want an eye that makes a statement. A different eye. An eye of another color, an eye of a color men do not have, or an eye a man can’t have altogether, like a cat’s eye, a snake eye, a shark’s eye. Made those, too. I’ve studied them. I got over fifteen different shark’s eyes, though they really aren’t a hell of a lot different if you ask me, everyone just wants the damned Great White though the Hammerhead has the most interesting eye. Snakes, we have all types ... gamblers buy those, cobra eyes and rattlers mostly, always about one every six months, good percentage come from my regular customers. One man in Nevada owns fifteen of my eyes, all reptilian models.”

“And cat’s eyes?”

“Everything from the Egyptian to the Persian to the Tabby. All in human sizes, though I once made one for a cat, too, who’d lost his in some misunderstanding. Even made him a highly reflective glaze, using luminescent model paint. Always felt good about that.”

“All in porcelain?”

“Ceramic, mostly, like I said. I made a golden eye once. A silver eye. Made an eye with a diamond iris. Can make you any kind except a goat’s eye. Won’t make any of those.”

“Why?”

He set the eye in his hand back among the rest, all staring up at myself and him. “Goat’s eyes are against policy. Some things are against the trade.” He cleared his throat. “You’re a history man, you say? I have eyes made up of famous people from the past, all different kinds. What kind of history do you specialize in, sir?”

“American Colonial.”

“Well, then.” The man leaned under the counter and came up with a cherry wood box and opened the lid to a rich, red, felt-lined tray of eyes. “I have here George Washington’s blue eye and I have here John Hancock’s – he was a straight hazel. And this is the merry glinting eye of Benjamin Franklin – think how many French women he seduced with that one. Thomas Jefferson, of course, a brown eyed man if there ever was. A hell of a lot of people like George Washington’s eyes. I have a special on this one for five thousand even.”

I had a cold feeling in my stomach, looking at those fingers hovering above the glistening eyes, the careful way he held each white orb as if it was a delicate, gourmet treat. As if it was still warm. “I was looking for binoculars, actually.”

“Oh. Excuse me. I get carried away. Give a lonely man a second and he’ll talk your ear off about his hobbies. His passions, really, in my case, at least. Binoculars for looking at what, can I ask?” He slid the box back from whence it came, stood up again, towering over me and moving easily and with surprisingly little noise toward the line of binoculars.

“Big objects. Moving objects.”

“Birds? Get lots of bird watchers in here. Not many around here, all little guys.”

“No.”

“Big game. Going out to see big game? You’re a hunter?”

“No, not that. I was—”

“There’s a big difference. Now, there are some people come in here looking for to see many things. Lots of things. But lets say you wanted to look at something bigger than a bird, maybe a thousand feet away. That sound more like what you want, mister?”

“Yes.”

“Well now, there’s binoculars and then there’s binoculars. I can sell you these little beauties for a few hundred, American made, perfectly fine if detail isn’t all important in tricky lighting conditions.”

“Detail is important.”

“All important, mister?”

“Yes. Certainly.”

“You pay for that. Seeing’s all about light, all about how a convex lens can collect light and aim in into your eye with exactitude. These Zeiss Field glasses, now, you could mount one on a rifle if you want. Made in Germany, imported so they cost you but if you want detail on a bad day or even when there’s very little light you don’t need to look any further.”

“How much?”

“Fifteen hundred even. Worth every cent. Rubberized and weatherproof, you’ll have these long as you live but I throw in three years guarantee and the company throws in a bigger guarantee. Take a look through them on the street. Go ahead. I trust you. You’re not running anywhere.”

So I stood out in the dark street, aimed the binoculars, brought in a quick blur of cars, buses, the faces of people walking a block away, frowning, intent walking concentrating faces, lights from stores and restaurants changing and reflecting off them. The power was such that I had to brace my arms because the slightest movement made a tremendous difference in the clarity of my vision.

Once braced the binoculars settled upon the face of a hunched creature in a long black coat rummaging furiously in a battered can of garbage. I adjusted the focus and brought in the face itself, the face of an old person, a discarded human being. It was a woman’s face of utterly indeterminate maturity, a woman who might be forty or seventy. The face had a soft jaw and a sick, weather-beaten sheen and small black eyes and a sickly grin of concentration, a grin that might have been a snarl. She was rooting for food, clawing at the torn papers and cans and then at something definite and then eating, still hunched over, eating in huge gulps, then licking something from the inside of a large white piece of wrapping paper, her movements clumsy, animalistic. She finished, grinned at the people walking by with her face darkly smeared.

The binoculars were excellent and perfect.

I walked back into the shop to find Siekel waiting for me in the gloom, his obscene, smooth hands splayed fat and pink on the counter. “You like them, do you?”

“Magnificent.”

“We have telescopes, too. Excellent ones, though for what you need the binocs are probably better. But you can look around. If you need other means of looking at your subject I’m the man to see. I specialize in that.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“I can make you up anything you need. There’s men in the government who come to this shop. There’s not much that can escape your notice if you don’t want it to.”

“You can’t see walls, can you Mr. Siekel?”

He grinned and his lips suddenly filled with long horse teeth perhaps made of the same material as his rows of eyes. “Walls are my specialty, Mister.”

He took my card and swiped it into his computer, his eyes flicking to the receipt as it spewed out of his machine. “You be sure and remember that, Mr. Humphrey. Walls aren’t the problem anymore.” He slipped the binoculars into a bag with the signed credit card slip.

“Well, if walls aren’t the problem, what is?”

“People, usually.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Just a trade joke, I guess. I don’t mean anything by it. You try those binocs, make sure you’re satisfied, return ’em if you like.”

“I don’t think I will.”

“No, Mr. Humphrey. I don’t either. But remember I’m always here.”

“I’d never heard of this place before. I’ve lived in the city almost all my life.”

“I hear that every day. People never notice me until they start looking for me. Suppose that’s the way with lots of things.”

“I suppose.”

“Those are a mighty fine pair of glasses. Be careful of ’em. Don’t let ‘em get stolen.”

“Good day.”

He nodded, bowed slightly and shuffled towards the back of the shop.

CHAPTER 6

I became more methodical in my activities. Drunken observation of an attractive woman was one thing but my interest quickly passed that level. In fact, after I bought the binoculars I found myself throttling back on the whiskies. I was a man who believed in doing this correctly, even those things that led to my own debasement.

One begins with a list. A schedule. The computer is perfect for the making of a schedule, a detailed schedule that permits one to keep track of a neighbor's comings and goings and to become acutely aware of routines. The routines I followed with Jenny were exact although I cannot say she was as enamored of habit as I am. Hers was a life centered around work and certain television shows. Well, let me be more exact. Work from 8:30–5:00 p.m., leaving usually 8:10, and arriving home at 5:25.

She usually changed in the small bedroom, and I granted her that privacy. I normally made it home before her but this became a more and more rare occurrence with the display coming up and Gretta's report requiring attention and the last minute work turning into a full time pursuit. By the time I came home on those late evenings Jenny would already have cleaned her kitchenette up and be watching the news by the time I came home to her. Channel 4 news, the cable network news, I could tell this because with my new binoculars I could see the reflection of the television in the side window, judge by the moving, clicking colors which newscaster was which and reference those

colors against my own television. She always watched Channel four, had a Tuesday 8:00 p.m. show she enjoyed, and a Wednesday 9:00 p.m. show.

And Siekel's binoculars were perfect, absolutely perfect. I began to see her as I had not before, see the lines on her face, see her inexpensive clothing, even watch what she chose to eat, which usually came out of a freezer packet. The binoculars stood at my desk, the computer was always on now, the schedule at home was taken up by her movements and she rarely, rarely surprised me. She had very few friends or use for friends. There were no callers to distract me.

I of course had a line of sight into her bedroom now, I could see the light blue quilt on the bed in there, see the light that was by a full length mirror, a cheap mirror that seemed taped to the wall. And the clothes strewn on the floor, always there. Sweatshirts, blue jeans The front room was usually clean save for the dishes and silverware she kept by the sink. A set of cheap ceramic coffee mugs in loud colors always seemed crowded together on the counter beside the basin and piles of dirty dishes were continually waiting their turn under the faucet. I imagined the bathroom to be the same.

Her face was not the face I had drawn or imagined. It is another face altogether. A younger face than I imagined – though of course I knew her to be young. Brown eyes, set in flawless, child's skin. She wore makeup that did not suit her. She sometimes used brown lipstick or added colors to her cheeks that were meant to make her look older and more refined and merely made her look almost startling when one has the view of one's binoculars suddenly filled with her eyes and mouth. Her hair was cut carelessly and she wore berets like a child.

The binoculars, of course, allowed me to only see her in segments ... and I found myself avoiding looking right into her eyes. I was happy with the face I constructed for her. When she moved around the apartment in the morning I watched her idly put the mug in the microwave or run water over the piles of dishes she carelessly slammed into the basin.

I had come to realize that seeing her face was disturbing. Every aspect of Jenny I had chosen to imagine for her did not fit. It was as if there is some other person waiting within my conscience whom I had pasted upon her unsuccessfully. A person whom I did not know and whom I had never seen but who seemed very familiar.

I discovered that she usually eats as she dresses. This was another revelation, I found that she came rushing from her room half clothed many mornings to pull a piece of toast from the toaster and devoured it standing in the kitchen with her blouse half closed. At one point she came in the kitchen in a bra and jeans and found an iron in the cupboard under the sink and disappeared back into the room. I followed the lines of her back and her stomach with something more than a man's lewd interest. She seemed aware of the possibility of an unseen watcher – every woman in the city must be – and did not disrobe completely in front of the long windows.

I had taken to bringing my schedule to work, updating it, Jenny's schedule becoming a diary of sorts. It took me only a few minutes each morning.

7:45 *First appearance. Knee-length T-shirt. News on at 7:51. Coffee. Dishes to sink. Disappear into bedroom*

8:05 *Second appearance. Work clothes, red skirt, white blouse, hair down, coffee drunk standing, purse found, return to bedroom, folders, folders shoved into bag.*

8:12 *Leave. [LATE]*

These notebooks were updated nightly into my own computer. I waited until she was gone each morning before I left, filled with horror that I should meet her on the street and betray myself. Ridiculous worry, I knew, for how would she know me, how would she recognize me? I had often considered leaving when she did, watching her come from her apartment but had withheld, terrified of being spotted. I imagined that when she disappeared from her apartment and from my view she in

fact disappeared from life,. The thought of seeing her, of hearing her heels click on the sidewalk or hearing her talk to another person, close enough to touch or to approach, was unbearable. If I were to see her on the street I would be forced to give up the schedule I kept like a lonely astronomer keeping track of the subtle movements of the cosmos. I could not bear the thought of seeing her face to face.

Was I not justified to meet her in a neighborly way? Could I not approach her at a bus stop or in the subway platform and ask her the time of day? I would add valuable knowledge to my notations: the sound of her voice, her accent, her expression when dealing with a well dressed stranger. That was tempting, I must admit. It appealed to my sense of irony, my sense of humor, and yet I did not do any such thing. When I took the elevator down to the lobby each morning there was no chance I could see her. I walked without looking to her side of the street on my way to work.

In this way the woman could disappear daily. I had a sense that whatever I wanted to discover about the cosmos would not be revealed though direct questioning. It would not be revealed even if I were permitted to ask her anything I liked.

More than that, I realized that in those few moments in the morning, alone, in the morning darkness of my den in my comfortable chair looking at her through the high powered lenses I could allow myself to forget where I was and who I was and where I was meant to be.

My records were very complete, I must add. I had begin to feel proud of this achievement. My skills as organizing her life, at making myself aware of the minutiae of what kept my constellation intact, were admirable and yet I had no-one to show them to. More than meeting the woman herself, I wanted to show another person the results of my work. I wanted to display with pride my meticulous efforts, the ease in which I had penetrated this woman's life without her aware in the slightest of my daily gaze. Often I was tempted to print my schedule and send it to a complete stranger. Or to send it to her and watch as she read it with amazement and horror from my desk chair. I even thought of sharing this with Kannotski. It actually occurred to me to go to his museum

office and plop it on the desk before him and ask him if his pitiful cataloguing of frozen pictures had was anything to compare to my efforts? I would have loved to see his face. I would share Jenny with Kannotski if I could trust him. But Kannotski was too dull, he was a simpleton, a puritan, a damned fool, and his foolishness made me resent him.

The desire to show this schedule and my new binoculars and my unimpeded view into the window had seized me. I had begun to wonder if there was any person in this world I could tell. The secret burned within me.

CHAPTER 7

Disaster.

I had begun to spend more and more time within the confines of my apartment. The comfort of the rooms was something. I did not believe it was done for Jenny's sake. I had become much less apt to leave. I came into the museum later and later. I had not had a visitor up here in a long time.

The apartment had begun to show the tell tale signs of bachelor living. I left my coat from time to time sprawled across the long red couch in the living room. Like Jenny, I left dirty dishes in piles by the sink. Empty coffee cups gathered by the computer, tiny espresso cups piled up on the window sill by my desk. Dust was settling over the apartment.

I once looked up from the sink and saw my reflection in the window. My hair was wild and unruly. I reached out to touch my face, drew a line in the dust that had settled against the glass. Dust was almost ninety percent human skin, I once read. I was decomposing over my windows, over my furniture, breathing in discarded bits of myself. I wandered the apartment in my thin socks and my unironed corduroy trousers hanging about my hips. I was punctuating my days by Jenny's departure from her apartment and her returns.

I was working frantically, too. I found I could work constantly at the desk. Towers of manila files and notebooks teetered precariously next to my chair as I worked. I updated reports. I sent email messages across the country. And from time to time I looked up and out the window. This behavior went on for a week.

Jenny made a new friend, a man. He had come to her apartment the night. To begin with he arrived late at night, while I was asleep and I only became aware that he was there after watching for a few minutes in the morning. He emerged out of the bedroom, shirtless and then went right to the kitchen. My first feeling was that something terrible had happened to her. He made coffee. He was thin with terribly white skin in comparison to Jenny. He moved languidly around the apartment and sipped his coffee watching the television.

I knew that Jenny was bound to have male visitors. I knew that this would happen but I was unprepared for the way she came out of the bedroom wearing a loose-fitting shirt (his shirt, obviously, a checkered shirt) and wrapped her arms around his from behind, almost knocking him over. He set down his coffee, turned and embraced her and the shirt rode up her legs.

Remember that I had not seen her nude, not completely. She had always been aware of the windows and now there she was, completely brazen in the window, her arms around her new lover. The binoculars brought her in very clearly, the two of them kissing, him pushing her to the couch, pulling the shirt from her so I saw, from the side profile, her breasts as he sucked her gently as she worked his trousers off, all of this occurring in front of the television.

There was something *wrong* about the way they made love, in front of me, right before the window for the entire city to see – as if they were proving something elemental to Niccalsetti, sending a message directly to me and saying you may watch but watching is not having. He stripped her naked and he had her on the floor, on the couch, on the floor again, devouring her and she played along with it. She looked my way once, a worried expression might have crossed her face once or twice (or was that passion, I could not be sure). But the two of them seemed almost to be performing.

One thought occurred to me. If only they would move to the bedroom. If only they would at least draw the blinds. And, strangely, they must be insane to have sex in front of the wide open

windows when anyone in the city might be watching. I kept willing her into the bedroom, willing her to come to her senses and take his hand and close the door but she would not.

The ridiculous gyrations of love. Even at this distance, with the binoculars, devoid of sound, their movements seemed awkward and purposeless, like a grotesque and silent dance. Her legs bent and spread, him working on her as she lay prostrate on the floor, moving her head back and forth. The entire thing lasted twenty minutes, twenty agonizing minutes, and when he was finished with her he stood over her, grinning foolishly, his member ridiculous looking in its nest.

She slowly stood up after it was finished and was speaking to him, speaking louder now, running her hands through her hair and suddenly he had his fingers around her upper arms and was kissing her. She kept speaking to him, pulled away, turned to me, her breasts upturned and she spoke then turned back, screaming something and then he did it.

He hit her.

It wasn't a hard blow, it was half a slap, as if he was pushing her away roughly. But it was enough to bend her over double, crying. He looked at her for a moment, the bastard, his face showing concern and then boredom as he walked back into the kitchen and ran his fingers under the tap. She, red faced, knelt and cried over the floor. He, naked in the kitchenette, drank water directly from the tap (thirsty from all his exertions). He then pulled on the shirt she had been wearing and walked bare-assed across to the couch, sat and pulled on his jeans. She was now imploring him in some way, still on her knees, her palms on her thighs. He ran his hand through his hair, said something quickly to her, stood and tried to get past her. She grabbed the front of his pants, tried to hold him, and he moved easily by her. He fumbled with the unfamiliar locks on the door and stepped outside, slammed it. She stood, naked, and shouted something, stamped her foot and turned and went back to the couch in tears.

A full view of her just-fucked body.

My rage was something mighty and immense. Even sitting and crying she didn't move to cover herself as my gaze lingered on her. The satisfaction I was getting was nothing sexual. It was a magnetic satisfaction, an unavoidable gaze and the unavoidable question: what had happened and why? Why had he hit her?

Finally she turned away and my gaze slipped over those buttocks. (Was she marked from him? Bruised? I could not tell). She went to the bedroom, shut the door.

I realized I was standing by the window, easily seen, my field glasses pressed hard against the glazing. I put them down. I had a vague headache. My eyes hurt. I leaned against the chair and felt a rush of fear and shame well up inside me and a churn of confusion. I looked at my work, then looked at the window, then back at the folders on the desk and the email in the computer and wondered how I possibly did anything productive, anything worthwhile

Then, in the midst of what must have been some kind of anxiety attack on my part the buzzer to my apartment went off, loud and insistent, scaring me so much I sat down clumsily over the edge of the chair, literally catching my breath, feeling as my mouth was full of dull razors.

It's the police. She saw me and called the police. Jenny had gone to her bedroom and called the police. They were waiting downstairs, grinning at the front desk, ready to arrest the pervert or ticket him, to come here in their uniforms and bulky leather jackets and humiliate me. Drag me downtown so formal charges could be brought against me. I opened the bottom door of the desk, shoved the binoculars under *The Modern Museology Journal*.

Another buzz. The front desk knew I was up there. The police wanted me to talk to them and nothing good could come from hiding. The buzz sounded impossibly loud, the sound resounded off the brass pots. I walked over to the intercom and pressed the SPEAK button. I intoned my name, sounding distracted and bored, my heart pumping, my legs weak. I felt as if I might throw up.

Paul's voice crackled over the ancient wires in the walls. "Man here to see you, Mr. Humphrey. Dr. Siekel. Shall I send him up?"

The name did not immediately register. I paused, licked my lips, thought. Siekel. The eye salesman. I felt relief, waves of it. I smiled, leaned against the wall, ran my forehead against the wooden frame of the door. Reprieve!

“Shall I send him up?” Paul asked, his voice crackling.

My voice, joyous, too relieved to be rude. “Yes. Do. Send him.”

I waited by the door and then noticed my socked feet. I stepped into the living room, slipped on my shoes, tucked in my shirt, returned to the door, my hand on the burnished brass knob. I waited to hear the telltale sound of the elevator laboring open down the hall, preceded by the gentle chime of its wearied bell. But nothing. I breathed deeply, smoothed my graying hair, looked around the confines of the room, saw the twirling dust in the light streaming through the kitchen window. Finally I thought I heard a step and at the same time a sharp knock. There had been no bell for the elevator. I opened the door.

He filled the door frame, despite the fact that he was almost bent over. He smiled pleasantly at me. He was wearing a grey pinstripe suit and a fedora that matched the suit. He smiled. He had a brown, faded, scuffed briefcase in a leather gloved hand, and each corner of the case looked chewed. He stood duck toed on the faded spot in the carpet before my door in a pair of dark, creased shoes. The entire outfit seemed as if it had been borrowed from another giant man. I imagined that he smelt of something caustic and stale.

“Come, in, come in, Doctor Siekel.” I knew above all I did not want him in my apartment. I wondered why I had answered the buzzer at all.

“This is an unexpected visit. But it has been some time since you have contacted me and I was in your neighborhood. I have some things to leave with you that might be of interest.”

“Ah. Yes. Of interest. Do you drink coffee?”

“I do not.”

“I have some made. Do you mind if I do?”

