

CHRISTINA'S CRAVING

AN UNCHARTED TRIP
INTO THE EROTIC FUTURE



Christina van Bell, the world's most glamorous investigative reporter, must track down a legendary man of mystery. Her search takes her, body and soul, to taste all of the sensual delights that tomorrow can offer. From Rio to L.A., Christina plays hard to get her man—over and over again.



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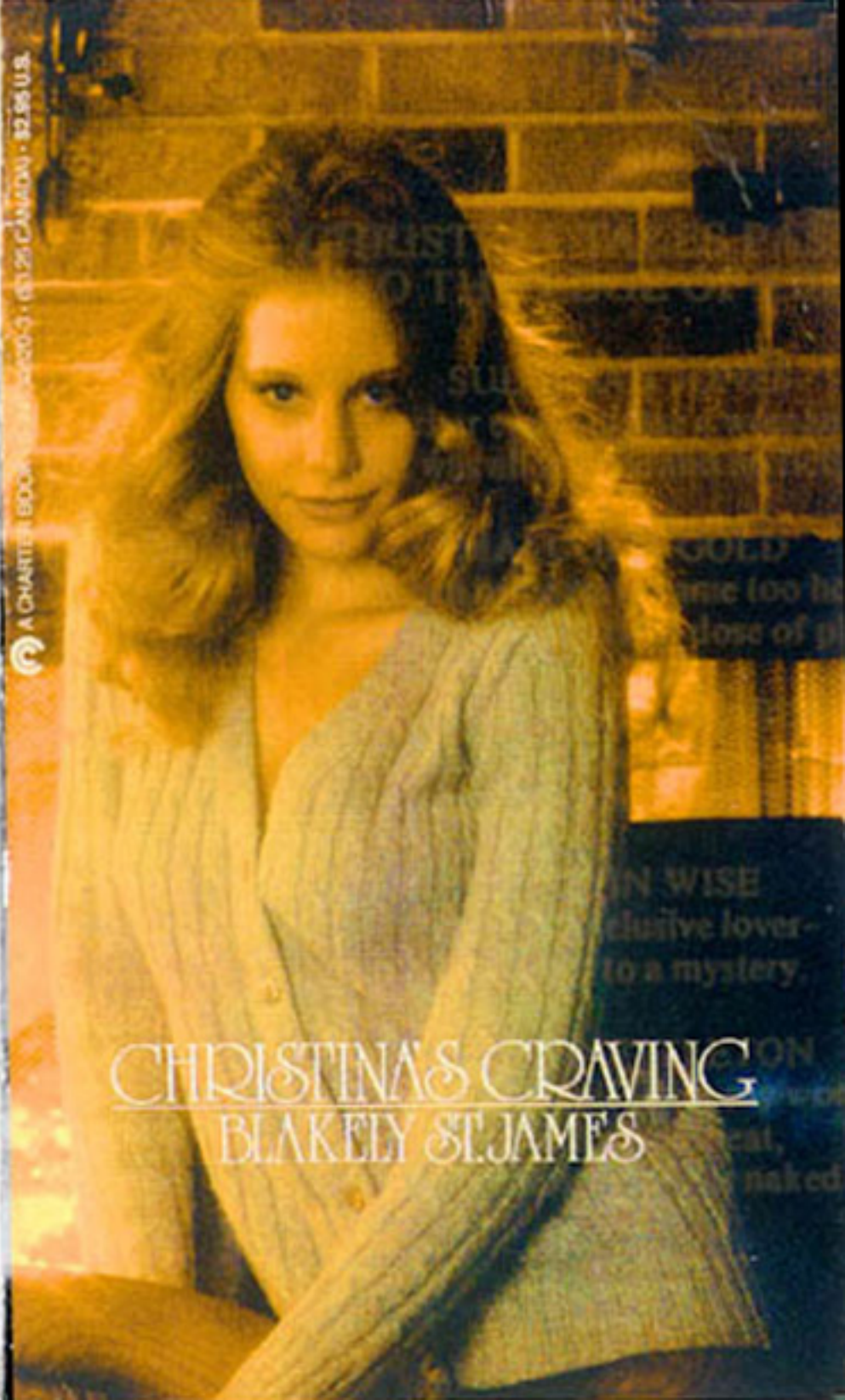
CHRISTINA'S CRAVING, BLAKELY ST. JAMES

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A CHARTER BOOK



CHRISTINA'S CRAVING
BLAKELY ST. JAMES



WRITTEN UNDER THE HOUSE NAME BLAKELY S. JAMES

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you definitely *have* picked an impossible task," she said. And left. Pleasantly.