“No.”

I indicated with a wave to the chairs in the living room. “Sit. Sit down. I’m sorry but I don’t think I’m in the market for any more binoculars.”

He sat down on the couch and placed the briefcase by his feet. He sat with his knees peaking above his folded legs, his hands together on his lap. He looked around the apartment slowly, spoke without looking into the kitchenette where I was pouring coffee.

“I only make my customers aware of what I have on offer. Often times this saves them money.”

“I see.”

“I have many interests. A man ought to have many interests. You want to know about your environment, Dr. Humphrey. Let me say that is a natural human tendency. To want to know all you can about your environment. To educate yourself as much as possible.”

I sat in the chair opposite him. I sat like a prizefighter, my elbows on my knees, my hands hanging down between my legs. It had been a long time since I had a visitor up here. He was a strange visitor. He had not moved from the uncomfortable position he had taken on the couch. The sunlight fell eerily across his pale face and his bald cranium and the browless eyes that turned to me like dark holes in the afternoon light.

He seemed to be reciting something committed to memory, as if he had said these words many times to other customers. “There are many reasons why one would want to keep abreast of one’s environment. To gain first-hand knowledge of the activities going on around him. I have helped to satisfy that need on the parts of other customers.”

I sat across from him in a leather chair that smelt of dust. I set the coffee, steaming, by my elbow, balanced on the heavy arm of the chair. I listened to him as if hearing a confession, my head angled down, examining the networks of cracks and fissures in my leather shoes. I might have been

nodding slightly. His words sounded reassuring, almost mesmerizing, the tone of a rehearsed act, a performance.

“You were not expecting me to come today. I understand that. This is an intrusion. But there might be articles I could provide that you might find helpful. Perhaps you are in a certain situation in life that requires you to be especially vigilant. To know what others are doing, or saying about you. Perhaps this was the case.”

“It is not.”

“If it was. I have supplied many people in the past. I have even supplied the government with equipment it needs to watch others, to keep track of them. Nothing else.” He reached into his soft coat with a clumsy hand, his long, thick, gnarled fingers strange nimble inside the unseen pocket. He extracted a single cigarette and held it, suspended, above his lap. “You don’t mind if I smoke.”

“No.”

Still looking at me he reached again into his pocket and pulled from the depths an impossibly delicate silver lighter, a sliver of metal in his great hand that he opened and lit, holding the edge of the flame to the end of the cigarette, his dark eyes hanging over the white smoke. “My business depends upon a somewhat personal attachment to my customers. I am, after all, in sales. I read people. I learn about their needs and try best I can to supply them.”

“What have you learned about me?”

“That I have things you might be interested in. That what I am talking about might not seem so strange to you. There was, after all, no good reason for you to let me into your home. I could have been sent away at the front desk. And I would have left. Of course I would. Did you know that is fifty percent of the battle of sales? More, even. All a salesman needs is an audience. Curiosity. That is the great opener of doors, you see.”

He inhaled again, the cigarette crackled faintly, glowing. He looked around for an ashtray, his eyes sweeping the room. I stood, crossed the room, picked the heavy ashtray up from below the

shelf of the coffee table and set it before him. He twisted the cigarette over the its depths until an ash fell from the end.

“I am professional, you see. A professional salesperson. A professional understands, first, the needs of a potential client. He is persistent. Not annoyingly persistent or intrusive, but chooses moments to visit old clients with his wares.”

“I needed binoculars. That could have been all.”

“And perhaps that is all you need. But perhaps you have a particularly elusive subject. A subject that might require more diligence. As well as the assistance of a professional. One who watches. Because I can help you see through walls. I have helped others do the same thing.”

I settled into my chair. I was tempted to ask him for a cigarette, thought better of it. He sat with the lit and smoking cigarette sending threads of blue smoke twisting towards me like ghostly tendrils. *The two of them fucking as if impressing their being on the city.* I suddenly saw, in great clarity, the way Jenny’s head snapped backward when he palmed her chin and the inane way she knelt on the floor at his feet. “If there was a means of seeing through walls, would you be able to make this happen? I have a subject who I must know more about.”

“What must you know? Have you asked yourself that? What do you need to know? Is it a piece of information? Is it an answer to a question? Truth to a lie? Or simply knowledge?”

“I don’t really care.”

“Maybe there is a vague suspicion that something is being hidden.”

“Yes. All right. I want to get to the bottom of something.”

He nodded, a curt nod, focusing those dark eyes on the end of his cigarette. “We of course can never know enough about certain subjects. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

“I mean to say that there is some knowledge we can only pursue and never attain. That there are some investigations that might not be worth your while.” He grinned. His cherubic face could be called either new-born innocent or purely evil.

I looked away from him, my eye catching something that was gliding stealthily along the ledge below my window. Through the partly open, long sliding glass looking over the main street a cat slipped into the room like a dark liquid, a green eyed wisp of smoke that lightly whisked against the floor. It reared its head and looked at me, then to my visitor, turned and jumped back outside, a stream of darkness sucked gently away. Siekel and I watched this cat without comment as it stalked along the side window and suddenly disappeared, lured into some feline exploit. Siekel’s eyes settled on its vacant space on the ledge.

“I can of course install the things you will need myself. You realize that. But your help would be much needed. I can make up an assortment of costs for you. Nothing would be too expensive.”

“I was speaking hypothetically.”

“There are the following items for sale. Are you ready?”

“I’ll hear you out.”

“A smoke detector camera. Comes in a smoke detector box and weighs just about two times the amount as the detector itself. It installs and uses two “C” batteries which I will provide with the cost of the detector. This will transmit an image to your VHS. It also has a free speaker that will pick up most sounds from the room you are interested in. It is steam proof and waterproof. It also, by the way, functions as a smoke detector. The batteries will last about six months and will give you an unimpeded vision of the subject. I will also include with this a pinhole camera we will install into the wall, no, don’t look at me like that, it will not take long. Not at all. I imagine that there is no logical reason why we could not install these things as soon as possible. I will accept any kind of prompt payment on these items and the installation charges, should you assist me, are free. With the wall camera I will include the software to play the images you see through your computer and record

them on file. These, along with the videotapes you can make, are often useful in case you are preparing for some sort of litigation.”

He was menacing in the room, this stranger with his leather black case and his dark eyes and his pale pink hands. I stood up.

“Let me think about it.”

“I’ll install them and tell you when they are ready.”

“Without her knowing? You don’t even know who I’m watching.”

“I do.”

“How?”

“By looking at you. And looking at where you live. And looking at how you live.”

I reached forward, took his cuff, gave him a pull. He followed me into the den and I turned, looked at the window. There was still disarray in Jenny’s apartment and the door to her bedroom was still closed. I pointed at the room. “I want to see what goes in there. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Perfectly.”

“I will deny ever meeting you. I will sign nothing from you and I will not speak to you on the phone.”

He was looking into the room, rubbing his lips, exposing those teeth, impossibly white and long. “Yes.”

“I don’t want to know how you get cameras in there. Hear me? I do not care. I couldn’t care less. I just want it done.”

“I will do it today.”

“And I will not have this done if you put her in danger.”

“There will be no danger. I am not a dangerous man.” He grinned at me then, his form huge and terrible in the small den. “Perhaps I will leave you now. You look tired, Mr. Humphrey. You look overwrought, if I may say.”

“I am. Overwrought.” I led him to the door and he bowed. “We will be in touch, you and I.

Very soon.”

“Good.”

CHAPTER 8

And so I shut him away. I leaned back against the door, my mind on the scotch already. I crossed the room, poured myself a drink and sipped, inhaling the vapors, my hands shaking. The ancient buzzer went off suddenly at the door, and I set the glass down with a heavy clink. I willed myself not to answer, found myself crossing the room despite myself. I did not want to hear his voice, and instead of course heard the desk man. "Man named Kannotski here to see you, Dr. Humphrey."

Kannotski! Of all people. I tapped the button. "Send him up. Yes, do, send him up now. Please."

I was in a hurry to please him. Kannotski, just the sort of clown I needed. I brought out another heavy cut glass and my ice bucket. Midway through the process I opened the door to the hallway, left it hanging open, went back to the kitchen and began loading ice cubes into the bucket in cold fistfuls. Kannotski!

He came tentatively into the room, bowing over from behind the door, looking at me through his wire rimmed glasses, his face owlsh and chubby, fat, his eyes childlike. I waved expansively to him. "Come in, Leo, damn you, come in now, where in hell have you been?"

"Reginald, I ..."

"Never mind. Never mind. Brought your briefcase with you. How have you been?"

Kannotski was not well. His checkered shirt ruffled and creased against his chest and an ancient white t-shirt peeked out beneath it. Over these he wore a coffee and ash stained cardigan. I sat him down, had a scotch in his hand and ice in the tongs before him before he could stammer a greeting. "Good to see you, Leo. Are you holding things together at the Fort? The Fortress, I should say?"

"Well, Reginald, this is why I've come."

I polished off the drink and refilled, the booze slipping over the rim of the glass, vaporous over my fingers. I plopped more ice in the glass, the sound of it ringing in my terra-cotta kitchen, the rooms we shared already the cozier for us. Good old Leo! The evening was drawing close around us. I sat down on the couch, the ice cubes swirling in my glass. "Here's to it, my friend." I'm sure he was perplexed at my behavior. Of course he was. He toasted me back, unsure of my intentions.

"Look, Reginald. I guess I may as well come to the point. Funding. We want more funding for the postcards collection. Er, I mean, I do. Funding." He sat blinking, soft and exposed outside the museum building as a turtle pulled from its shell. He reached for his briefcase, pulled out a dog-eared manila folder. "You see, these are facsimiles of what I am looking for. The Lavender series is now almost complete, these came over the Internet this afternoon. I emailed you but you were, well, you haven't been in the office in some time."

I reached out, took the folder and its pictures from him. Mrs. Osborne again, in her faded Edwardian glory. The same grainy colors. The same dark image of the woman under the shower tap.

"How valuable were these once, Leo? Tell me."

"Oh, it depends, I suppose. It depends on how much they'd be willing to pay. The reproductions were done by a small Chicago photography company. My feeling is that they were shown around, shown mainly to Osborne's friends."

"His friends?"

“He was very proud of them. He made an effort to circulate them among a select group of gentlemen. He was quite proud of his wife. He’s like the hero of the Herodotus story, I suppose.” Leo held his cup like a supplicant, with both hands, as if drawing some kind of wisdom from the glass. He drank, eyes lowered in the concentration of a non-drinker and grimaced at the taste. He sipped again, his lips shiny and ruby over the rim.

“Come with me to my office, Leo. Come on. The light is better. We can see what these collectors are trying to flog us.”

Leo followed me into the den and I switched on the long halogen light over the desk, sat in my padded leather seat and hunched over the photos. Leo could not fail to look out and see her across the way, her apartment light was on, we could see her paltry furniture. Jenny herself was in there, perhaps in the bedroom. He would surely note her. It seemed obvious that he would at least look out the window and notice her and I would see him doing it. I was very tempted, very tempted, to make some sort of statement about it to Leo. To casually point out that we could see right into my neighbor’s room. That she ought to buy blinds. Make a joke about it and see how he reacted.

But he stood beside my desk, looking down at the photo-prints, expectant, like a child. A war could have raged outside and Leo Kannotski would have been none the wiser. He would not have cared. The room seemed close and still with the two of us in it. I spread the photos of Lucy Osborne on the desk.

The collector was in St. Louis. He had excellent specimens: the woman in the picture, Osborne’s wife, was stepping daintily out of the shower, into a small room. But didn’t Leo see the half smile on her face, mocking the camera, the painful awareness she had that the photographer was right there with his Kodak Box cameras under a black hood, the obscene round flashbulb pointed into the stall where she had stood dry as a bone to emerge half grinning upon command?

She was clumsily overplaying her role as the object of attention. The way she stood, shielding herself from the camera so we could see only the profile of her breasts; the old fashioned, bun like

wrap of her hair, was frustrating. I pointed at the photo, the end of my finger tracing her plump, pale figure.

“She’s boring, Leo. These are boring photographs.”

“Amateurish, yes, Reginald. But a complete set.”

“I’ve rarely seen a less interesting model, Leo. Really. Look at her. Her ‘come hither’ look is ridiculous. It is meaningless in the first degree.”

Leo turned his glass in his hand. He was holding it very hard, his mouth pressed in a line. He sipped from the glass, bowing over it, then speaking into it. “She has a place in her history. This is a rare find, Reginald. We make a display of it and we get not only deltiologists like myself into the museum, here, but also Titanic experts. She and her husband died two years later on that ship. And here is his wife. I did not think this collection existed in full until today. I didn’t.”

“This rounds it out, then.”

“There’s this and one more, which I have located. The Curator has already agreed to a showing. We have a week to decide. He has posted these pictures on the Internet. It would be a crime if they weren’t picked up, Reginald. An absolute crime. They make a real contribution to our understanding of deltiological collections of the time. As well as, well, as well as to our understanding of what was considered sexually appealing.”

I quickly and furtively glanced past the glare of my light on my den window, outside and across the street to my neighbor. She was home, she was standing in silhouette looking out into the city, she could perhaps even look upwards and see us if she so desired, she was *right there*. Leo could not fail to see her if the fool – the absolute fool – would only look up. I sipped my drink, sipped it again. I sat down in my chair, set the drink on a coaster, thumbed his photographs, printed reproductions of the thick plates in the possession of a certain Mr. Dennis in St. Louis. Three hundred dollars a piece. Leo sat down in the smaller chair I reserved for guests, my wife’s old

dressing chair from out bedroom. He set his whiskey on the blotter, still almost full, a grievous waste of good sixteen-year-old single malt scotch.

“The Curator must be in favor of your buying these, Leo.”

“The decision is up to you. But it does add something to the museum’s collection. As I said before. It is something we can certainly use.”

His eyes were traveling to the window now. See her, Leo? See her? But he looked out the window blankly, his curiosity unaroused. I wanted to slap him, suddenly, rise out of my chair and slap the back of his head, shout, “Don’t you see what I have here?” I wanted to shake him, “Don’t you see her?” If he would only say something, if he would direct my attention to her, say something in passing that would let me look about in agreement, and say, “Oh yes, I can see into that woman’s apartment, how embarrassing,” so the two of us could have a brief laugh over the matter, that would be enough. It would be enough for me to actually buy his damned postcards. I would have done whatever he wanted. But Leo settled back in his chair and put his hands on his chest and looked at me with an air of expectation that belied a canine complacency of a man without responsibility or curiosity or ambition. Sitting in the room with him made me furious and I drank more of my whiskey, the ice knocking against my teeth.

Then, across the way, the light went out, the silhouette disappeared and I was left alone with Leo. The possible moment was gone, the moment that we could have shared something as sophomoric as a glance into the woman’s apartment had now absolutely vanished. I stood, the chair rolling out behind me a full two yards, dropped his pictures in a pile, walked out of the room, mumbling about our needing more scotch. I left him with his fat Lucy Osborne, let him sweep her jumbled and ridiculous representations up and follow me. In the harder glare of the kitchen lights I snatched the pictures from him and looked at them once more.

“Are you sure to get your hands on that last picture, Leo?”

“Leo drew himself up to his full shortness. “I am. What’s wrong, Reginald—”

“It’s nothing. Headache, I get them now, have been feeling down the last few days. Buy the postcard. I give you authorization, have the accountant call me in the morning.”

“Will you be in?”

“No. I’m very busy Leo. Very.”

He seemed to deflate a bit, hang his head, “Look, I’m sorry to have disturbed you, Reginald, I really had no—”

I lifted his coat off the chair by the door and handed it to him. “I understand, Leo, I do. I’m sorry. I’m feeling rotten lately. No idea why. Don’t mean to be short with you.”

“This will be another coup for the museum if the Curator gives us the Osborne Exhibit. I’m not kidding.” His collar turned inward against his chest and he pulled the jacket tight around his neck. I flipped the collar out for him and the gesture seemed too intimate, so I clapped him hard on the shoulder. “Good. Good. Another six thousand visitors, Leo. This is what we’re here for.” I had the door opened already and he looked around him, perplexed, suddenly aware he was to leave, unsure how he had wound up at the threshold. He absently opened his folder and counted his pictures by touch, looked around the room again for a hat or a scarf he did not bring.

I gave him another pat on the shoulder, guiding him out.

“Listen, Reginald, one other thing. The Curator has noticed that you are not attending the department meetings.”

“Did he attend any himself recently?”

“No, no, of course not, but he gets the minutes. You really have to come, he sent a query to the department which I intercepted and answered quite apologetically for you. You have another meeting this week, Reginald.”

“That’s right! Of course.”

“They keep track of the department heads. It’s not a warning from me. I’ll send you the note the Curator sent down.”

“He likes us where he can find us, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. I suppose so.” Leo pushed his glasses up on his face with a deft press of a chubby finger and blinked in the hall light. He put out his hand, “Sorry for bothering you like this.”

“Not at all.” I shook his hand – it was damp with perspiration – and shut the door quickly in order to avoid further thanks.

CHAPTER 9

I returned to the museum. I had been out for almost ten days. The students were subdued around me, they seemed confused. They had been taking orders from Kannotski, had been carrying on with the Shawzin collection and the cataloguings. Piles of notes and reports had been shoved in to my mailbox. I came into the office feeling drained and tired, greeted them, went to work. I held an ad-hoc lecture about the value of the Shawzin collection. They seemed bored throughout.

I was needed there to make the job seem exciting. To remind them that they were something more than cheap intelligent labor – lifters and filers. What should I have done? Held a party? Given the troops a speech? Instead, I assigned jobs and checked reports.

Gretta came to my office after the students had left. I was sitting attempting to make notes for a report that would go into each student's carrier file. She waited until I looked up. She was covered in dust, her hair had been swept back, she was wearing a Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey baseball cap. She cleared her throat.

"I made a file for you. To see what pieces have been catalogued and packed in the sealed room. It's on my Palm Pilot. I have to download it into your computer or I can email it to you."

"I don't have that kind of software."

"You do. I loaded it into your computer while you were away. I've been out there in the basement writing in the codes for each piece, and every day I get it on your hard drive. Leo said you wouldn't mind. He even bought himself one. You should too. The Curator will let you write it off."

She slipped next to me, leaned over the desk, switched on the computer. She double clicked a new icon and then brought up a file. It was a listing of over four hundred pieces, alphabetized, with a short description of each, serial numbers and storage codes. She had saved me easily a week of work, and had done a better job than I would have. I grinned up at her stupidly.

“Palm Pilot, eh?”

“Don’t go to grad school without one.” She opened hers, put it in my hands. It was clicked open to a new set of numerals.

“Should I even ask if these figures and codes are accurate?”

“What do you think.”

“I think they are.”

“They are. Leo stopped checking me last weekend.”

“Leo’s letting you people run the show.”

“He’s obsessed with his old porno cards.”

“Postcards.”

“Yeah, whatever. We want you back. Leo’s not much of a leader. There has to be somebody with flair around here. Somebody who loves the job. Leo treats us like a bunch of children. It’s bad for morale, Reginald.”

“I know. I’ve been terribly busy.”

“There’s rumors about you and Mrs. Shawzin?”

“Oh yes? Really?” It amazes me, the familiarity students feel free to adopt with us. I was not offended, though, perhaps because I wanted Gretta to think me somewhat of a paramour. I enjoyed the illusion that Gretta felt there was some sort of mystery to my life. And I was flattered she bothered at all with my private life – what fifty-year-old man would not hope to arouse the curiosity of a twenty-three-year-old woman?

“I think Mrs. Shawzin spread them herself. Made insinuations that couldn’t be true.”

And so the game begins, I thought. The sharing of secrets The defamation of the rival woman. “The rumors are unfounded. I’ve been at my desk at home. What would you have thought of me if I had wasted museum time with Stella Shawzin?”

“I don’t know. I’d have thought you were a typical man. I’d have been jealous.”

“Jealous? You’d be jealous of Stella?”

“Women are funny, Reginald.”

“There’s nothing to be jealous about, Gretta.”

“You’re allowed to do what you want. I’m not yelling at you. God, you look so embarrassed.”

“Not me. Tired, maybe.”

“I’m asking you to pay a little more attention to us. The troops are getting restless. I don’t have any authority over them.”

“But I bet they do what you say.”

“They respect me up to a point, I think.”

“You say that with some pride.”

“I guess I do. Yeah.”

She smiled. She had a masculine edge to her voice that I found attractive. Her handwriting was also masculine, sloping letters, full of sharp angles. Perhaps there was some very tough part of Gretta that protected her, that she used when she had been the tallest girl in the classroom while a child. She no longer needed it. In another life, Gretta would have been a model. Even in overalls, covered in dust, she was attractive – well formed, a blonde sylph dressed to hide her charms.

We were alone. The basement was empty now.

“Do you drink, Reginald?”

“Of course.”

“Can I offer you a drink?”

“Where? Here?”

“Yes. Here. I’m not going anywhere else looking like this.”

“You look fine. Wonderful, in fact. Sublime.”

“I look like hell.”

“What will we drink?”

“That stuff Leo keeps in his desk.”

“Whiskey? Can you drink whiskey?”

“Whiskey and water. Sure. Why would you think I didn’t drink whiskey?”

“It’s an older man’s drink.”

“That’s dumb. Go on, I’m not going into Leo’s desk. I’m just a student around here.”

I went to Leo’s office, opened his desk, found a half full bottle of Johnnie Walker Red, then went to our tiny kitchen area and found two streaked tumblers. The cube refrigerator had no ice in the Lilliputian ice tray but there was a bottle of chilled water. I took it all back to the office, set the glasses down, poured us each a thumb and gave her an extra splash of water. We toasted each other and I took a swig, feeling the familiar burn and good feeling. Gretta sipped, sipped again, her eyes on me. I couldn’t tell if she was a whiskey drinker or not. Probably not. I sat back in my chair, the whiskey almost immediately making me feel expansive.

“So, Gretta, why are you wasting time with me? You must have some sort of interesting life outside of the museum. A fascinating social life, I’m sure.”

She placed the glass on the edge of the desk. “Me? I don’t know anyone in Niccalsetti. I’m sharing a summer apartment on Bird Avenue with Susan Uttman. She’s never there. She adjusted to small town life better than I did, I guess.”

“I’d have thought, with the University and all, there’d be plenty for you to do.”

“College bars don’t interest me. I feel too old, you know? Jaegermeister shots on the bar, all the drunk guys, kids swigging beer. I’m beyond all that – it was never really me in the first place. I’d prefer something just a little low key. Do you know what I’d like?”

“No.”

“To go to a really nice club that had a good bar and a nice pool table.”

“You like billiards?”

“Yeah. But not the thirds sized tables in the bars. Not bumper pool. I mean a nice pool table.”

“Ah. The real thing.”

“Yes. Too bad you don’t belong to a club.”

“Well. It just so happens that the Niccalsetti club did away with two of their tables years ago. One was auctioned and the other, well, my, my, the other seems to be in upper level storage.”

She picked up her drink. “Really? I didn’t know that. Can we play on it?”

“I’ve been known to shoot one or two lines in my time. The lighting leaves something to be desired. We must be careful. The table has real velvet, and the balls are made of ivory. Do you object to playing billiards using ivory balls?”

“I can make one exception.”

I got up, grabbed the bottle and our glasses, and we made our way through the stacks to the freight elevator in the back. I rolled it open, stood aside with a bow, the glasses clinking in my hand. “After you.”

“Thank you.” She wiped her brow and stepped in. She stood a good two inches taller than me in her work boots. I got in, rolled the doors shut, and pulled the lever to upper storage, where we keep things we really don’t know what to do with, things that we can’t protect from the mold in the basement. I opened the door to the menagerie of stuffed animals – a glass case full of decaying King

Penguins, two bears, a Kodiak Brown and a Polar Bear, faced each other on their hind legs, both moth-eaten, snarling into the gloom. A lion, donated by the Knox family and shot with Curtis Shawzin nearby. There were various antelope and stuffed birds, all of them basically hunting trophies that at one point we used in a sort of ad hoc natural history display that we took down, finally, in sensitivity to the times and our customer's discomfort with the spoils of trophy hunting. Just before it all came up here Adam Rubenburg, the president of the Nicalsetti Zoological society, had written an open letter to the museum asking us to put away the stuffed exhibits of endangered species such as the Siberian Tiger and Black Rhino as well as an assortment of birds and lesser carnivores.

Gretta and I walked through a crowd of moth eaten fur, glaring eyes and fangs towards the back. The front of the room smelled like dust and animal decay, of mothballs and caterpillar spray. I noticed Gretta stuck by me as we pushed through the tanks of stuffed reptiles, including a stuffed Crocodile one illustrious Nicalsettian had sent back from the Nile.

We walked past an assortment of Wurlitzers and a platoon of dummies dressed in World War II and World War I combat gear – the Curator had sent a general email recently asking if we might not pull the World War II stuff out again in response to the cinema's new interest in the major battles of that war. Here sat simulacrum of dead men and dead animals forever poised for mortal combat. Finally we came to the back and I had to pull the general light switch to illuminate the covered pool table. I drew off the plastic and vinyl covers and stood back, hands behind me. "Tell me about it."

Gretta whistled, walked slowly around the table. She stood back, sighted the silver plate, then rubbed her fingers along nickel plated pocket irons and along the faded silk tassels. "Well, it's a modified Brunswick-Balke Narragansette table. Regulation size, probably just off 4 feet by exactly eight feet."

"I'm surprised you know the model. I originally mistook it for a Collender Brilliant Novelty."

“Come on, Reginald. This is quarter-sawn oak, not French walnut. You guys have a real saloon table here. It doesn’t have gilt inlays and the legs aren’t as fat. This isn’t a Novelty series table, just a heck of an antique.”

“I know it. Look above you.”

“What?”

“The lights.”

She stood by me, sipped her drink. “I can’t see. Can you turn them on?”

“Look carefully and tell me why I couldn’t.”

“Oh, god. They’re a classic four arm billiard light set. That thing is probably late nineteenth century.”

“I’ll give you a hint. It has a copper Japan finish and the glass shades are from Murano, Italy.”

“Then it’s one of those really old sets. Circa 1880.”

“Precisely.”

“And it hasn’t been converted from gas so we don’t get to use it.”

“Well, it has been converted but there’s no outlet. Even the Niccalsetti Club had electricity installed during the first part of the century.”

“Can you see well enough to play?”

“Yeah. The overhead lights are enough. Why isn’t this on display?”

“As part of what exhibit?”

“I don’t know. Americana?”

“If it had only been owned by an illustrious American. Samuel Clemens had a Brunswick-Balke. That one was auctioned off after they sold his house in Elmira. If this had been owned by him

we'd have a display, all right. We'll hold it until I can think of something – possibly an American West exhibit.”

She found the cues lined in the unmounted cue rack, handed me one, hefted her own, sighted it. “It’s warped.”

“It’s a hundred years old, Gretta.”

She selected another from the dusty rack, sighted it. With her long fingered hands she extracted the balls from the rack, cast them spinning across the green of the table.

“Where’s the triangle, Reg?”

“Beats me.”

I collected the balls best I could, arranged them in a crude triangle, then stood. I sipped my drink and sneezed. The dust of ages. I felt as if the soldiers and animals behind me were watching this from the darkness. Gretta looked at the balls, flexed her knees, set the cue ball two feet off her bumper and looked up at me. “How about you give me a refill, Reg.”

I picked the bottle from the packing cases, filled her tumbler half way, filled mine. I drank off a shot just as she sent the cue ball coming into the huddled ivory orbs, sending a quick explosion of color around the dim table. A yellow three lazily rolled into the side pocket from the opposite bumper. “OK. I’m solids.”

“I haven’t played in a while.”

“You play for a bet, Reginald.”

“I couldn’t take money from my students.”

“You won’t have to. Fifty bucks says I beat you in the name of all the underpaid scholars you’ve shamelessly exploited for three decades.”

“I was once exploited myself, Gretta.”

“Don’t avoid the bet.”

“Fifty dollars in cash?”

“Yes.”

“I accept. On behalf of assiduous, bedraggled researchers everywhere.”

“You can use the warped cue. Go on. I see the ten ball’s awful close to the corner pocket.”

“Tricky little angle.”

“For you, maybe.”

I shot, missed. She lined up two shots, took the harder one, sunk another ball, then another. I managed to sink one ball before she followed with two. The balls made a tired clanking sound like heavy teeth falling together. I drank on, realizing that it was affecting my aim. She drank recklessly, carelessly. I should have stopped her but I didn’t. I refilled her glass. She lined up here shots twice, piled her balls into one corner, covered the pockets.

“Where did you learn how to play billiards, Gretta?”

“My older brothers. We had a table in our house. They’d love this, though. Go on, you can sink that green stripe. Hit it with the six ball.”

“I’m not good at the combo shots.”

She walked over in her high boots, stood behind me. “Go on. Line it up. Line a side shot on the ten, forget the six. Just line it up.” She bent next to me, smelling of sweat, animal hair and whiskey. She covered my hand with hers. “You’re off by half an inch. There. That’s the shot. Now ease it in. Don’t just smack them together like an amateur. Just tell it where to go.”

I jabbed at the ball, it spun into the bumper and then ineffectively drifted into her side of the table, finally tapping a cluster of solids. I looked up sheepishly. She didn’t look at me, picked up her glass and drank. She lined up and shot. The cue ball rocketed into a lonely seven beside me, which promptly hit the leather pocket pad and fell on top of its striped mates. She came to my side of the

table, bent next to me, blew a stray blonde hair from her forehead. Her legs shifted and steadied her long torso as she sighted and poked the cue ball into a pair of stripes at the far left corner.

“Well?”

“Sorry, Gretta, what?”

“It’s your turn. What were you looking at?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re losing bad, Reginald. I have the six and the eight ball to go. Get your eyes off my legs and concentrate. I’m kicking your ass.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Go on.”

I lined up the five ball, shot, and the cue ball blundered across the table, smacked the five, which spun into the pocket, pausing upon the precipice as if thinking twice about that stripe-balled abyss.

“Very good. Wow.”

“I’m not totally without ability, Gretta.”

“Never said you were.” She blew her hair from her face, leaned over and neatly deposited the six into the corner pocket beside my glass. She took an easy, graceful step to the side of the table, drained her drink and lined up the eight against the side pocket. “OK. Side pocket and you’re out fifty bucks. I am a sporting woman. Want to double the bet on this ball? If I miss it, you get the fifty, if it goes in, you pay a hundred. It’s your last chance.”

“Some chance.”

“Go on. Show some panache.”

“All right.”

“All right what?”

“I’ll take the bet. I’m going broke. I should never have told you about this place.”

She grinned. “No. You shouldn’t have.” Her stick slipped through her fisted fingers as quickly and smoothly as a piston. I didn’t see the cue ball crack into its target, only heard the eight topple into the side pocket. The cue ball rolled back to the center of the table as if awaiting another game. Gretta stood up, practically hopped in the air. “Hah! One hundred smackers.” Her eyes were glistening. It was easily the most animated I had seen her all year. Her glass was empty beside her. She lay the cue stick on the table and leaned against the burnished side. “OK. Pay up.”

“I have to bring it tomorrow.”

“What?”

“I don’t walk around with that much cash on me.”

“Unacceptable. Completely.” She was still grinning. I sat up on the table, my legs hanging down, drank, feeling drunk and knowing if I was then Gretta was in worse condition. The bottle had only a puddle of scotch left in it. *A wee dram.*

“So tell me the truth,” she said.

“About what?”

“About you and Mrs. Shawzin.”

“The truth? There’s nothing to tell. You’ve painted a much more romantic picture of me than I can live up to.”

“She wants you. She has the Jones for you.”

“I doubt it. I really doubt it.”

“She does. I can tell. You’re just not interested – or are you? There’s a running pot with us drudges. I say you’re already involved.”

“Then you lose. How much is the pot? Maybe I can make back some of my money I’ve drunkenly wasted.”

“Stella’s always pissed off when we go out there and you’re not there. She gets all dressed up. Are you really drunk?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Not me. Do you bring all your women up to the pool table? I hadn’t heard that rumor.”

“You’re the first.”

“Hah. That’s a laugh.”

“Come on. Be honest. If you’re honest with me you don’t have to pay. You don’t have to lie. You’ve never done it with any of your interns?”

“No.”

“You’re single.”

“So? What does that mean?”

“And you’ve never slept with Stella Shawzin?”

“No.”

“You’re *lying*.” She whacked my arm. She leaned back, supported herself, then lay flat on the velvet. “You said this was in the Niccalsetti club? How many waitresses and stag night hookers were bonked on this baby?”

“I have no idea. Women weren’t allowed inside the club.”

“Come on, even you’re not that naive.”

I looked down at her. “You’re getting dust all over a valuable antique.”

Her eyes, now halfway closed, opened. “I want to try this out. Nobody is safe in the museum so long as I know this table’s up here.”

I supported myself with one arm, smiled down at her, then gently leaned down and kissed her. She smiled, as if the kiss had woken her. “And you were telling me that you’ve never brought a woman up here?”

I kissed her again, almost unable to prop myself up. Her fingers went to my jacket and she pulled me over, looked down at me and sat up smiling. She unbuckled the tops of her overalls, let them hang free, and pulled her T-shirt off, exposing two perfect breasts. I struggled to my elbows and brought my lips to her nipples, closing my eyes and willing myself to stay conscious.

“Maybe you’re not lying after all, Dr. Humphrey. Nobody who plays pool as badly as you should try to seduce a woman on a Brunswick-Balke.”

CHAPTER 10

Gretta and I made love uncomfortably and quickly on the strange slippery velvet surface of the pool table. It was an act of concentration. The more we moved together the more I was aware of the brooding dark around us. Gretta smiled as we made love, a knowing smile or perhaps an amused smile – how much did I truly know about her? How casual was she about this kind of encounter? When I was finished I rolled off her, banged my ass against the side pocket, lay panting with my pants around my ankle. Gretta lay nude upon the table, pressed her long legs together and pointed her toes upward. Her overalls and T-shirt were folded neatly under her head. She sighed, closed her eyes and clasped her hands across her breasts like an encrypted gentlewoman. She began to snore. After a few minutes rest I sat up in the dark and the room spun and swam – the booze and the late hour and the unfamiliar exertion had been almost too much. I felt as if I had dreamed making love to her or I had witnessed myself doing it. I felt no guilt. No remorse. I had to wash myself and use the bathroom downstairs, my bowels felt loose and warm.

I stood up, naked and cold, and shook her awake before we both were found by either the guard or a colleague. I had to help her with her clothes – only a few minutes of unconsciousness had made her unwieldy. We got dressed quickly. She, sobering a little, assisted me in covering the table with its plastic sheet. We put the cues away and stole through the forest of moldering pelts. The humor of the situation seemed to wear off in the harsh light of the freight elevator and I thought

Gretta might be ill. She followed me back to my office in the basement (and thankfully we were not accosted by Kannotski), picked up her canvas briefcase and waved at me unsmilingly, her hair now flat and damp against her head. We mumbled something to each other about keeping this a secret and she disappeared upstairs. I felt as if she had seen something in the post-coital Humphrey that left a sour taste in her mouth.

I shrugged on my coat and waited in the dark until I was sure she had been let out before I shut off the lights and followed her, passed through the shadows of the main hall to the door like a criminal. I walked home imagining that people were whispering to each other “Drunk, fornicator, seducer,” as I passed by, just another lone old man smelling of whiskey late at night. I arrived at my building in a sweat, and trudged wordlessly past the doorman’s desk to the elevator. I closed my eyes against the push of gravity against my insides as I rose to my apartment. Once there, I went to my den, rubbed my face and slept.

I took the next day off, unwilling to face the students or Gretta, who also, it turned out, stayed away from the museum that day. I spent the day sobering up, napping, cleaning my apartment. I did paperwork, I filed, I sorted, I checked things. I put Gretta out of my mind.

I received an email from **Siekel_Optic@Nicc.net.com** that gave me a web site address that I promptly visited and on this site I found camera feeds that displayed the insides of Jenny’s apartment. The site been divided into four different, corresponding areas. The first was the living area, serviced by a camera that made everything in the living area seem black and white and slightly rounded. The attached email message informed me that I was in fact looking *down*. I realized I was looking down at the room from the vantage point of the thermostat, which he had disassembled. This was the biggest window, though all of them could be enlarged. The next box was her bedroom and the next the bathroom and the last the kitchenette – he had installed this one in the clock of her microwave! I spent an hour simply perusing the apartment.

The living area, first. The dimensions seemed wrong but she had a small space area dominated by the couch and a marshmallow chair. The other chair, which I had seen when she moved in, was in her bedroom. There was a coffee table and books and magazines. She read *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and the *Niccasetti News*. She also had more books than I had realized and some classic novels. I think I saw *Great Expectations* and *Julius Caesar*, and an assortment of thick, romantic novels that I had never heard of but I had seen their like many times in airports and at the drugstore. They were books with titles like *The Best Women*, and *Love and Riders* and *The Harlot* and *The King's Woman*. They faced me from the floor by the couch or through the glass coffee table, where they were neatly stacked. I panned on to a book entitled *Bitches* and smiled at the bravery it took to buy it! Good for you, Jenny!

The kitchenette. I could see a wide view of her counter. I could look down the counter at her jars of kitchen implements, all mismatched and cheap: one jar read, simply, Kitchen Things and had an interesting looking wooden spaghetti extractor beside the usual spoons and forks and serving spatulas. She had a cheap stove that must have come with the place and a line of cookbooks over the stove including "The Joy of Cooking" and "The Enchanted Broccoli Forest" as well as "Microwave Cookbook for Busy People". I could not see the refrigerator though I knew it was directly beside the microwave. The telephone was on the tiny counter facing the light of the living area, and there was a pad beside it and a mug full of pens. A bulletin board above that with pictures lined up on the side. I could not make these out very well, even with the mouse operated telescopic lens, but they seemed to be mainly of groups of women of her age in pairs and in groups. I would later learn that she had been a sorority sister at Tri-Delta at Affinity College and these photos were of her pledge class. There seemed to be one family shot. She had a little brother or sister, I could not make them out even using the zoom feature. A picture with a couple of younger men, one of her and three of her friends lined up at the beach, in swimsuits. A couple of cartoons that I could not make out clearly

and a cartoon of a cat, fluffed out with the caption "Who, Me Stressed?" There was also a list of things "To Do" with a pen hanging down the side – this was an erasable white board, badly marred and scarred, full of cross outs and squiggled notes, including "Get laundry" and two phone numbers as well as "8:00 Tues, DON'T BE LATE" and "Washing Powder, Fab. softener". A list of emergency numbers, which included, in big letters POLICE and RAPE HOTLINE and FIRE. Two postcards, one of a mountain scene – god knows where – and one of a city. There was a postcard beside that that had its picture turned away to show the writing which I could not read but could make out the words MISS YOU in big letters and LOVE. There was also the delivery menu for to A Taste of Paris and another for Sung Ming's Famous Chinese Food and one for Casa Nova Pizzeria, all of them hanging beside one another neatly.

The bedroom. The camera had been positioned inside her clock radio, which sat against the single hung window on the other side of the building outside of my range of vision. The room was small and dark. Everything in the room had a slight green sheen to it and I learned by checking Siekel's addendum that this was because he installed a night vision camera in this room a facility called an "illuminator". This was so powerful, he assured me, that you could clearly see the inside of a black sack. The room had a double bed at the same height as the camera, with a fluffy quilt and a pile of white pillows and throw pillows and two stuffed animals who nestled in the middle of it all. There was a low, long row of drawers that must have come with the place and a louvered closet that hung open exposing lines of clothes. There was also a hanging rack of shoes to complement the pile that was below her clothing. The top shelf of the closet was crammed with boxes and luggage and right beside the closet was the door to the bathroom, closed. She had a vase beside the bed closest to the door, on a small night stand that I could not truly see. She also had a pile of magazines there and a few more of her famous trashy books. An assortment of pills as well and a mug with a smiley face on it that never left its post so long as I watched her. There was a picture of what must have been

her parents wedding photo by the bed, and another small cube of other pictures of other women posed with their faces close to one another in widely smiling, ruddy cheeked camaraderie. I could not see these faces particularly well. She had a wire candle holder and a half burnt candle which tantalized me, I must admit. What was it used for except for candlelight sessions of intimacy? There were more serious books in here, perhaps to impress the occasional guest. I saw at least one name of a very literate, popular book, recognized its cover.