Inwardly, I kicked myself.

"How to make friends and influence people!" Lee quoted.

And I knew it.

"Really, Christina," he said.

"Totally wrong?" I asked.

"Without a doubt, the prize-winning Hoof-In-Mouth performance of the year."

"In other words, she's not thrilled with the idea."

"Let me tell you something," Lee said.

"Lay it on me, bruthuh," I replied.

"I'm not too thrilled about it myself."

"All right, interviewing Georgiades isn't such a good idea," I agreed politely.

"My opinion is not."

"So don't push it," I said, reading his look.

"Too late," Lee said. "You just pushed all the wrong

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CHRISTINA'S HUNT

CHRISTINA'S CRAVING

BLAKELY ST. JAMES



CHARTER BOOKS, NEW YORK

For Big John, the oil man

CHRISTINA'S CRAVING

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CHAPTER ONE

I was feeling reckless. That was the reason I made the mistake of telling Malcolm I liked the movie. I *was* feeling reckless. We'd eaten dinner at a wonderful unknown restaurant, thanks to Merritt Dane, *World's* restaurant and food critic. Oh, did I mention that I own *World* magazine? I didn't? Well, just chalk it up to my innate feminine modesty. *World* magazine is my life, my love, and my passion. Ever since I first learned to masturbate back in Vermont to *World's* African-tribesman feature, the old magazine has been intimately involved with both my life and my love life.

Malcolm Gold is also involved with both, since he works for me as *World's* editor-in-chief. In essence, he runs the magazine for me. I took an early retirement, you see. After I'd managed to lie my way to New York on a thumb and a prayer and wangle a job as a *World* photo assistant. And after I'd worked my way meteorically up the editorial totem pole, the magazine folded, and I inherited \$16 million from dear dead Daddy. So I bought the magazine and retired. After all, I didn't want to miss my twenties. I'd work later. Maybe when I

was seventy or something.

Anyway, Malcolm is a friend, lover, confidant, and employee. It's a strange relationship, but it works. And since I see so much of Malcolm, I can't help interfering just a little every now and then. But I was feeling reckless, and that's what got me into the mess. It had been a lovely evening, and the prospect of a great movie and a good fuck were all but inevitable.

We'd been given passes to the first screening of *Star Crusaders*, you see, and that night passes were hotter than an Islanders box at the Stanley Cup's seventh game. Now me, I loved *Star Lords*, and *The Emperor Strikes*. So did ten million other people, *World* wrote. But Malcolm had a little problem. We'd been to the first one, and he'd dragged me back to see it seven times in the first three days. Pretty soon, because *everybody* liked *Star Lords*, it became chic to *dislike* *Star Lords*. Some dwarf in California started it, I think. So, by the time Malcolm and I went to see the premiere of *The Emperor Strikes*, most of the people there were at the screening to pick holes in the movie. Of course, they didn't. But strangely, that childlike joy had evaporated by the time we were in the lobby of the theater. And now, with the third movie, everyone had already made up their minds before entering the theater. A pity. They missed a great flick.

And so, feeling reckless, I happened to mention that I liked the film within earshot of Malcolm. Krakatoa was no longer east of Java.

"You liked that piece of shit?!" Malcolm exploded.

I sighed. Malcolm was rolling and there was no stopping him.

"What a piece of unmitigated horse-hockey. What mindless drivel, fit perhaps for the mind of a fourteen-year-old mongoloid, if said mongoloid is wired to the gills on a mixture of Thorazine and Ex-Lax. You liked that infantile, brain-damaged flatworm's excuse for a movie?"

Yes, I admitted, I did.

My friends the movie buffs live their movies with a religious zeal. If I like the wrong movie, it's "Look out, friends, we got us a new convert!" And then they proceed to waste three hours beating me down until at last I accept the Holy Writ that that was, in fact, a baaaaad movie, and I've been a baaaaad girl, and that I should go and sin no more.

This Malcolm did: "What was so great about it? I mean, I could see you liking it if you'd never gotten beyond puberty, for Chrissake, and I could see you liking it if you'd been blinded in some horrible industrial accident, but Christina, you're in full possession of your faculties. You can't possibly have liked it."

"But I *did*!" I protested.

"Okay. I see it. Yeah, I can see it all now. You've decided to like it no matter what. I understand. Now you can amuse all your friends by inciting riots at parties and baiting poor helpless idiots into trying to refute you. Great. You're such a perverse asshole sometimes. I can't believe it."