The bathroom. I enlarged this because the bathroom was small. I tried to guess, at first, where he had hidden the camera, but was dumbfounded. I realized, finally, that he had hidden it behind a tile in the shower, and it peeked out of a pinhole. The tile was inset into the frosted glass window, right above the shower, giving me an immediate view of the shower area itself and, when the shower door open, the rest of the bathroom. It had a sink, and counter absolutely full of bottles, removers and the like and a tower of wire mesh drawers crammed between the toilet and the counter. On this holder was perched an assortment of cotton balls, unrecognizable boxes, a snarl of cord from the blow dryer, more boxes, big plastic canisters of lotions, more books, pamphlets, plastic hair rollers in a big, see through bag, ancillary make up bags, a set of combs and brushes on the table and another smiley face on a glass half filled with water. There were marvelously named make up and skin products like "Hide the Blemish", "Pinch Your Cheeks", "Line and Shine", "Avocado Cream (Night)", "Great Lash", "Cinnamon Frost Powder," and my favorite, "Hard Candy Hint Tint". I panned across as far as I could into the shower, which had three old taps. Over the shower head there was a holder attached for her shampoo, her conditioner, a razor, shaving cream, two different soaps, a long handled brush, a nail brush, and another mirror. In the corner of the shower area (it was in fact a bath, but the bath seemed tiny, though this might have been an illusion caused by my position), was another candle in a wire holder, half burnt, and a matchbook hanging open beside it. Opposite that was a fat sponge of some kind sitting in the corner like a massive, soft,

tumor. She had towels, white ones, hanging from the rails of the shower itself. A pair of sneakers lay on the tiled floor and a dark towel lay crumpled beside the sink.

I could make her out much better, and she was pretty (or do I assign that beauty to her because of my feelings? I can't say). She had a smooth even face, a sharp, classic nose. She had a serious eyes, dark eyes, and was not as frivolous a character as I once supposed. She was much more thoughtful than I had believed, spent many evenings reading quietly, listening to the classical music station in Niccalsetti or working in front of a cup of coffee. That first week we had to ourselves, for the hated visitor did not come back. I knew she was poorish but came from a good deal of middle class money. I learned that she liked to read, she liked to eat in bed, she liked to sleep on her left side facing away from the camera and she slept with the radio on. I learned that she hummed to herself. One night, as she sat in bed reading, I sat in my own desk chair reading with her, my scotch in hand. She was wearing that yellow SNAP shirt to bed that first week. I had that very day watched her eat alone in the kitchen, watched her make quick meals and that terrible mix up coffee.

A few hours later I sat in front of the window and could see her form across Delaware Avenue. It was late, after dinner, perhaps eleven o'clock and she was preparing for bed. She had changed into a pair of men's boxers and a T-shirt, had briefly walked around the apartment and into the kitchenette completely nude. It was a luxury to compare her real body to the body on the computer screen, each body confusing and too small. Her movements in the apartment did not exactly conform to the movements on the computer screen. At first I found this disappointing as well as disconcerting, and attributed it to the fact that I could not look at the window to the screen fast enough. Later I came to believe that the transmissions from the cameras in the apartment to my computer screen could occur quickly enough. She might have moved slightly more slowly on the screen.

And I discovered that Siekel had done something unexpected in his camera installation: he had permitted me to hear her voice! Her voice! It came through the speakers in my computer. As she is alone most days I had not been at first aware of the voice. Yet once the phone rang, startling us both ... the ring a metallic, insistent sound that came through the speakers to my computer – indeed, I had forgotten the computer had even come with speakers. When she picked up and said hello, I listened. It was an everyday voice, unexpectedly high, but with a hoarseness, a roughness to it ... it made her seem older, somehow. The call I heard was obviously a call from work. She sat before the coffee table crouched over her papers with her thick address book opened, her brown-blond hair hanging down around her face. She wrote and while she wrote had the most innocent of conversations. Something was to happen on Tuesday, it seemed. That voice still insistent, somewhat demanding now. She wanted somebody to be at the office early on that day. The voice held more authority than I would have expected. Wherever she worked, she had a position of some weight, some power.

Funny. Listening to her was the very first time I had felt invasive of her privacy. I certainly had not felt invasive when I had the cameras installed though as I think about it I realize I can not delude myself, it was an invasion, all right, in very sense of the world. But hearing her voice, hearing her make plans, that seemed but more of an invasion than anything else so far. I realized I had done something unwarranted, illegal, had crashed into the private world of a working person who held real space. Here was a woman who was needed and respected and required outside of the apartment and outside of my line of sight. That scheduling of that unknown appointment remained my last aural contact with Jenny Malinse. I disconnected the speakers after that. I realized, suddenly, that had I been unable to watch without also listening, I would not have watched. That day would have been the end of the story – I would not have had any more interest in this woman. The voice irritated me. It seemed to divide us, it was a third presence between us. I, usually alone in the evenings, should

have welcomed an accompanying voice. I should have wanted to hear her, I realize that. But once the speakers were switched off it was easier and more pleasant, to watch Jenny. I did not mind her speaking on the phone so long as I did not have to hear. She also spoke to herself, I realized, and sang to herself. It seemed as if I knew what she was saying in those moments. In fact, watching her speak increased my enjoyment. I had never been able to watch her speak, beforehand my view had been too vague, too distorted, impeded by distance. But now I could watch her lips move as she talked on the phone. A few times she looked right at me as she spoke. I grinned back at her through the tiny eye on the ceiling. Those were moments of small triumph. "Address the camera," I once intoned. "Address me." And I did give her words to speak with.

* * * *

The day after Siekel installed the cameras which I paid for, dutifully, as a matter of course, a credit card number emailed to his office – he emailed me a request for payment and I paid – the night seemed to grow on. The watching of her, this revelation of all of the woman's details, made me restless. The constant eye becomes tired, I suppose. I watched the woman with a feeling close to sickness. I did not look away when she cooked (toast, frozen meals, pizza from gaudily covered freezer boxes) I could switch cameras and follow her into her bedroom, watch her undress, though my view of the woman was most noticeably then not what I would have it to be. When she undressed for the first time before the camera I found myself easily distracted by the minutiae of her bedroom and by the things that had heretofore been not allowed me. The objects. The pictures in the cheap cube, the crumpled Kleenex on her bedside table, the cheap white clock radio with its glowing

numerals, the fat novels on the floor beside a pile of open glossy magazines. The camera's proximity turned both the large faces on the covers of the magazine and her face into shifting two dimensional images. It was as if she was being watched from below by a smiling race of make-up models while I watched from above. The novel's title, I was to discover, was *Torrid Nights*, and it had a garish picture of a woman in a black lace chemise on the cover. Jenny, despite her general slovenliness as a housekeeper, self-consciously hid this book under the bed most evenings

The camera, of course, required a good light, and the small bedroom often did not have that, so what I saw was not the woman pieces of her, different, awkward angles of her body that is not as erotic, or compelling, or, annoyingly, as revealing as I would have hoped. Once in a while she moved away from the camera so that I was granted a full, unrestricted view of her side, her legs, her flank – she was attractive, I decided. I remained unsure of how attracted I was to her, I was more attracted by certain moments, certain instances when I became convinced I was seeing another person, a person as she saw herself. That moment when she stepped out of the shower and bent over and let her hair hang and flipped it up, smiling at the mirror in her room, that was the image I saved – a press of a button – or the moment when she was first dressed to go out on the town and flounced aggressively out of her bedroom into the living area, that was also special. The person I saw with tangled hair in the morning, the woman who held a hair dryer over her nails to force them to dry, the woman who slept with one arm wrapped lovingly around a pillow and other draped to the floor, this was the woman I felt most possessive of, the woman who I hoped would find no misadventure when she left the apartment.

I captured images of her in pieces into my computer, saved them for later perusal. I saved a picture of her arching her back, displaying her medium breasts to the camera, another of her twisting shyly to pick something from the bed, a classic Greek amphoran pose – *Woman At Dress* – a pose of her bending awkwardly.

Pictures of her touching herself, aware of herself in the mirror, rougher with her body and its needs that I would have expected, furiously applying makeup, for instance, or poking her hair, hoeing her scalp with the hand-held blow dryer, standing naked or in shorts, before a radio.

These pictures reminded me that she is preparing for more life, for adventures outside of the apartment, for her forays into the world outside of the screen. This had begun to annoy me. It ate away at the ends of my enjoyment. I could not explain why, even to myself. It seemed that this close proximity to her only made this feeling more acute – made me feel wronged that after our many mornings together and my familiarity with her schedule, she should then casually move away to another's eyes.

I had also realized that what I had done had nothing to do with "enjoyment" at all. There was some kind of obligation that I was unsure of. I knew its flavor. I had seen it before. It was partly my job. I've seen it in the eyes of collectors, the collectors we in the museum go to. I had seen this uncomfortable greed in the face of a man who has been offered three times the value of an entire collection of colonial memorabilia and could let go of it though he had no need of the collection and he could no longer afford its upkeep and had approached us to buy it in the first place. The collection no longer represented actual things to him but many hours of plotting about the things and categorizing the things and collecting them and storing them carefully. I was such a man. I could not let her go. I therefore did not watch her with enjoyment but obligation. When she left, I was released, briefly.

It was not a pleasant release, either. A few weeks after Siekel installed those cameras and she had disappeared on some nocturnal errand (I did not guess at these), I was sitting helpless in front of the computer when the phone rang. I heard my voice in the machine, then Gretta. "Reginald. We've missed you. I've missed you. Maybe we should play pool again? Are you there? Are you?" She

exhaled into the phone as if she had been holding her breath. "Get back to the office, Dr. Humphrey."

Briefly I thought of Gretta, of Gretta half nude on the pool table, luxurious, spread out, the sweaty-sour taste of her nipples, the smell of her hair, her relentless fingers around my cock.

The phone clicked.

I rose from my chair, shrugged on my coat, opened the door and disappeared out into hallway.

CHAPTER 11

I was not familiar with the various bars and clubs and coffee spots in my neighborhood where one might have a drink and let life rush by, where one might feel a part of a greater human mass. I walked down the grey, night sidewalks, past late night convenience stores glowing luminously across the streets. Where does one go with one's inertia? Niccalsetti, like any city, has its places, I supposed. I wandered down towards the bowels of the city, away from the museum district. I walked past promising looking coffee shops, past smaller bars that did not appeal to me, all of which seemed accusingly trendy, peopled by students. Places meant for business people, places that seemed too new, places that were meant for groups, not for one to sit and reflect. I do not know what kind of place I was looking for so I wondered on, but found what I was searching for eventually. I found it at one of the older hotels in Niccalsetti, a leftover from the turn of the century, a hotel that once would have been the tallest building in the city district and now was dwarfed by tremendous edifices of reflective glass, comic book buildings that seemed sterile and intimidating. This hotel, the Niccalsetti Grand, had been built in a day when Niccalsetti expected great things from itself, it was a monument of granite, severe ledges, frowning iron panes windows and a low archway for cars to drive up. It was still stately. I walked in through one of the brass revolving doors (imagine, brass doors, today, I pressed my palm against the cool metal to ensure I was indeed *not* imagining it), walked past a caped doorman who touched his cap and resumed his post; I tapped across cool

marble tiles to a small bar held over from another age, a bar meant to comfort a man far from his club in the outreaches of civilization represented by the ambitious Niccalsetti of the past.

The entrance was discreet. The ceilings loomed over me, the two chandeliers dimmed. It was a long, narrow room, almost empty. Two pairs of leather couches faced one another. A rotund bartender of my own age looked at me with dark eyes expectantly and seriously from behind his high post, guarding the racks of underlit bottles, his serious gaze a reminder that the administration of hard spirits was a serious business to be handled correctly. We looked at one another, I in my academic baggy trousers, long coat, open shirt and suit coat and glasses, he in his tie and apron and rolled sleeves, and we nodded in the mutual recognition of holdovers and refugees. This was the kind of bartender who might just refuse you a drink if you did not pass muster – these bartenders do exist, still, even in this day and age. I ordered a scotch, a blended six year old from a satisfactory row and he nodded in discreet, polite approval as he reached for a lowball glass and dug a silver ladle into a fresh pile of ice beside the sink.

“The humidor’s been freshened sir. If you are interested.” His was the authoritative voice of a professional servant, a voice that invited conspiracy. I settled against the bar with my elbows as he scooped shimmering diamonds of ice into my glass. He poured a hefty shot across the cubes, slipped a small, embossed napkin beneath the glass and moved a silver bowl of nuts, cashews, dried fruit, and olives, both black and green, in my direction. His eyes were intent on his work and his hands were thin, hairless and scrubbed like a surgeon’s. He turned, placed a heavy mahogany humidor on the bar beside me and opened it, then stood back. “I suggest the Dominican Cohibas or perhaps the Santa Damianas. I think there is also a Nat Sherman Metropolitan and the new Fuentes.”

He placed a discreet leather diary of cigars beside the humidor that listed the various brands and years which I consulted carefully, my eyes skipping over the strange, exotic sounding names.

Santa Damania, Carlos Fuentes Opus X, Los Stantos, La Brevas, El Productos, Cohiba

Esplendidos, Monte Cristo, Romeo Y Julietta, Don Figaro. It read like a list of secret operas, the same promise of connoisseurship applied to something that is inhaled and digested, pieces of culture meant to enchant the body.

I know nothing about cigars but I nodded sagely at his suggestion. The cigars lay under the dim light of the bar, fat, and promising, releasing the smell of sun, gentle breezes and time spent aging in faraway wooden storehouses. I ran my fingers over their oily skins. I selected one with a pleasingly archaic looking band and a blonde wrapper. The bartender nodded in approval once again and closed the humidor with a heavy chunk and placed it beneath the mirror. I examined my cigar. He teased from his watch-pocket a double guillotined cigar clip and took the cigar from my fingers, clipped its rounded end into his pink palm. He extracted from beneath the bar a box of matches, encased in a shiny silver sleeve with the hotel's crest embossed in the center and tapped out three matches, rolled them together, struck them against the side of the sleeve where the striking pad was exposed. The first burst into flame, ignited the second, then the third, creating a tiny explosion of light within his palms. He rolled the matches between his thumb and finger, spreading them slightly and widening the flame. He held the cigar close to the flame roasting the end and twirling it. The whole operation was done swiftly and deftly over the bar itself. The tip of the cigar glowed hot over the flame and he held it up, inspected it and waved it in the air. He held it to me and I took it and inhaled while he shook and threw away the twisted, smoking black spindles and placed a heavy glass ashtray in front of me. I puffed away at the cigar. A lazy haze settled over the both of us.

The room was still and quiet, lights beamed in from outside, rain ran down the windows but I was encased, perhaps entombed in this bar. I nodded significantly at the bartender, stood with a drink in one hand and the cigar in the other. The bartender began to methodically polish the mahogany before him and I walked towards the long club windows at the end of the long room. I sat, drink in one hand, cigar in the other, crossed my legs and looked at the strange pattern of lights and rain

playing off the glass. It was a smoky meditation and my ambitions for the night, whatever they might have been, began dissipating.

I almost did not hear the woman walk into the room ... well, I must have. I must have heard the bartender intone a question, then her order, then another question. I had finished half my ambitious cigar. The tobacco's nicotine had entered my body through my lips and lungs and mixed lugubriously with the aged peat of the scotch. Beside my long couch where I was slowly and agreeably poisoning myself was a deep red wingback chair, far enough away from me to warrant its own end table and ashtray. It was to this chair that the woman came and sat and her drink down.

I am somewhat of a worldly man. I understood that single attractive women often frequent bars like this in hotels like these and better. Of course I knew this. But I am not enough of a man of the world to understand, or read, whether or not such a woman had now approached me. This single chair and its proximity to me, did that mean she wanted to suggest some sort of collusion? I glanced politely her way and was not acknowledged. Her proximity might not be in invitation at all, I thought.

But it occurred to me, in a fit of recklessness brought on no doubt by the drink and the cigar – *drinks*, I should say, for by now the bartender had meandered over to take my glass with the round nubbins of ice tinkling together within with his query over whether I should have another. I told him I should.

I ordered my drink, took it, looked at the woman, who was most certainly older than Jenny Malinse. She was coiffed, that's the word I suppose, threateningly coiffed. She was wearing what seemed to be a suit, a dress suit of brown and black, cut in a prim European thirties style, though the fabric looked soft and inviting. Was this suit the new outfit of the high class call girl? Perhaps by sitting inertly, as I was lowly becoming intoxicated, I was breaking some decorum. I did not look at her. Perhaps my duty was to move away, leave the place open to one who knew the rules.

But I was a man alone. A man without a care in the world, really, a man who had sat splendidly before the white city lights and watched rain fall on long somber windows. The sweet poisons were making me courageous and generous, the cigar smoke I exhaled gently billowed downward and crossed the room settling in dark corners beneath heavy furniture. The smoke wafted around me and sunk into my pores.

I knew that if the dark lights above us were to be snapped on in the cold light of day while the rain continued outside and spilled white, somber patterns over the room I would see only some dilapidated furniture, cracked, worn, leather, worn armrests, tables not smooth but stained with drink, a bar made of no longer fashionable mahogany – today’s bars, I knew, were made of Plexiglas, or stone, and bartenders like the one I had were a dead breed. But I chose not to see this that night.

The feeling of power wavered, fell. Reason argued against common sense. I sat there in the gloomy room and looked her over with a haughty politeness, I smoked my cigar, and leaned forward conspiratorially.

“The rain in Niccalsetti has been said to be the saddest thing on earth.”

She turned her head slowly, looked at me, murmured some kind of agreement, sipped her drink. “I wouldn’t know. I’m from New York.” Her voice was utterly non-committal.

I crossed my legs. My heels were still wet from the outside. I rubbed them with satisfaction into the worn carpet, puffed my cigar.

Without looking at me, she said, “Working nights have very bad moments, don’t you think?”

“Yes.”

“I rarely work on rainy nights.”

“Oh.” The power was quickly draining away. She spoke with authority, her voice shattering and loud in the enclosed bar.

"I live in this hotel. Did you know they rent rooms by the month now? They do. They certainly do." She looked at me again, her hands sitting idle on her lap.

"I never work nights. I despise it."

"Buy me a drink. Absolut on the rocks. Roger knows how I like mine"

I waved for the bartender, bought myself another whiskey I didn't need and ordered her a double. The bartender shuffled away after quickly casting his eyes between us. The rain continued on outside. The drinks came. More olives too, which I ate hungrily, the salty vinegar making my drink cooler.

"May I ask what you do at night?"

She grinned into her drink, looked at me, swallowed prettily. She was older than I had imagined. "Freelance work. I have a private business."

I tried in vain to think of some witty comeback, drank more whisky, ate another two olives and fumbled a peanut on to my lap.

"You seem like a sad man, you know. You seem very, very sad. I could feel it. Only sad people watch the rain at night. It doesn't matter, you know."

Peculiar feelings now. It might have been the drink. I looked at her watching me, her eyes deep, her face made up, this freelance woman of sorts, whoever she was, and I felt for all the world as if I was disappearing once again. I felt as if I was melting. I set the cold heavy glass on my knee, where it tilted in my fingers, the sound of the ice cubes falling between us. My heart beat twice, loud in my chest. I drank again.

"Are you all right?" She was bending forward, trying to see me in the gloom and I nodded, coughed again, sputtered. My hands were trembling. I felt as if something deep in my bowels was slowly turning to liquid. I touched my fingers to my hair, fingers wet with the cold dew from my glass, ran them over my eyelids. "I must be tired. I'm terribly sorry."

“You look like you’ve been under a strain. You do. You look miserable.”

I was about to say that I had in fact not been under any strain whatsoever. I drank, slumped backward in my chair. She leaned forward again and said in a firm, quiet voice, “Give me ten dollars for Roger and we’ll get you up to my room.” She held out her hand, palm up, fingers slightly curled, as if she had won a bet. I reached into my jacket and found my billfold, paged through the notes until I found a ten, handed it wordlessly to her. She sipped her drink again, tilting her head, set it back upon the coaster, slipped the ten face up like a trump card under the coaster beneath my drink, stood, and in a rush of perfume and alcohol took my arm, lightly, as I rose from the chair.

The disappearing feeling had not yet subsided. I touched my face again, mumbled something about not knowing what was wrong, took a step. Was I having a heart attack? Perhaps this was the first stage of a heart attack. I wanted to grab her, whisper urgently into her ear that I was dying, that she ought to call a paramedic, yet then she led me through two steps, then another, and the feeling began to subside. I followed her docilely. I turned once, looked at the tall window, then to the bartender, then back to our chairs and the thick ribbon of smoke curling in crude designs between the leather couch. The woman had hold of my elbow and I followed her through the room, across the soft carpet. I might have been very drunk. I turned back again and saw an alcove beside the bar and a pair of long legs crossed and a shiny domed skull. It was Siekel, of all people, sitting alone, smiling around a cigar, looking at me, grinning. I tugged my arm away, took a step in his direction to confront him and ask him what he was doing here. She took my arm back, tugged it.

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

“Speak to that man in the alcove.” My voice was a croak, unnatural, hoarse.

“Honey, there’s no man there. Nothing. look for yourself. C’mon.”

I looked and the chair where Siekel had been sitting was empty and the chairs further into the room were enveloped in gloom. I felt a light, sick, panicky feeling under my tongue and my knees buckled slightly.

“Just follow me. Watch your step. Watch yourself. This place has an elevator, we won’t have to walk up. Wait.”

We came to an old fashioned elevator in heavy brass with an interior iron grating that opened with a resolute squeak and clang after some initial resistance. The floor was of wood, watted and spotted, grey from years of waiting feet. She shut the door after us and I had time to see her in the dim, harsh light as we rose up three floors. She had a sharp face and her hair luxurious and pushed back over her shoulders. She didn’t look at me in the elevator but kept tight hold of my elbow, watched the floors, made a satisfied sound when we arrived on her floor. She manhandled the gate again and pushed me into the hallway. “I have a small room. It’ll have to do. I don’t think you’re planning to die on me, are you?”

“I’d hope not.”

“Good. I suppose it’s against the rules, dying in a hotel. They never want a dead person in a hotel, do they?”

She did not smile as she spoke. We came to her door and she opened it, pushed me in, shut the door and locked it. The rain here seemed much closer and colder. It fell harder against the windows. She had a small, immaculate room. Her bed sagged in the middle and seemed close to the floor, yet even in my reduced state I recognized the value of the twenties furniture. A vanity was thrown open to me with the mellow lights beneath the mirrors that sat on prim lions paws, full of her bottles and perfumes. A tasteful reproduction Louis XIV desk sat by the window with a bag and a pile of cheap notebooks on top and of all things an open man’s briefcase of a better make than mine.

Light filtered in here from the lights on the street, from the neon tubes running atop the restaurant next door, soft, muted blues and pinks that ran lazily across the floor through the crack in the white, laced under-curtains that blew in lazily against the window. I sat in a chair by the desk holding on to the armrests. I was being affected by the nicotine from the cigar, I was sure, and the booze which had taken so quickly and something else. Perhaps a fear. A fear of this woman? Surely not. She stood by the bed, one knee propped up casually on its edge. "Do you want a drink? I have drinks here ... the room comes with a bar."

"Water. Just a glass of water from the bathroom."

She shrugged off her coat in a casual butterfly gesture revealing a prim, soft blouse beneath and a band of pearls. She shook out her hair and left the suit-coat on the bed. She kicked off her shoes and stood flatfooted on the carpet. She walked into the bathroom and turned the tap and pipes rumbled beneath us as the glass filled. The sound of water running was soothing. She came back and set the glass, cool and still, by my hand on the desk. It was a highball glass taken from the bar downstairs, with the hotel's crest on the side. I drank from it greedily, feeling my heart rate abate. I settled into the chair and smiled a weak smile, the near death feeling disappearing. She was sitting in front of me at the edge of the double bed, her hands clasped over her skirt. She wore no jewelry but her fingernails were long and elegant.

"The color is coming back to your face."

"I'm terribly sorry."

"I've never had a visitor die on me. Never. You didn't seem like you'd be the first."

"It must be strange to have a man suddenly have an episode like that. It's very unlike me."

"People have different problems. Men especially – men more than women, if you want to know. It isn't anything I can worry about, I try not to waste my time."

“Do I look like just another dying person? And what do dying men want most, besides more life and less pain? You don’t have to answer that. I’m a bit drunk.”

She grinned, looked around, stood, padded across the room to a thin closet and pulled the latch. It might have been a broom closet once but now posed as a bar. She poured herself some wine.

“What do I know about you? Nothing. Nothing at all. I don’t know what you want. I’m not a mind reader. I can only do so much for you.” She filled the glass to the top, drank off the brim balancing the glass in her fingers, looked at me grinning wetly, her hair falling in her still girlish face. “Well, I know you don’t know what you want. You don’t know why you are here. Maybe you think you’re superior.”

“What possibilities? I haven’t considered possibilities. I am a man with very few possibilities left. No – many of those have been taken away already.”

“Endless possibilities between two lonely people in a room.”

“I know I don’t want to die.”

“Well, that’s good. Me neither.”

“I know I should be home in bed and going to work tomorrow and doing my job, which I do incredibly badly nowadays.”

“Why? Are you trying to learn how to drink to much? Forget it. It’s too late for you.”

I closed my eyes and breathed. What would such a room smell like? Perfume? Sex? Sweat? Dirt? Spilled drinks and cigarettes? No. Nothing. The air was cool up here, cooler than it would be in my apartment. When I opened my eyes she had set the wine glass, half full, upon the desk. She was sitting with her hands clasped again. “I have to rest. I do. I’m tired. I’m happy to help you but I’m tired so we’d better decide what to do with you.”

“What is the right thing to do?”

She laughed. "Oh, god, there is never any 'right thing'." I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to go to bed. I'm going to get ready for bed and you can decide for yourself what you'll do."

"Shouldn't we make some kind of agreement first?"

She seemed not to hear me. She stood, pulled the blouse from her skirt, began unbuttoning it. I, in my position, did not move, but watching her made me feel a strange sense of impropriety of embarrassment rather than arousal. She pulled her thin shoulders from the blouse and hung it over the chair and in one twisting motion unzipped the back of her skirt, tugged it over her hips and hung it limp over the desk chair. Outside it had begun to rain harder and I let my eyes drift from her, over the bed, over the little table beside the bed where she had an ashtray, an open book, a box of tissues. She unsnapped her bra and her breasts were small, round, and perfectly suited to her. She arched her back to stretch, she eased out of her underwear and walked in front of me naked, walked across the threadbare carpet with a fatigued, flat footed gait to the closet, opened it and the light within flicked on, illuminating her as she stood with her hip cocked and her back to me, her legs solid on the carpet before a row of clothes. How many men had touched her body, had tasted it, and did her body retain some of the others who had explored it? Had other men left a residue I could not see, or taste, or feel?

Perhaps at some level I did not exist for her. I was a necessity for her, the man who in fact was not there, not real to her, a man who was meant to work upon her body and disappear. The body retains, perhaps, only what it chooses, or what others chose for it.

She stood on tiptoe, her legs tensed and she pulled from the closet a loose-fitting shirt – it looked like a man's business shirt with a high roman collar and put it on. It hung to the middle of her thighs. She buttoned the front and walked over to the bed leaving the closet door hanging open. She snapped the light off on the wall and a rectangle of light glowed warmly from the closet to the bed.

She slid under the smooth silver quilt on the bed with a sigh and a sound of pleasure, rested there so I could see her outline in the dark and nothing else. She moved her feet within the bed and sighed again.

I sat in the chair with my coat around me, my heart thudding slowly in my chest, now resting, a fist clenching and unclenching within me. I felt a degree of sadness for myself that I had not felt for a long time. My clothes felt tight and fetid, my shirt stuck to the bottoms of my arms. I sat in the chair and the thought of my own bath and my shower and my quiet kitchen filled me with longing. I was breathing deeply, unwilling to stand quickly and feel the room spin. I looked over to the woman and asked, quietly, "What's your name?"

"Not important."

"Nonetheless."

"Isabelle."

"Like Isabelle Archer?"

"My last name isn't Archer. If you want me you just ask Roger at the bar for Isabelle. That's all. He's my pal, Roger."

"Do you want to know my name? My name isn't important either, I suppose."

"I'd forget it tomorrow anyway. I don't want to come looking for you. I wouldn't call your wife."

I closed my eyes, imagined what Agatha would say if she would see me. She'd laugh. A ridiculous drunk man in a strange woman's room, a smug old prowler. I pulled my billfold from my pocket, extracted twenty dollars, slipped it under her drink. I stood and there was no accompanying nausea, no dizziness, just an acute desire to stand in my own kitchen with the windows shut against the dark.

"Am I a disappointment?" I asked.

She shifted in bed. Swallowed, shifted “You? No. No, don’t think that. People are very strange. Very strange. You’re not even unique.”

“I left money under your glass. For the drinks.”

“You’re a sweetie. I’m tired now.”

“I’ll pull the door closed after me.”

“Good. It’s late. Ever noticed how fast it gets late around here?”

“No.”

“It does. ‘Night.”

“Good night.”

CHAPTER 12

I woke up early in the morning lying on top of my sheets and feeling as if my bones were wooden, as if my eyeballs were physically scraping the insides of my eye sockets. I had slept in fresh pajamas and had hung my robe by the bed. I walked barefoot through the house with the wooden steps of an old man. I paused by the window in the living room to watch the people downstairs on their way to work, to watch the rhythmic motion of the morning traffic, and had the pleasurable the feeling of playing hooky from school. I did not pour myself coffee but drank from the sink in the kitchen, slurping like a savage from the even gush of water from the expensive pressure tap my wife had installed in the apartment when we moved in, the water filtered and tasteless and barely cold. I walked into the computer room and checked my watch. Jenny would be up soon. I sat down, jiggled the mouse and watched as the web site sprung to life, camera A showing the disheveled room, camera B showing nothing, camera C showing her bedroom which was stuffy and too small, dominated by the bed which seemed to be nothing more than a mattress without a headboard and a book and a beer on the floor beside it. When I panned in I could see her sleeping figure, from above. She was alone.

Watching the sleeping woman took much more concentration than I would have imagined ... it was studying – looking for something, reading deeply into a person. I found myself breaking from the screen, looking out the window to her building, then over it at the yawning white morning sky.

The phone rang. I accepted a long distance call from the Musée Des Tapisseries in Southern France, the Associate Director Fleuron's secretary spoke to me in clipped English and I was patched through to Fleuron.

"Good morning Reginald. Is this too early to call?"

"No." I had a vision of him sitting there, fresh from lunch, at his desk, Stella's tapestries the first thing on his mind as he digested a Jadot White wine. A rough skinned, skeletal, man with a big nose and gypsy gambler's eyes who dressed like an Italian. He had stayed here once in Niccalsetti, and had gotten horribly drunk in the revolving restaurant overlooking the Niccalsetti Falls. His voice constantly sounded as if we were sharing a private joke, as if this phone call was merely him picking up on an intimacy. I preferred the London collectors to the French, to anyone on the continent. I tried to smile while I talked to him.

On screen Jenny moved to her back. She was wearing a thin grey T-shirt. I panned lower to her sleeping face, creased by the buckled pillows. She made a fist in her sleep, relaxed it.

"Reginald, I am thinking of coming to your country soon. Is it cold there yet?"

"Freezing. You'll freeze."

"It is very cold already?"

"Yes."

"Stella wants me to appraise the *Woman with Swan* for you. I think she might want us to share this, don't you? I think we have the capital now for this piece."

"Keep it. Once it comes in from France she'll be taxed."

"Have you been talking to your accountant again, Reginald?"

"I have also been talking to her."

"Do you know what always worries us on this side of the ocean, Reginald?"

He pronounced my name with a heavy accent on the I, so that I sounded like “Reggi-noled.” He was doing it purposefully, and he was bored, by the afternoon lull after lunch in that dilapidated mansion he called a museum. He only called me when he was bored, to make another attempt at Stella’s tapestry

“Tell me what makes you worry. I have no idea.”

“I worry always that you will marry Stella. Don’t laugh. I have considered this myself.

Except that I do not like the cold winter in Niccalsetti and she is too much for a man like myself. But, you, Reginald, you would be perfect for Stella.” This last part did not sound like a compliment. It sounded distinctly critical. I ignored the comment entirely, the rude pompous little bastard.

But Fleuron was used to Englishmen and Americans ignoring his continentalisms. “But I am serious, Reginald. Serious! There she is, alone, there you are, alone. And she is a beautiful woman with a magnificent house who throws parties for all her many admirers.”

“And she has the *Woman With Swan*, Fleuron. Remember that.”

“Many men have been married for less. Much less.”

“I enjoy my solitude.”

“How ridiculous. How foolish, too. Who cooks for you? Who do you talk to at night? Who do you confide in, who do you complain to? Not to me. Not to your friends at Historical Society – oh, I am sorry, your *colleagues*, Americans do not have friends when they work.”

“I will see her and I will be sure to discuss her *Woman with Swan*.”

“She is very possessive of this, you know. This is absurd about her American taxes. This woman is rich. What does she worry for about these taxes? I tell her I will give her something in return. I promise to break the law, I promise to send her checks in Europe, send her anything. But oh no, the taxes, the taxes, she cannot possibly let go of this piece because there are these many taxes.” He stopped took a short, hurried breath, munched something, wheezed, prompting an answering

crackle from the phone line. "And so here we are. Your Stella, beautiful Stella, she pays for nothing. The cost of living in your pretty little frozen city is nothing, next to nothing. I will tell you something. She is afraid."

"Of what? Of you? Of me?" I was smiling despite myself. His voice sounded jovial and half drunk and incongruent under this morning cold – looking out my window, fingers to the glass, I could almost touch the raw air, feel its chill. Yet in my silent office, behind my thick windows, I felt cocooned. Every so often, as we spoke, the wind outside moaned against the windowpanes.

"Of me? She has not forgiven me for being so drunk in your spinning restaurant over the big waterfall. I am a buffoon to her. No. She is afraid that maybe there are not so many Reginalds left for her. She is afraid that once you have our *Woman With Swan* you will disappear. And there will be no more drinks together and no more little letters and phone calls from her and she will be left with her mansion and her admirers who perhaps do not admire as much as you and I. Could this be so? Perhaps."

"You're drunk, Fleuron."

"I always think to myself, maybe this Reginald does not know what kind of a woman is waiting for him. I think that it might be if he marries her I will never see this tapestry so I am quiet. But then I think perhaps Reginald will become ... he will be—"

"Beneficent."

"Ah. Yes. Bon. Beneficent to his friend Fleuron once the ownership of the tapestry is his. Perhaps he will strike an agreement, a private agreement between friends to loan this out. To share. To bring a very important French museum to the interests of the Niccalsetti Historical Society."

"I cannot say."

"I will call back."

"All right."

“And why are you never in your office anymore? Are you sick? Don’t be sick. All my American friends are always ill, although they try so much to take care of themselves.”

“I do a great deal from home now.”

“Ah. America is quite a country. Perhaps you will be lonely at home and think about what I have told you.”

“Probably not. I’ll call back if Stella changes her mind.”

“But I have said I will call anyway. As a friend.”

I said goodbye, and hung up. I had rushed the end of the conversation because now Jenny was starting to stir. She rolled over in her bed and lifted up the alarm clock, moved it to her face, squinted, grimaced, slapped it back down and rolled away from it, so that her rounded back faced me. I checked my notebook, then brought up the window which held her schedule on my computer. She would be late this morning. I panned the eye of the camera around the room while she slept, panned it to an open handbag, zoomed in the semi dark to see only a jumble of feminine looking things, zoomed back, zoomed to what looked like a briefcase, more of a canvas satchel, zoomed in. Manila folders. Working things. A row of pens. Books, more folders spilled out slightly across the desk. I panned in, on top of one of three white folders, seeing an embossed company name, a train logo.

Veri-something.

I panned in again, took the best shot, had the computer light the image. Veri-Tru delivery serve. Veri-Tru.

Well I knew that company well enough. Delivery. She worked in the delivery department somewhere. I scribbled it down on the pad, then clicked open the schedule and wrote that. I could phone her.

Well, for that matter, I could meet her. Any pretense would do.

But I had already decided not to hear her voice – at least over the speaker. when it was distorted. But now, now I had some semblance of control over what she did outside of the apartment. I knew where she worked.

She stirred again, finally, and brought her feet from the bed, pressed them together on the bare floor, and shivered, looking around the room with that squint. She stood, stretched – her right index finger came right at me, startling me into a quick roll back a bit from the desk as the finger zoomed into focus, steadily increasing in size. I panned back and watched. I grinned. I was a fly on the wall now, my vision was tiny and panoramic.

My chair. I settled into it now, my robe fell open and I strokes the thin hair of my stomach through the gaps in my pajamas. The luxurious feeling was returning to me. I hid the screen, and she disappeared from view, and my email window popped up, complete with a trail of new messages from the Curator. I felt a fondness for them, these addresses piled up in a line. He wanted reports, he wanted feedback, he had called me asking where I was but I was nowhere to be found. The answering machine winked lazily by the phone, and I ignored that, too. The means the museum had for searching for me were fruitless. I would get around to the next report, the next block of feedback, and send it as a pulse of words across the street and down five blocks to the museum, and I would then surrender to anonymity. The Curator would be sated with work for a while, the museum would hear from me, I would return to this new invisibility, an invisibility I first had feared and now enjoyed. I wanted to return to the woman in the bar, to go up to her room and relate to her that I was now, this morning, coming to grips with my new eyes, my new invisible identity. I had come to believe that my new existence was full of pleasures. I had become a ghost in the hallways, a ghost in my own life. I sailed unseen through my life and would materialize when I felt it was necessary.

I zoomed in on Jenny, who was sitting on the bed, hunched over her foot, digging into her large toe with the end of a pair of nail scissors and flicking the resultant residue to the floor. I wanted to kiss her, materialize there and tell her that this feeling of mine was to be much wanted, to be sought after. I switched her off, turned up the word processor and began working in earnest. I wrote an assurance to the museum about Stella's tapestries. I lined up the emails on the screen in glowing, neat tiles and fired them off one by one, and closed the email and brought up the woman again, who was now standing in front of a mirror, (two Jennies), doubly tantalizing, her feet splayed out, wearing skimpy panties and her T-shirt and examining her nose with her head tilted far back, probing its innards with what looked like a forceps. She would be late for work, I knew.

I picked up the phone. I put it back on its receiver, stood, the robe fell open. I punched in Stella's number while Jenny walked around her room, with me following her from my heightened position, Jenny's form changing, changing, taking shape, now disappearing from the screen. The phone picked up. "Hello?"

A slight cough, Stella's greeting never as robust as I imagine it would be, much more tentative. Jenny was pressing a blouse to her T-shirt, pouting at the mirror over it.

"Hello Stella. Reginald here."

"Reginald. Hi. How is the museum business treating you?"

"You sound tired, am I calling too early?"

"Never too early for me. It was a long night last night. Tell me something amusing, Reginald."

"Fleuron Fouchet has called from France."

"He called me once already."

"I guess it's time we talked seriously about these tapestries, Stella."

“I’ve burnt them. They are in ashes at the moment. Terribly sorry but I am so bored of being called and harassed about them.”

“Come to dinner. We’ll see if we can salvage what is left, then.”

“Now you’re talking my language, Reginald. What time? Sevenish?”

“Yes. Sevenish. Lovely.” I was distracted, Jenny had pulled her shirt off and was pushing her hair in a tangled lump on top of her head. I ran my fingers down the front of my pajamas idly, standing there squinting at the screen entertaining a sudden impulse to masturbate standing in the sunlight. Watching Jenny in front of the mirror now made the room feel much warmer, I stroked my slumbering cock as I watched the woman move on the screen then slip on a bra, settling it with precision over her breasts and snapping it deftly into place, before twisting open a jar of cream which she smeared across her eyelid. The urge faded, looked up through the window, saw nothing of the neighbor.

“Reginald? Are you there?”

“Of course, yes.”

“Well, then, answer my question dearest before I hang up on you.”

“I’m sorry, I was distracted for a moment, what was it Stella?”

“Who else will be there?”

“There will be myself and yourself. That’s it, no one else. They do let me negotiate these things by myself, Stella. Didn’t you know that?”

“How lovely and cozy. In your little apartment, no less. Charming. Very charming. I’m very pleased, and looking forward to this, Reginald.” I could imagine Stella now, standing in the hallway near the front door, talking on the cream colored phone on the fragile Guernet spindle oval table with its engraving of two ladies at tea (auction value maybe around 3-4 thousand dollars if there were no drink rings on it) wrapping the cord around her fingers as she talked. Her voice sounded

genuinely pleased – Stella had a way of making everyone she spoke to feel important, as if they all shared a special place within her recognition.

My eyes flicked over to the woman on the computer. I could see her now as a dim shadow moving around the room. Jenny was dressed now, had put on a black skirt, ankle length, and a blouse that hung out over her waist, a chic, sloppy look that was reserved for women of her age. She was frantically picking papers and folders from the floor, biting down on a pen as she crammed papers into a manila envelope. Her movements on the computer screen were jerky and exaggerated at times as the connection faltered or the computer struggled to represent her.

The mail icon flashed below Jenny's image and I double clicked it as Stella said, "Well, what are you cooking for me?"

What indeed? "I know that I'm making crepes suzette."

"Really, Reginald? Can you make that without burning the building down? I haven't had that dessert for ages."

"You'd be surprised at what I can do."

"Will it impress me?"

"Indeed. There shall be many different things on the menu."

"I'll be there early then. You owe me for all the dinners I've cooked for you and all the booze you've swilled at my parties."

Booze. Scotch, oily in heavy lowballs and tall gin drinks with clouds of lime and merry floating fruit rinds. Tinkling ice and Stella's parties. For the first time in my entire life I truly felt like having a drink in the morning.

CHAPTER 13

I stood in front of the computer and undressed idly. It had grown cold outside but the sunlight filtering through the windows warmed me as I watched Jenny put the finishing touches to her face and move from camera C to camera B. I stood naked on the floor, dropped my clothes on the desk chair and left the den when she did, my feet sticking ever so slightly to the wood and ties as I moved through the house.

The phone rang and I picked it off the wall in the kitchen with a flourish, thinking of the last image Jenny had left me with, a woman disappearing out the door. I had moved to the kitchen window to watch her emerge from the revolving doors below, just a glimpse. I now knew where she was going, she was going to Veri-Tru, her work, and I stood beside my counter, naked, caught her form quickly as she pushed open the door to her building against the wind.

“Stella? Is that you?”

“No, no, it isn’t.”

“Leo? Leo? I was just getting ready to visit you.”

“I have news.”

“What?”

“The last postcard in the Lavender Collection is in. I want the museum to acquire it. It is in the best possible condition Reginald, absolutely the best. I really want your reaction on this.”

My reaction, Leo? Tear them up and get out in the world, my friend. Mrs. Osborne has had you tied to her loathsome figure long enough. "What time is the meeting, Leo?"

"I called one for eleven."

"Will the Curator be there?"

"No." A pause, a rueful silence, Leo almost surely remembering the voice of the ageless secretary on the third floor informing him that the Curator is tied up. "The Curator will get the transcript. There will be the other members of the departments, and I've invited a few of the interns." You invited of them, most likely, and want to see who shows up, I thought. "Reginald, I'd like you to see the postcard first. It's something you'll appreciate."

"Why? Why would I?"

"Because you've followed this collection, from its inception." A surprised tone in Leo's voice now.

"I will be there soon enough and we'll talk about it."

I stretched, crammed the phone to my ear, wandered out into the hallway leading to the den, idly stroking my back leg, saw the screen saver wobble and snap to life as one of the cameras in Jenny's apartment snapped to life.

"I have the other prints laid out and out on the light table. I have PowerPoint Slides on the collection and a fax from the evaluator."

"Good. That's good. How much does the collector want?"

"I need you here, Reginald. This is the only chance the museum will have."

"How much?"

"Keep in mind it's negotiable as always."

"I will. Now, how much?" There was definitely something happening on the computer, I could see standing by the refrigerator and looking into the den and squinting.

“One thousand even, but as I said, it’s negotiable.”

“Leo, forget it.”

“I have the photo in the office. It might get approval. We’ve already invested a lot in this collection. It’s worth it, Reginald, I’m telling you.”

I stretched the phone cord, walked down the hallway, saw a form moving stealthily through the apartment. Not Jenny. I panned in, it was a man with a big frame, wearing an old fashioned bowler cap. He was tall enough so his body was distorted in the tiny eye, his hat unnaturally big, his body impossibly long and tapering as he strode purposefully around the room, moving with confidence. I panned in on him, squinted, tried to see him through the window but could not, the morning glare of sunlight reflecting too harshly off the windows of her building. Finally, the man turned and looked up directly at me, his eyes and face impossibly close to the camera, his ivory grin filling the screen. It was Siekel, his nose bulbous and hideous on the screen.

Siekel waved at the camera, walked into the bedroom and stood in the middle of her clothes, looked up at Camera C and grinned. His dark coat buttoned up to his chin. He looked around the room with an air of satisfaction. He sat on the bed stiffly, stretching his long legs out.

I dropped the phone, it hit the floor, rocked back and forth. Leo’s voice was reduced to a distant whine. I was mesmerized by Siekel’s hideous face. I wanted to pick up the telephone and call the front desk of Jenny’s building, tell them there was a prowler in her room on the top floor. He ran a great hand over her bed sheets, stood, walked into the bathroom and stood in the shower stall, grinned up at me again and waved. His hand reached out towards me, growing immense and dark. I drew back in the chair and the round thumb, blurred with proximity, brushed the lens and blotted out my vision. I found I closed my eyes as he touched the lens and when his hand moved away he shrugged his shoulders and paced through the bedroom and then through the living area. He paused at the door to her apartment, frowning, his head tilted to the side, listening. He drew from his pocket

something dark and formless, something I could not make out. He stood there with the thing in his hand and finally relaxed and returned whatever had been in his hand to his pocket. I imagined it was a small pistol or even a knife but it might have been something more sinister, like a pair of pruning shears. He turned the doorknob to the apartment, stepped out into the hallway and was gone.

I stood up.

I was sweating, rank with the smell of decay and age and fear.

I had saved none of the images.

The whining became more frantic. I snatched the phone from the floor and held it to my face.

“Leo, I had better call you back. I’m calling you back Leo.”

“Reginald? What’s happening? What the hell is wrong.”

I pressed the mute button on the phone, then the power, set it down beside the computer absently. I stood in the window alcove with my forehead pressed against the glass forming a smear of sweat and looked frantically down at the entrance to the building. I stood there for a long time but Siekel did not appear. Had Siekel found some new exit, some exit I did not know about? Or was he still in the building?

What to do? What does one do and what could I accuse Siekel of? Nothing. I paced around the apartment. What was Siekel up to? Why had he been there? I went to the kitchen, leaned against the counter, actually had to catch my breath and I ran some water from the tap and put my mouth to it and then pulled the scotch bottle from the cupboard, set it on the counter, looked at it a long while, looked at the level of scotch and thought of how it would taste. Hard peat spirits mingled with the taste of fear and outrage. I left the bottle there. The phone rang again and I let it ring until the machine picked up, the machine working in the hall now without the handset. My tired voice answered, and Leo spoke again, “Listen., Reginald, are you there? What’s happening? Christ.” He

paused, breathed twice loudly into the speaker. "Pick up, Reginald, or I'm coming over there right now."

I walked to the den and carefully picked the phone up and took a long breath. There was something tight and insistent working in my chest. "It was nothing, Leo. Sorry." My eyes traveled over the window ledge. I looked into the next apartment, saw nothing. I pressed on the computer. Nothing, the small apartment was as bare as ever, the light out of focus a tiny bit.

"Listen, are you all right?"

"I have a dinner to give tonight, Leo. The cost of the last picture will have to go to the Curator."

"I understand that."

"He's going to ask about the price." I settled into my chair. Her apartment was completely still. Jenny's clothes were strewn on the floor as usual, but nothing had been disturbed. Would she smell Siekel's presence when she finally did return to her apartment. Would she sense that a man such as Siekel had been sitting upon her bed casting his eye over her glossy magazines and her crumpled underwear and clothing thrown over the chair by the entrance to the bathroom?

"If you do contact the Curator tell him that this is the end of the collection and we can have an exhibit. Tell him that there is a kid in the city who has offered to get this online, in the Internet, so people can browse the photos. For a fee, through MuseumNet." Leo's was practically pleading now. He sounded as if he was sitting in his office at the end of his chair. I had never imagined we'd have to pay so much for one card, or that the show stopping card would come right at the end of Leo's quest. I sighed into the phone and looked at the hands of the grandfather clock laboring over its gilt work.

"I'll look into it."

"You'll learn all about it at the presentation today."

“What presentation?”

A pause, then, Leo’s voice tentative. “The eleven o’clock meeting. It’s almost after ten now, Reginald.”

“You’ve told me what I want to know. I can approach the Curator directly. I have my own projects, Leo.”

Leo’s voice exasperated. “Reginald, you have not been to a meeting in months. Do you understand?” You are my immediate superior, and ... well ... there has been talk, Reginald.”

“My presence there won’t make a bit of difference to your success. You understand that. Tell them I sanctioned the PowerPoint slides and the collection up to this time. Tell them that. That will hold everyone.”

“Do you understand that this is not about my photo? This is about your job. We have not seen you at all for months, except when you float in during the afternoon like some kind of *ghost*. You have to at least be here. There will be departmental business to conduct as well. “Leo paused. “I’ve practically taken over your duties with the interns and they are all asking for marks for their supervisors. I have no idea what to do. There’s a rumor going round that bunch that you’re *ill*, with *cancer*, Reginald!”

“I’m meeting with Stella. The Musée des Tapisseries called yesterday. And we might be able to acquire the tapestry.”

“Meet with her afterward. I’m telling you as a friend, Reginald.”

“All right. And I’ll give you full support on your project, as much as I can.”

Leo paused and made some other kind of appeal, and I nodded into the phone and reassured him that I would be there. He hung up and I clicked his voice away. I had not shaved yet, or showered, and I had not dressed and was in no condition or mood to face my students. I sat in my chair and considered placing an anonymous call to the police and warn them that a strange man was

seen hanging around Jenny Malinses's apartment. I thought better of it. Phone calls to the police could be traced and recorded. The only phone booth I knew of was far down the street, and then, were I to call, what would I say? That I had seen a man in an apartment not my own? And would some anonymous cop believe Siekel's description, even if I were to direct them right to him? And ... well ... what then? Siekel could have had any sort of business in that apartment, but I nonetheless shivered at the way he made himself at home, and at the aggressive, animal way he had tensed when he had heard a sound outside Jenny's door. Siekel. Good god, if he were to ever be caught and forced to explain to a bevy of lawyers and police officers what he was doing in a woman's apartment whom he did not know in the middle of the day, where would any rightful line of questioning go?

I shrugged on my great leather coat, flipped up the collar, opened my front door and ran down the hallway to the elevator. I stood pressing the button again and again, until the elevator whispered up behind the great brass doors opened. I stepped in, practically hopping with impatience, pressed the bottom floor and when the doors opened almost ran across the dark tiles of the lobby towards the door, past Paul's surprised look and his "Evening Mr. Humphrey."

Outside the night was very cold. I ran down Delaware Avenue, two blocks, in the direction of Siekel's store. I looked at the faces in the evenings crowd as I moved along, searching for him. I was almost ready to turn around, three blocks away, coughing like a hag and out of breath, when I found Siekel standing on a corner in front of the Java Internet café. Dressed in his long dark coat and bowler hat he was handing out flyers to the passers by. He handed them out methodically and people took them, unable to refuse the frightening man. I ran across the street, stood before him. He grinned down at me.

"Dr. Humphrey. Good to see you."

"What were you doing in her apartment?"

"Which apartment?"

“You know damn well.”

He moved around me, distributed two more flyers to two women, who took them with averted eyes, then turned his gaze to me. “What does it matter to you?”

“It matters a great deal to me.”

“Concerned about the woman’s privacy? Her safety?” He grinned, shrugged his shoulders inside his coat.

“Yes.”

“My records indicate that you have been watching her seven hours a day. Twelve hours a day, even. Are you watching just to make sure she is safe? We regularly check for proper camera feeds, Reginald. You bought very sensitive equipment. Many of my customers don’t call when there is a problem. They just blame me for it and give my business a bad name. A man such as myself, Dr. Humphrey, lives off of the good word of others. You must have seen me doing a routine checkup.”

“How many have you done before?”

“How many do you think? Many. The job is getting too much for me, in fact. I need to recruit.”

“I will ask you not to go in there unless I say. Is that clear?”

“Unless you say?”

“Yes.”

“Does my presence in the woman’s apartment make you uncomfortable? Jenny Malinse, this is the woman we are talking about, correct?”

“You know damned well.”

“I don’t remember telling you that you had sole access to those cameras.”

“Don’t I?” This hadn’t occurred to me. Had he sold the address to others? Did he log on regularly himself? How could I know? What had I paid for?

“What good would it do you to know? Shall I say yes? All right, yes. You are the only one to have ever logged on to that web site.”

“I hope so, Dr. Siekel.”

“We aim to make our customers happy, Dr. Humphrey. Everything I do, I do for your greater happiness as a customer. I prefer to think of our relationship as an ever evolving one. New things come out daily. Weekly. There are many new opportunities to be taken advantage of. I can keep you updated.”

“No. I don’t need more. You’ve done enough. I don’t want to be updated.”

“I have work to do. You might change your mind. Here, take a flyer. My information is on it if you have lost it. I am expanding my premises, you see.” He held a flyer to my face. It read

Sale Items
Dr. Siekel’s Optical Gear and Privacy Management
Communication To The World
visit us at www.siekelshop.com
Bring this flyer for 10% discount at our NEW Premises
See Us To See It All
We Never Stop Getting Bigger
Bringing YOU more

And there he was, underneath this advertisement, with his ridiculous grin and bald head. His hands were held out in an obscene embrace. Superimposed on his figure was a color globe of the world. Under the globe read simply “Siekel’s Covers The World.” I tore the paper from his hand, crumpled it and threw it in the gutter. “I’m telling you. Stay out of her apartment.”

“I can remove the cameras whenever you want.”

“Leave them there.”

“If you ever see me there again, I somehow doubt you’ll do anything about it. I’m not interested in hurting people. I’d be more worried about my customers than me. I’m just a businessman. I sell technological apparatus.”

He turned, put the flyers under his arm, and began walking briskly away from me. “Don’t approach me again, Dr. Humphrey. I have business to do. I’ll be at it all night. I don’t have time for you now.”

What could I do? I watched him weave in among the crowds, handing out flyers, bowing and smiling, moving away. Soon he was a dark form with a grotesque pale head a street away and then he was gone. I turned and began the walk back to my apartment. I had a guest arriving, after all.

* * * *

Jenny was home by the time I returned. I stood in front of the monitor, watching her, thinking that at any moment Stella would arrive.

I briefly considered switching Jenny off. My cameras were an invitation to Siekel, after all. Could I accept Siekel’s word that Jenny was safe? What about the others who might be watching her with me – was she safe from them, too? And what could I do to stop Siekel, without incriminating myself? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

In fact, knowing that there might possibly be others watching only made keeping track of Jenny more exciting, somehow.

Jenny seemed in a terrific rush, agitated, looking around the apartment carefully before setting her things down and stripping quickly and efficiently. I panned both cameras, split the screen,

watched her pad naked into the bedroom, more fascinated by the speed of her disrobing, the angles of the camera annoying unsensual, though she seemed to pause, naked, in her room, flat footed, her knees pointed inward a pit, her calves too heavy. Funny how popular representations of women never focus on the calves – there is something annoying about a woman’s calves – so we dress them away, put them in high heels. She walked around the apartment looking for a change of clothing. I paused, looked up from my computer and out the window, saw her briefly, a shadow in her room, unnoticeable without the extra intelligence of the cameras.

What became clear to me as I sat at the desk was that Jenny was actually cleaning up the apartment. That meant she was stuffing clothes into the small bin in the bedroom, she was crawling under the bed – still naked – and taking other articles of clothing, as well as a pizza box and a bunch of magazines from under there and a sweatshirt and two CD cases, and arranging and straightening up the room. She did not go so far as to vacuum but she did slip on a pair of men’s boxer shorts and walk into the kitchen, drew a sink full of soapy suds and plunked pots and pans and the piles of plates into it scrubbed it all, placed everything on her folding hide-a-rack which she had only bought a week before this. I could not see but could easily imagine the dripping water from the plates to the countertop.

Watching her ready the apartment for some visitor was by far the most interesting and arousing thing I had ever seen her do. The Greek amphorae we had upstairs at the museum, on the AD level [Ancient Civilizations: the Niccalsetti/Fox Collection] was a good collection and one of the hallmarks of the pieces that have been collected over the years is the fact that the ancient Greek style of pornography did find the working woman to be attractive and alluring. The drawing of water (I thought of this while she poured water from the sink and squeezed a yellow bottle of soap into it for the second time), the woman carrying wood, or carrying amphora (I thought of this as she carried pots to the counter, readying them for the sink), or the sewing woman, the mending woman, the

weaving woman, these things are all staples of Greek amphora dating back to the fourth century BC. Was there some kind of dormant luxury in watching a woman work, while one rested or contemplated? In the ancient Greek mindset, was there some kind of home and hearth feeling about women that made a man want to see her at the most mundane activities of any age? This I do not know but I watched as she made her way through her dishes, cleaned the counters, left the piles to dry and moved back to the bedroom

She didn't have a vacuum. She did have a quick swipe at the rug with a carpet brush, an old one that almost certainly came with the apartment. I watched, then lifted my hand, moved the icon to the clock on the computer. 10:50. There was no time for me to be ready for the meeting at the museum and already I was justifying my absence to myself. I told myself that I had already gone so far as to speak to France. I had an evening meeting lined up already that was going to be only half-social. Therefore, my presence at meetings at the Niccalsetti Museum was counter-productive.

I realized how irresponsible I was being. And, more than that, the very mundaneness of what was distracting me from a job I had worked at for decades, for a position that was coveted by many of the people at the museum (not least of these, Leo), was far from justifiable. I was not being torn away from my duties by the siren call of nature I was watching woman in a dingy, anonymous bachelor apartment that repeats itself across the United States a million times do housework! And yet, and yet, and yet. I believed I owed her something. I felt I should send her a bouquet of flowers to brighten the sunny spot where she ate and to make the apartment more inviting. Or perhaps buy her a proper vacuum, or send some prints over from the museum to brighten the walls.

The flowers were not a bad idea, I thought.

The idea appealed to me on many levels. It appealed to me because it was something I could do for her, a surprise that I could watch unfold. It was in many ways a gesture of goodwill. I looked on my desk, found my wallet, fished out my American Express and picked up the phone, still

watching her cleaning, and dialed information, asked for flower shops and was told I could not be recommended a shop, so I said Niccalsetti Florists and a recorded voice gave me the number and informed me that for fifty cents more I could be connected. I paid the fifty cents by pressing one, waited for the connection. A young woman, bored and brusque, picked up.

“ ’Calsetti Florist.”

“Hello, I’d like to send a bunch of flowers to a friend of mine.”

“Roses? We have special today on pink roses.”

“No. Lilies and baby’s breath.”

“No lilies. Wait, hang on, no, OK, we got some, how many you want, it’s like eleven bucks for six.”

“12.”

“You buy fifteen we give you a standing vase.” As if there was such a thing as a supine vase.

“The standing vase for fifteen, please.”

“OK. What’s it going to say on the card?”

“I get a card with that?”

“It’s like a dollar extra.”

“All right. Wait a moment. Let me think. Say, ‘Herewith a bunch of other men’s flowers, my own only the string that ties them together.’”

“Herewith?”

“Yes.”

“Herewith a bunch of flowers for other men?”

“No.” I repeated the phrase from Montaigne but did not attribute it.

“So you want some string with this? It’s kind of irregular for string to come in a bunch like this, because it comes in a standing vase.”

“No. No string, the vase will be fine.”

“OK.”

We went through the quote four times. I offered to fax it to her but she finally got it right.

“When is someone going to be home for collection? My guy goes out again at three.”

I gave the address.

“Way up north like that? Jeez. Why’d you call us, there’s like six florists up there and all?”

Listen, it will be about a six o’clock delivery. Is that OK?”

Stella wasn’t due until seven. “Yes. That’s fine.” I called out my credit card number – twice – and sat by the window, waiting for the evening to come.

CHAPTER 14

By seven I had dressed and was ready for Stella's arrival. I had begun the preemptory cooking, a fillet, spiked with garlic, with a gravy, cooked at 350F, though I would not turn on the fillet until later, after we had a few drinks. It had grown colder and darker outside, a cold that could prepare the city for snow or for rain. The rashness of my call to the florist filled me with the conflicting feelings of idiocy and excitement. I sat in my easy chair, beside the computer, reading, drinking a half glass of Merlot, my eyes flicking from the computer screen to the window, as Jenny prepared for her own evening, watching the television while she dutifully cleaned her much smaller apartment. I badly wanted the flowers to arrive before Stella came here, I badly wanted her guest to arrive as well. In fact, I regretted inviting Stella over but the business of the museum could not longer wait and if things were as bad back there as Leo had outlined – and I did not doubt that they were, then I would far more rather arrive there with the coup of the Tapestry and the envy of Fleuron than empty handed and distracted. Sitting at the chair, my legs crossed, reading a first edition manual of Tapestries, printed in 1876 in England, with stiff plates and cut pages outlining the best of the European Tapestries, the book entitled, simply, *Tapestries of Great Value, 1400-1800*, I wished that I did not have any responsibilities outside of this apartment.

Looking back upon what happened next, I realize I should have let this all go. I should have snapped off the computer and shut the blinds and lived my life.

Jenny looked particularly attractive that night. Her apartment was lit partly by candles. The light sensors on the cameras and the infra-red adjustments I had made offered up fake light from memory to illuminate what was dark. But I could no longer truly see Jenny, the light had gone that bad. As I tried to focus in on her I wondered, strangely, if I had ever truly been able to see her face? Even when I drew a full range close up of her while crouching forward in my chair and manipulating the mouse the image was distorted, full of the squares and pixels that made up the computer's representation of the person.

The doorbell rang.

Jenny was still waiting for her guests, the flowers had not arrived. I remained online, walked through the apartment, composed myself, put my hand on the knob, took a breath and then grabbed the knob firmly and pulled open the door.

Stella had gotten fairly dressed up, had brought along champagne in a long leather picnic bag. She was wearing dark cream slacks, a matching jacket, blouse. She was wearing pearls and two heavy gold ropes around her wrists.

"God, this is a depressing neighborhood."

"Welcome."

"Drinks first, I was very good but cocktail hour will come to a close if we wait so start mixing, Reginald. And get this bottle on ice." She thrust the leather sleeve of champagne in my hands and followed me to the counter area, sat down to watch as I thrust the bottle into the ice container in the freezer and took two glasses from the middle shelf, pushed ice cubes into each glass. I laid out a handle of Johnnie Walker and a fifth of Gilbey's Gin. I poured us each a double – a hefty double, and took one of my conservative green cocktail napkins left over from last Christmas, slipped it under the lowball and set it in front of her.

"What's the matter, Reginald. You're distracted."

I turned on the oven. “Not so. Not at all. Constant harassment from the office.”

“Don’t be harassed just yet, Mister. I’ve come to harass you. I’ve a bone to pick with you – the Musée des Tapisseries emailed me this morning, something about some agreement – tentative, of course – that might be in the offing? So what’s your game, Reg?”

I sipped my drink, felt it cool and reassuring in my hand. Stella’s presence seemed almost too real, she seemed to dominate my kitchen, her voice louder than I had ever remembered. She clicked open her small clutch and dug through absently looking for a cigarette. “Well?” she said, arching her eyebrows.

“Dinner first. There won’t be any plans made against your will. Whatever my colleagues in France have said has little to nothing to do with me.”

“I like the way you think. Are you trying a little soft sell, Raymond?”

“Perhaps.”

“There might be hope for you yet.”

We finished our drinks and I almost immediately felt drunk. I opened the wine and checked on the steak, then opened the leaves to my frying pan steamer. She chatted with me about the museum, her collection, her social life, which, frankly, made me feel almost inadequate. It was amazing that a woman like Stella could keep up the pace. Tidbits of gossip, though they lacked the same meaning to me as I did not move in her circles. That alone, I knew, made me more attractive to her, a secret wooer of Tapestries. I poured her a glass of wine and set it next to her scotch, and excused myself, walked down the hall to the bathroom – powder room, as it had once been called – relieved myself, looking to my side at the long mirror front of the sink, examining my face for drunkenness, grinning at the reflection. I zipped, drank another glass of water and lightly splashed my face after washing my hands, then buried my eyes in a hand towel for a moment. I looked up, and

noted with alarm the time. The flowers must have been there at Jenny's. I grinned, opened the door to the powder room, walked into the den and jiggled the mouse.

"Reginald?" Stella's voice. "Did I hear you come out of there? I was just thinking that your apartment really doesn't have a masculine feel to it – it's too damn neat."

"I'll be out there soon, I left something on in here, Stella."

"Sitting here makes me want to whip on an apron and cook. What a great kitchen for the city. God."

I couldn't tell at first if the flowers had come. I panned in and out of the living area until, yes, there they were, on the counter before the kitchenette, a cheap vase with the flowers right there. Jenny was not in sight. I switched to the bedroom and saw a line under the bathroom, switched into the bathroom and saw her standing in front of the mirror, pushing her hair high up on her head. I followed her out of the room, switched cameras, watched her linger at the flowers, finger the card, and then pause, hearing something, then answer the door.

"Reg? Where are you? Is this your den? Why the heck are you standing there in the dark?"

I hid the camera application, switched on the screen saver, my hands almost immobilized, turned to face Stella, who was a dark silhouette in the door, smoking. "I left the computer on and can't get it to switch off."

"Leave it on. You're cooking, remember? God, what a nice view of the city – I didn't realize! Here in the dark you really do see the lights – all the way to the river. Niccalsetti at night isn't bad."

I could see straight into Jenny's apartment, see her admitting someone, the man from before, in a dark coat. I stood before the window, shielding Stella's view, though I realized even then that it would be unlikely Stella would notice just Jenny's apartment, there were many, many apartments open to the night now, which was abundantly clear. She walked to the window and looked out. "It's a nice place to work. Sitting here, you'd never feel lonely, would you?"

“No. That is certainly true.”

Stella was standing here in the dark with me, purposefully not moving back into the light, no longer urging me back into the more sociable, neutral confines of the kitchen. The long leather couch lay right behind my knees. I looked past Stella and saw the man holding the flowers, crossing the room with them, a black, hulking form with the multicolored hues of the flowers in their standing vase. Stella seemed inexplicably closer to me now, just as I realized that the man was moving quickly, there was some kind of confrontation going on in the room, the two were standing at opposite sides of the small living area in Jenny’s room.

“Reginald, do you want to put dinner off?”

“No. Not at all. Follow me.” My voice seemed to break a spell, it was far too loud for the occasion. “More drinks are to be served in the dining room. Let’s leave the world of computers for one moment, shall we?”

She paused, drank, puffed her cigarette. “Go ahead. I will follow you.”

There was a commotion going on in there, some kind of argument, and it dawned on me that the new stranger would not appreciate my sending her flowers. It was further obvious to me that I had created this disturbance from afar, that the watcher could, by a mere pressing of buttons, the recruitment of others over the phone (and what could be easier), make profound changes in the life of another. It was a feeling that filled me with cheerful good humor. If they were arguing, then I had caused the argument – I had made an appearance in her life in the form of a few dollars worth of flowers and a “standing vase”. I led Stella back into the kitchen and topped up her drink, plunked more ice into the cup, topped up my own and polish half of it off. There could be no way the new stranger would get to the bottom of the mystery of the flowers, he would wonder who sent them, who had the propriety over Jenny to send flowers and intrude upon his private moments with her. It was a feeling just beyond the feeling of mischief.

The heat of the kitchen cheered me even more, and what I cooked – a julienne of vegetable, steak, twice baked potatoes and a light gravy, a salad which was now chilling in the refrigerator, the whole meal seemed to me to be a sure success. Stella even helped me cook, drink in hand: she passed me seasoning for the steak, seasonings for the potatoes, even unwrapped and grated a small block of sharp cheddar cheese. We opened a bottle of wine and proceeded to get somewhat drunk even before the dinner started.

By the time we had set the table, lit the candles, laid out the food, we had drunk half a bottle of decent Chardonnay. We sat across from one another like chess players, and I poured us new wine, opened another and set it on the table. Stella's movements had become a bit slower, more calculated, compensating for the alcohol. Her eyes shone. She looked me over and said, "Reginald, I believe you are trying to get me drunk."

I toasted her. "Dig in."

"This is marvelous. Who knew you could cook?"

"Flattery is nothing to a chef. I mean to talk business. Is the cheese on the salad good?"

"Yes. Business. Go to it. Give me your best pitch."

"*Woman with Swan*. To be shared between the Niccalsetti Museum and the Musée des Tapisseries in France. Ah, do not reply, I am in mid-spiel."

"I should not eat potatoes. They are murder on the figure."

"Nonsense. Listen. A tax free holding for the museum that transfers into our ownership with a tax break to you in the next year, the tapestry displayed in Angers for six months before being shipped back here."

"I'm listening."

“Fleuron does the accounting. I would say we can begin at a valuation of a million, that should get you a large deduction, the cash value vouched for in France, of course, giving you a donator’s deduction and credit for an overseas cash donation.”

“Hard to resist, the damned thing smells awful, like old tombs.”

“Before I go on, let me point out that that steak you are just now carving into is choice meat. Not prime, choice, from a local Swiss butcher. The cows drank only from local springs and ate fresh grain every day, they were never given steroids, they were never abused in anyway and they went to their deaths in a slaughterhouse that played Mozart to them before they went to their final reward so as to limit the stress the animals would suffer, making the meat that much more tender. It is cooked in a light olive oil I import by the can from Sicily, each can comes separately.”

“Virgin olive oil?”

“Yes. Do you enjoy it?”

Stella closed her eyes in feigned bliss, nodded.

“We are the last of the meat eating, smoking, drinking lovers of fine art and history, Stella. We do not keep great art for ourselves but display it for the benefit of those few others like us and for our greater tax benefit and so we may keep a fine relationship with our friends overseas, who have only admiration for you.”

“Now you are drunk. You slurred the final two words there Reginald.”

“I can have this arranged upon a casual agreement from you.”

“Those are two very full glasses of white wine you just poured, Reginald. I’m noticing this.”

“This is the best offer.”

“I haven’t even tried dessert yet though it must be something.”

“Dessert is something you will certainly like.”

“Crepes Suzette. Which I now realize I have never had in the United States.”

“The chocolate and orange sauce as mailed to me a year ago from a client in France. But wait.” I stood, went back into the kitchen, a little wobbly on my feet, held on to the counter for balance before looking into the bottom cupboards for a long, white linen chef’s hat that I had bought downtown with Agatha ten years before. I placed it on my head and she clapped and laughed.

“Marvelous. You MUST be drunk.”

I wrapped the white chef’s apron around my body and reached over the counter for the wine-glass, drank some and then remembered Stella’s champagne. I sat it on the counter, popped the cork.

“Drink up so we can celebrate.”

“I’m still thinking about what else I can get out of you.”

It would be best to reiterate that I was getting drunk, but Stella was drunker than I was, she was matching me drink for drink and had scotch on top of that. The problem I faced, of course, was that making crepes suzette while intoxicated was quite simply dangerous. I had lain out the ingredients, the fine chocolate (I melted this in the microwave, cut up in chunks and then stirred in a small white jug, the orange sauce from France, in its own matching jug, the delicate pancake batter, the cognac. I had a real alcohol flame for the frying pan I was using, which was in fact a large omelet pan but suited to my purposes. I wheeled the entire thing out on a drinks service tray, and warmed the pan while I made a show of stirring the batter. I lined up the Cognac and Grand Marnier before me.

“Stella, do you know where crepes suzette was invented?”

She shook her head, lit a cigarette, inhaled it.

“The Hotel de Paris, in Monte Carlo.”

“A lovely place. I thought this was a Parisian dish.”

“No, no. Let me illustrate the story, if you will, by creating crepes Suzette, and reenacting a fateful day in culinary history. Imagine the back of the kitchen, if you will, in 1890, when Monte Carlo could claim a much more regal lineage than today.”

“Today it is absolutely overrun by movie stars, dope dealers and ragamuffins.”

“It isn’t all that bad.”

“Have you been recently, my dear?”

“Of course. I was there to pry this secret recipe from the great-grand nephew of Henri Charpentier, who still works in that kitchen of that grand old hotel.”

“Grand it is.”

I laid out the crepe mixture which I had prepared that morning and the frying pan. I heated the pan and then poured the crepes as I went on. “Henri’s patron was Albert, Prince of Wales. He was making a special dessert for the prince after making a perfect crêpe ... much like this one. He spread the orange sauce, which in fact is not complicated, it is only orange juice and sugar with some lemon., this cooks easily and smells wonderful, very light, very fruity, am I correct?”

“Yes, divine.”

“You then fold the crepes on the hot chafing dish like so, like so, and like this, now this is where our friend Henri had an accident. He had placed his cordials beside the chafing dish, right beside the flame, and spilled them creating a fire. Henri, thinking his crepes were ruined, plunged them into the tray of orange sauce and then poured the cordials into the sauce itself and lit it, making what would have been an embarrassing accident into a display of fire and gourmet extravagance.

I stood back, folded the crepes into triangles, placed them on the tray, poured Grand Marnier and Cognac in two opposing swirls and pulled a lighter from my pocket. I applied the flame to the dessert and it ignited quicker than I expected, with a whispering woof. I jumped back, feeling the flame brush my face then recede, though it kept on at a blue burn. Stella was clapping throughout

this. I had been standing too close to the flames, a few inches more and I would have been caught.

The room seemed very hot and there was a tinge of smoke in the air.

I had forgotten dessert plates. I turned, grabbed two of them from the shelf, not the two good dessert plates but cheap plates, placed them down in front of each place and slid a hot crepe upon each one. The room smelt of caramelized sugar, oranges and Grand Marnier. I held the melted chocolate above her plate, and made a quick swirl beside the crepe, did the same to mine, and sat down. I was slightly out of breath and my temples were throbbing.

“I am now thoroughly impressed.”

“The dessert, borne of accident, is now perhaps one of the best known in the world.”

She tasted it, her eyes widened, she fanned her lips. “My god, that is hot.”

“You have cold champagne in front of you.”

She drank. I finished the dessert and stood, grinning. Stella seemed almost unnaturally attractive tonight. It was as if she gave off a glow, she had an ability to make me feel as if it were the two of us alone again, cloistered against the world. I poured the champagne and flicked off the kitchen lights, leaving us only candlelight. I returned to the table, and sat and then suddenly found myself gripping the end of the table, still grinning, telling her more about that fateful night over a hundred years ago, but feeling that awful feeling of disappearing again, feeling as if there was a slight but intense pressure bearing down on me. The feeling intensified, and my voice trailed off and I looked in vain on the table for water.

“Reg, what’s wrong?”

I stood once more, ran my fingers over my neck, feeling a pulse beating, beating. “I’m sorry, Stella, I—”

“Has this all gone to your head?” She stood up, concerned.

“No. Give me a moment, the heat from the crepes seems to have gotten me.”

She came around the side of the table, took my arm, and for a moment I felt old, almost feeble, then felt the warmth of the night coming back to me, my strength returning. The hollow feeling of the hotel had returned once again but I was beating it now, I knew where I was. I was not alone. I took her arm, straightened, felt another strength I had missed, a strength that came from having another human being close, a friend. I stood by the window, finally leaned my shoulder against it. From here we could not see Jenny's building, instead could see over the Midtown Bank building to the river. I asked her for a cigarette and she said, "Yes, yes, how rude," and she went to the table, got one, poured herself another glass of wine and returned to me, held a lighter while I lit it. I breathed in, feeling more and more foolish, yet more and more at peace.

"I feel as if I'm in a dream, Stella."

"You're overdoing it with all this stuff and we've been drinking like sailors straight on since I got here."

But I was in a period of lucidity. I felt dead sober, though I knew she was partly right, drinking was bringing on these spells more and more frequently.

"Do you want to lie down?"

"No, I'm—"

"Don't make me explain myself. If you keep plying me with booze I won't be good for anything later."

"Yes. Yes, in fact I do."

"Good. Come on. Show me your bedroom, Reg, and wipe that sheepish grin off your face."

And so, in mutual agreement, I showed her my bedroom. She blew out the candles as we passed the table. I had left the light on in the bathroom: it was bright, it shone into the room. "Give me a second," she said, "You take a seat and relax."

She disappeared into the bathroom. It occurred to me, vaguely, that Stella seemed almost used to orchestrating her own seductions, which made the end of this night seem preordained. I loosened my shirt, kicked off my shoes, and the sudden rush of cool air on my feet made me feel ridiculous as I put my feet up on the bed. Lying there I felt completely alone, I asked myself why I was doing this. I felt the bottom fall out of my life, as if I was falling. A cold chill crept along the floor, perhaps from the window. I hugged my shoulders and felt strangely as if I were preparing to put on a performance or a lecture for someone else's benefit. I unbuttoned my shirt deliberately, frowning to myself in concentration. The light went out in the bathroom, and Stella came into the room wrapped in my baggy seersucker robe, her hair unpinned. She was smiling at me and I realized that she too was nervous, that both of us had been operating our relationship on bravado and humor. I grinned at her and waited to feel as if I had company but the feeling did not come. She sat down on the edge of the bed – Agatha's – looked at the clock, then reached over and switched the light off beside me, plunging us in a sudden darkness and she sat there waiting for our eyes to adjust to the dark. The dark itself was heavy and having her near me, in silence, gave this act a formal, almost funeral air, as if we were reluctantly doing something we shouldn't, something illegal. I raised my hand, touched her shoulder and she seemed to slump, to grow smaller in the robe. Then she leaned back against my stomach, I touched her hair gently, brittle hair, but lush and full. She let the robe fall open and I traced my finger down her throat, to her breasts, which were surprisingly full and large, her nipples erect. I felt her sigh in contentment.

“You are a hell of a cook, Reginald.”

She sat up, shrugged off the robe and I turned to face her and she leaned towards me, supporting herself on one arm, her breasts swaying gently. I could sense her wicked smile.

“There's one more thing I want before I turn over the tapestry to you, Reginald.”

“Tell me.”

“Oh, I plan to. I do.”

CHAPTER 15

I awoke later, and glanced at the blue flickering numbers of the bedside clock. 1:00 a.m. I had slept only a little while but I was desperately thirsty and already aching. Stella slept with her back towards me, wearing an oversized pajama top I had found for her when we finally decided to sleep. I lay looking at her, grinning, more satisfied with myself than I had been for months. I feeling of utter contentment settled over me. I stood, naked, stretched, and came close to pounding my chest in a quick exultation. I walked barefoot and naked from the room to the kitchen where I smelt the old crepes suzette, the smoke from the burned cordials and the underlying, stuffy scent of burnt out candles. I moved stealthily through the dark, felt the cold tiles under my feet as I entered the kitchen area, and bent, animal-like, under the faucet, drinking so that the water ran down my neck and chin, slurping the water in gulps until I could not breathe, then rested, my palms splayed on the counter, water dripping from my lips over the empty ice tray sitting in a pool of water in the sink. I wiped my mouth with my wrist and ran my fingers through my hair.

I went to the office, flicked on the computer and glanced nearsightedly over the screen towards Jenny's apartment. I saw nothing. I sat on the cool leather chair, my skin stuck to it as I panned in the cameras, finding movement in the kitchenette area. The two of them were up. The man was in his jeans and T-shirt, his jacket over the end of the counter. Jenny was wrapped in what

looked like a robe and they were screaming something. I had hoped I would find them entwined but it was not to be, they had finished and he was leaving her.

Sitting in the dark I realized that I was now saying goodbye to Jenny. I no longer needed her, I felt as if I was beginning a new life, a life without solitude, a life that would be full or at least more full than it had been in the past. I even thought of disconnecting the program, or perhaps, and this was more likely, simply saving that web page and saving myself the option of being able to peruse Jenny's apartment for old times sake every so often, to keep a tab on her so to speak. And what of Siekel? The entire affair had gone too far. I wanted not only to say goodbye to her, but to have the cameras removed, even if it meant sending an anonymous message to her and warning her that she was being watched, to check her shower, her cube clock, her smoke detector and thermostat and microwave. I still felt that possessive of her and watching the two of them argue on screen (I could not even make out their forms in the room, I needed my glasses for that), filled me with a sense of regret.

He pushed her. She fell, awkwardly, into the kitchenette, her hands flailing out, grasping first for him and then for the wall. She fell to the floor hard, her hand flying to the back of her head, her face contorting with pain, then tears.

The man was unsure of what to do. He first attempted to scream at her again, then bent over her while she, in a red faced rage, pushed at his clothes, holding the back of her head.

I watched his face relax, as if something had been decided. He clenched a fist, reared back and hit her with a hard, solid blow right to the stomach. She smashed backwards into the kitchenette, the back of her head slamming into the cupboards above her, her eyes fluttering. He stepped gingerly over her, he stepped away as she scabbled on the smooth linoleum floor. He kicked her, hard, high up, near her breasts, then methodically kicked her throat, then her shoulder. Punching downward, flexing his knees for leverage, he smacked her upper arm and her neck as if punishing an animal.

Jenny's eyes were wide. She covered her face from the blows but he seemed intent upon destroying her body. He stood back, turned his back to her, then spun around as if remembering a point he had to make one last time. He brought his heel down into her groin. The woman on the floor reared back, bashing the back of her head and then vomited from pain, her hands folding between her legs. The man looked down at her, his chest heaving, and then calmly opened one of the drawers in the kitchenette and brought from it a small, sharp paring knife.

I watched all this hardly breathing. I saved it all. I looked on with curiosity, as if watching two small animals fighting in a pen.

He knelt as if he were very tired and at prayer. He held the knife close to her eyes. He did not speak, he merely turned it back and forth, hypnotizing her with the flashing blade, which her frantic eyes followed. He drew it down between her robe. It reached the resistance of the belt, then the robe fell apart. He calmly lay the flat of the knife against her stomach, running it upwards, pausing below her breasts. She moved her mouth as if to say something and he clenched his other fist and brought it down into her stomach the way a baker might knead a stiff mound of dough. She squirmed beneath the fist.

He turned the blade of the knife into her, slicing her gently, the tentative cutting of a surgeon that drew a line over her body.

Jenny did not move or scream but watched the cutting knife as he pulled it away, rested it below her left breast, turned it, and cut again. This time blood trickled under her arm. He lifted the knife from her splayed body and awkwardly squatted over her pubis. He pressed the end of the knife just over her crotch, drew blood again, and stood. Jenny did not move or touch the three wounds upon her body. She turned her face slightly to see him better. He dropped the knife carelessly into the sink and squatted over her again. He rested his fingers upon her lowermost wound, then brought his fingers to his lips and then brought them to hers, and I saw her taste her own blood. He smiled

and pressed the wound again, smearing the blood across her abdomen where the stream from the high cuts had gently meandered. He stood, examined her as if making certain she would live and confirming something he had long suspected about her. He stepped backwards, turned his back to the woman on the floor. Jenny was pushing herself up against the cupboards, wincing. The man opened a drawer over her head, extracted a pile of dishtowels, dropped them on her, and she carefully applied them to her wounds. He squatted next to her, took her face in her hands, looking at it as if it were something fragile delicate, of immense value. He kissed her lips. Jenny began to cry. He held her tenderly, then began to methodically daub her wounds while she looked on. She had ceased to struggle against him and he had ceased to act as any kind of menace. I felt as if I had watched some sort of dangerous ritual played out, a bleeding, a rite of passage.

I had been standing throughout the entire thing.

I believe I had expected to see Jenny die. I had prepared myself to watch her death on screen, and realizing that it was not to be I felt a rush of exhilaration, followed by something else. Disappointment. I had no means of telling if tragedy had been narrowly averted or if the two of them were bound in blood in some secret pact. Or both.

I also had begun to wonder if Jenny's death would truly have been a tragedy to me or something else. A kind of entertainment or something else. A confirmation.

I picked up the phone. I dialed in a number. The doorman of Jenny's building picked up, his voice too alert as if he had been caught sleeping and was now feigning watchfulness.

"On the eighth floor. Ms. Jenny Malinses's apartment. There is a fight, a woman is screaming. I think she's in trouble. Use your key."

"Who's this?" I could hear him standing, the chair he was sitting in scraped the floor.

"Go. There might be very little time."

I heard stirring in the living area of my house. The padding feet of Stella, walking through the apartment, unsure of herself in the dark.

I hung up. Switched off the computer.

“Reg?” Her voice sounded older, confused and I realized I must have looked ridiculous, sitting there naked in the desk chair. I squinted through the dark at the bright lights shining in Jenny’s room. Then walked easily through the den towards Stella, who had slipped on my robe once again.

“Reg? Why the hell are you up?” Stella stood, blinking helplessly at me in the kitchen. My throat was dry, my voice croaked when I spoke. “It’s nothing, honey, nothing.”

“Are you *working*, for god’s sake—”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“You’re a strange man, Reginald. A very strange person. Come to bed. God, I feel terrible.”

“I’ll meet you back there.”

She waited.

“All right. I’m coming.”

She waited until I was standing in the hallway, then looked up at me. “What’s so important?”

“Nothing.” I had seen enough. I felt as if my body were purging a debilitating disease.

“Look at me. Look at me. I don’t know what’s been happening to you, Reg. For the first time in months you’ve been your old self. You’ve been someone I can relate to.”

“I know. I’ve been very busy.”

“We’re all busy. We each had people in our lives and we were busy then, too.”

“I know.”

“I live in an empty house, Reg. And I don’t know about you, kiddo, but I don’t like it.”

“Stella, I know—”

“And I’m not sure I’d like anyone who did. You know what I’m saying?”

“I think so.”

“There’s people who get used to it. Living alone. They let it happen. They find other ways to amuse themselves. Jesus, Reginald, it used to be a world where people saw each other. Made some kind of effort. You spent months in here, doing what?”

I started to walk past her. “I don’t know. Working.”

“Hell, Reg. Nobody works that hard. Not even you. You never really struck me as a hard worker anyway. Just a responsible guy.”

“I know it. I’m sorry.”

“I’m going home tomorrow. I’m going back to a big house and I’m going to sit there and if you don’t call me, right away, I’m going to buy your fucking museum and turn it into a circus.”

“Let the years free? Do it.”

“Yes. Stop collecting them, Reg. Start living ‘em. Forget what people leave behind for you, Reg. We still have time. At least I think we do.”

* * * *

We lay down together. As I lay there I felt the tension over my heart lessen. I felt as if I could breathe, once more, one last time. I felt the muscles that made up the fist of my heart relax. Lying there I opened my eyes in the darkness and believed I might have turned young again. I lay there like a child, my hands slightly curled, breathing like a child in quick breaths. This was right, I thought. Two people lying next to each other. Two real lives.

My body became lighter, as if a fever had begun to pass. I slept only to awake with a start hours later, perhaps minutes later, and to slide out of bed one last time, walk to my den and stand in the window. There was movement in there. Jenny, wrapped in white, standing close to her own window, her hand against the glass as if she was testing the air on the other side. There was only a dim light on in the apartment, the orange light over the stove, I suspected. I stood facing her, the early morning contemplation of a stranger, that's all. Finally she walked away from the window. I went back to my room, sat in the chair at the foot of my bed for a minute. Stella's breath hitched, its cadence quickened only half a heartbeat, just enough to make me sure she was emerging briefly to wakefulness.

"Get your skinny ass in bed, buster."

I obliged.

Stella woke early the next morning, and dressed after using my shower. I made her breakfast and we shared a romantic moment together sitting in the kitchen. The loneliness of my life was coming to a close. I decided I would wipe out the computer files from the computer that had anything to do with Jenny Malinse.

Early that morning I had reached for Stella's hand. We had lain there, fingers touching until dawn, when I finally dropped off to sleep. Stella, my friend, my confidant, my supporter and now my lover, was enough for me. Making her breakfast, I realized this is how it should be: two friends, eating, drinking together, the insanity and the confusion of other worlds behind closed doors, permanently. I had given up on loneliness.

Would Stella and I get married? I was not sure if two people as used to their own company could form that perfect union, but I was no longer interested in perfection. Perhaps I could hold on to this office in Niccalsetti. Perhaps I would come out to Stella's mansion, to her maids and servants

and dinners and cars and do my work in peace. I deserved it, after all. I was a man whom people trusted.

Stella left me after breakfast, left me to clean up, pack my briefcase. I avoided the den altogether. I hummed to myself and when I returned to our unmade bed I smiled as I straightened the sheets, smelled the scent of another human being once again. I felt as if I was recovering from a long illness, a sickness that had cloistered me with my job and hobbies and musings over a woman half my age. I was, after all, a romantic at heart.

I stood alone in my room and suddenly felt that awful feeling of disappearing come over me, and then a sickness. I sat down and realized what was coming over me was grief. I closed my eyes and realized that I no longer cared about Jenny, or about her, or what happened to her. I was letting her go, slamming her away in my mind. I was embracing my present and whatever future I still had and deserved to get. I felt weak and then sick, and then looked around the quiet apartment as if it were not my own but that of some strange man from my past, some former acquaintance. This was the apartment of a man who was to lead the life he was meant to lead. There would never be a clue as to his private and peculiar obsession with a child in another strange room. I wondered how it could be possible. How a man could have spent months in the grip of a gentle and parochial madness when security and happiness were so close at hand – literally within his touch?

I slipped on a red paisley silk tie (a gift from Stella) and my suit coat. I buffed my shoes. I was ready to face the museum, to return to my subterranean office and take control of my life once again. The apartment seemed bathed in that peculiar city sunlight that warmed the insides of buildings but not the streets. I slipped out the door, took the elevator down to the bottom floor and walked out to my long journey up to the museum. I passed Jenny's building without a glance

Most of Niccalsetti was already at the office. There were only a few people lingering on the streets, enjoying the afternoon sun peeping through the buildings. I walked in the center of the

sidewalk thinking I would make a note to call Stella immediately and to call the Niccalsetti Florists and send her a dozen roses. Champagne, even.

As I headed down the avenue towards the museum I saw a man ahead of me, in a black leather jacket. Jenny's torturer, walking along idly, his hands stuffed in his pockets, looking down at his feet. I crossed the street. He was unshaven, jowly looking, older than I would have guessed. His hair was tousled, unkempt and flipped up now and again in the wind. I had to slow my pace on the other sidewalk so as not to pass him. He squared his shoulders into the wind, sighed, looked up. He looked like a man who had too much drink the night before, which was entirely possible. He was well built and looked like an ex-athlete but now he looked deflated, weakened. He moved along at a steady gait making for the entrance to the Niccalsetti Subway on the corner of Killian and Delaware.

The ability to cause pain does not show on a person. I looked at him and believed that one's crimes must cause some kind of deformity, that perhaps inside this man was something twisted and rotten, something awful. If that was so then there was something almost equally deformed inside of me, I who had stood by and watched him inflict his pain. My god, I had gone to sleep afterwards!

I stopped walking entirely when he went down the stairs to the subway. I stood on my side of the road, motionless, looking at the dark entrance to the tunnels beneath the road. The wind suddenly seemed much colder. What was I to do to the man? What could I say that would not give me away?

He had hurt her while I looked on. *What if he had killed her?* Would I have been culpable? Could I ever have found him again, even if I wanted to? I doubted it.

I crossed the street with no plan formed in my mind, only the knowledge that I had to do something. I went down the stairs, bought a token from the bored uniformed person sitting in a booth by the turnstiles – a fat, ruddy faced woman crammed into the tiny room with a naked lightbulb overhead reading a slim romance volume – something Jenny would eschew in favor

something fatter, more luscious. I shoved two quarters under the Plexiglas and the collector looked up nearsightedly and pushed a hollow token into the wooden depression meant for coins, then returned to her novel. I went through the turnstiles, down the stairs. The platform was absolutely empty except for Jenny's boyfriend, who stood near a tremendous advertisement for Toothpaste (SMILE! See our Cleansite at www.teethclean.com). I had been hoping there would be more of a crowd down here but the two of us were absolutely alone down here. The smell of the subway was hollow, dirty wind kept in sooty caverns. As I approached him I became aware that I was breathing hard from the stairs and from my own nervousness. We stood side by side on the faded white line by the edge of the platform, both looking into the tunnel for the train, listening to the telltale rumble and waiting for the wind that would indicate its arrival. He did not look at me. He stood with his hands in his pockets, pushing himself up, down on his toes. He was wearing scuffed red high top sneakers and was whistling tunelessly. I looked down into the tunnel, then at him, cleared my throat. He regarded me completely impassively, without any emotion or recognition.

I had watched him inflict cruelty and pain on a helpless person. What private self do we reveal when we draw a blade into a human being's skin? What had I recorded of this man? What expression that could be held up to him in a court of law, for a jury to see and agree that yes, that was how one set one's mouth when inflicting pain, this is what a murderous gaze from an innocuous man looked like. I had watched him do something he would give anything not to have others see. I had recorded it, had seen the entire episode from the comfort of my den. I wanted to tap him on the shoulder, and say, simply, *I know you in a way none other does. I know you better than a lover. I have watched you while your victim squeezed her eyes shut in agony.* But I did not.

And I will say that I was all the more brave from my knowledge. Me, Reginald Humphrey of the white shanks and thin back, stood fearlessly next to this younger, obviously fitter man who was capable of the most extreme cruelty.

I had the power to print copies of his torturings and paste them along the streets, I had the power to replay them to the police and point an accusing finger. I could blackmail him, harass him, ruin him. Let him gaze in wonder at his worst self, copied a million times from an anonymous computer. I could do the deed without ever exposing myself to his defense: I could anonymously email the pictures to the Niccalsetti Police station along with Jenny's address and phone number and let the cops appear at the door asking their questions and exacting their answers from her.

I must add, I felt no pity for his victim. Jenny did not come into this. I searched myself for pity but felt nothing. The man I had been two months ago would have torn his hair to see a helpless woman murdered in front of his eyes, the man I was now had ceased caring what people chose to do in the privacy of their own homes.

I cleared my throat again and said simply, "Jenny Malinse."

He turned so he was facing me completely. "Excuse me?"

"Jenny Malinse. I think you know her. We're mutual friends."

"Have I met you?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so."

I put out my hand. Unsure of himself, he took it. He had a strong, warm grip, and was slightly taller than me. "I'm Reginald Humphrey."

"Yeah? Jonathan Miles." He blinked, looking at me blinking the way a man who needed glasses might search a strange face. Had this man done those terrible things across the way from me? He seemed sullen, weak, and tired. He looked like a man who had been convicted of his crimes years ago and had paid a long and tedious penance. He looked like a man who had been forced to live alone for a decade for every second of pain and torture he had ever inflicted.

I had not flinched at his touch. Instead, I suddenly believed I felt an unexpected warmth and kinship with him. Was it the kinship guards felt towards prisoners of grievous violations whom held in solitary confinement? The pity one might feel when seeing a man ten years removed from some awful atrocity of his past and now held up to censure? I could not feel any kind of rage towards him, just a vague curiosity – as if he were someone I recognized from a photograph.

“How is Jenny?” I asked

“Yeah, well, she’s fine.”

“Are you sure? I heard she might be ill today.”

He looked at me again, without threat or malice, only with curiosity. “What, do you work with her? She called you this morning?” His voice was pure Niccalsetti: *She call you this mornin’?*

“I’d hate for her to suffer needlessly. I consider her a close friend.”

“You do? Me too. A very close friend.”

He made to turn away from me but only turned so his side was to me. He glanced down the track. “She’s a crazy girl, you know? A great girl but she can drive a guy out of his mind.”

“Like I said, I hope she’s well.”

“She’s fine. I saw her last night.”

Far down in the tunnel was the clacking of the train, then a shuddering deep inside the darkness. The train was coming, pushing a bubble of wind before it that came through the tunnel entrance I stepped closer to the man and said, slowly, “Never touch her again. For your own good, my brutal friend.”

He turned, quickly, the sound of the train louder now, building up momentum. He found me unexpectedly close to him and he stepped back, put out his hand and pushed my shoulder in a mixture of confusion and anger. I stepped away from him as he lost his balance and then I stepped forward, my hand raised as if to defend myself from a blow. Once more he stepped back and away

from me, his brow furrowing in concern and perhaps bemusement, his lips pouting as if he was avoiding an insect that had flown at his eyes. He stepped backward and off the platform as easily as if he had taken a step down a stair while holding a conversation, one arm windmilling out, flailing. He fell the seven or eight feet to the track and looked up at me quizzically, his mouth forming words before the sound of the train became a roar and then a screech and then the train filled my view completely, full of people and light. The doors opened just as an alarm bell rang insistently inside the train carriage and I turned, crossed the platform to the exit.

The stairs were empty. I was not nervous or frightened. I felt as if I were in a dream with only a calm desire to move way and up, out of the bowels of the city to the street. I came up the exit, passed the fat reading woman in cube who had heard the alarm and was craning her neck against the glass to see into the tunnel and reaching with chubby fingers for the telephone. I went up the stairs to Delaware Avenue and began walking. It was still bright out. I walked two blocks, head down, hands in pockets, ready at any moment to be accosted. I only realized by the second block that I was walking the wrong direction, I was walking back towards my apartment. I stopped, straightened my collar, looked at my coat and hands for any telltale sign of John Miles, looking for blood, for hair, for anything. I turned my eyes up between the tops of the buildings for the sky and there it was, high above. A blue sky. I smiled to myself. I was in a state of such agitation that I might never have known guilt, or sorrow, or penance. I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing except the glee at being free to live and love as I pleased, unchallenged, unseen.

I was a free man.

CHAPTER 16

Exactly three months after John Miles met his unfortunate death in the Killian Avenue Subway, crushed underneath the Niccalsetti C Train, I was married to Stella Shawzin. I was also promoted to Assistant Curator shortly after the behest to the museum of her tapestry, *Woman with Swan*. Fleuron Fouchet of the Musée des Tapisseries was in attendance at my wedding, as were many of my students, as well as Leo Kannotski. The wedding was held at a private chapel in the country outside of Niccalsetti, close to Stella's house. We do not truly keep separate residences, I have moved many of my most important things out to her tremendous house, and I live there most days, but do spend the occasional night in the city. I have had no more dealings with Jenny Malinse. I believe she might move out soon. Sometimes I might glimpse her form in the window of her apartment but I am not curious about her. When I work late at night and see the familiar light of her apartment I sometimes smile to myself.

I still walk to the museum from the apartment on those rare days I sleep overnight in town. My health has taken a turn for the better – married life agrees with me. Stella has me exercising regularly in a new gym she has installed in the house.

I do not think of John Miles at all. I feel no remorse. I have been tempted many times to talk to someone about this, but to who? To Stella? To a therapist? To a priest? I do not want to confess to a

murder – I do not consider myself a murderer as I did not mean to kill a man. I do admit I do not wish to speak about my part in Miles's death to the authorities.

I can still see his face in my mind, see him looking up at me from the train tracks in the half second before he was wiped off the earth, that look of sudden confusion and anger. I believe I have come to a point where guilt would force me to think of contacting somebody about his death, perhaps even contacting Jenny and simply saying I was there, a fellow human being, at the time of his death. He did not take his life, he fell by accident, it was ridiculous. In this way I might assuage some grief from the world. I might clarify things for his family and for Jenny herself. But I do not do these things. There was a short article in the newspaper about the unfortunate event, an article which mentioned that a man dressed in a conservative grey suit had been seen talking to John Miles shortly before his death and was wanted by the police for questioning.

I have had my chances, of course. I saw Jenny once, in real life, on the street. It was shortly after my marriage, on a bracing day in the late spring. She had changed her hair and was dressed in a formal khaki suit – perhaps she had changed jobs – but it was her. She was walking down Delaware Avenue from the shops towards her apartment. I recognized her as she approached me. As she neared I searched her face as she passed me for some kind of impossible recognition. Of course there was nothing. She passed me like any other stranger, walked away from me like a million other strangers have before and a million others will do again, walked back to her contained life. I continued on down the road and did not look back.

I am truly a free man.

THE END