To Malcolm, it was gospel that the movie was a great gobble. But he couldn't see how, if *he* hated it, *every-one* didn't hate it. I had a professor once at night school who told me that in '72 everyone he'd known had been for McGovern, that everyone *everyone* knew had been for McGovern, and that when Nixon had finally won the election, he and all of his friends had gone into shock. They couldn't understand that anyone had voted for Nixon. Likewise, no one Malcolm knew would like the picture, and no one *they* knew would, and not one of those people would understand that millions of people who loved it, and went again and again, did so because they *liked* the movie.

To Malcolm such a thing was impossible, except for the class of nerds, which was anyone who didn't agree with Malcolm. I thought it rather childish, and I told him so.

"Malcolm, would you like a bottle, or a diaper change?"

"I still don't understand *why* you like the movie," he said, a bit calmer.

"If you'd bothered asking," I noted, "you might have found out why." And I refused to say another word.

Even at this point, my reckless plunge into the weird world of the future might have been averted, but I was feeling hurt that Malcolm could be so crass and rude to me, so I was having a girlish tantrum. Otherwise the subject might never have come up. Georgiades, I mean.

We rode back to my apartment in our rented limo. The silence was deafening. I really don't like to pout, but Malcolm had offended my delicate feminine sensibilities by being such an asshole. It had been threatening snow all through a gloomy New York day, and that threat was fulfilled as we drove in silence. I regarded the snowflakes, which grew thicker and whiter by the moment. Christmas decorations lined the streets in cheery counterpoint to the pall that had been cast on the evening.

Malcolm didn't speak until we were in the elevator up to my apartment. "All right," he said. "I'm sorry," he said. "If you like that sort of thing, I guess it's your right," he said.

Not much of an apology, I thought, but it was as close as I was likely to get. I think the fact that he was horny might have had something to do with it. "You're forgiven," I said.

Malcolm looked at me as if seeing me for the first time all evening. "I'm really sorry," he said.

"It's all right," I said. I saw that there was something else.

"It's just . . ." He paused. "All this Buck Rogers stuff is idiotic. I've been busting my ass all week to get a press pass to the White Rose Festival, and I guess I'm just sick of the future."

"The White Rose Festival?"

He sighed and dragged a folded brochure from the pocket of his tuxedo. It was covered with scribbled

phone numbers. He handed it to me.

It read: "The Third Annual White Rose Festival—Future Life Styles and Technologies."

"We're covering this?" I asked, inadvertently hammering the final nail into my coffin. Little did I realize that the White Rose Festival and I were heading on a direct collision course. And I, like an idiot, was still feeling reckless. "Sounds interesting."

"Christina!" Malcolm gasped. "If you had any idea of what a god-awful pain in the ass this festival has been."

"What's the big deal?" I asked innocently.

"G. I. Georgiades is attending, and since it's only his first public appearance in twenty years, security is tighter than a professional virgin with plenty of alum."

"Georgiades?"

Malcolm sighed. "Yeah. You know. G. I. Georgiades, man of mystery, con man, guru, author, secret agent. The biggest recluse since the Man in the Iron Mask, Howard Hughes, Salinger, and Pynchon all rolled up into one."

"Never heard of him," I said.

"Great," Malcolm said. "Let's fuck."

"That's the best idea you've had all night," I said, and G. I. Georgiades was almost forgotten. "Malcolm?"

"Yeah?" he said, moving up against me.

"Why don't you eat my pussy?" I said, lifting my skirt to reveal my newly manicured bush.

His eyes popped a little. "You've been like that all night?"

I ran a hand down and teased myself—something that always gets Malcolm hot. "If you'd have been less of a crank, you would have noticed me rubbing myself off three or four times during the movie."

He dropped to his knees. "I'm sorry," he said. "I . . . mmmf!"

I kept my hands on the back of his head with firm pressure. "Enough talk, Malcolm. Your mouth has got-

ten you into enough trouble tonight. Try getting yourself out of it.” It was, I thought, a terribly effective way of moving from dull discourse to a more interesting intercourse. I guided Malcolm to the heat and folded myself around him. His tongue began to move, tentatively at first, but then he began to get the idea. I have this problem with conversation; it tends to obscure the more important facets of life. I massaged the sides of his head with my inner thigh muscles. The tension in my legs was forcing the blood into my crotch, and I could feel the delicious, palpable heat flooding me. I’d just had my flowers, and in deference to some of my more squeamish partners, I’d been out of commission for several days. Now I luxuriated in the intensity of sex. Sex is not a game; sex is not a toy. It is an act of communication, of communion.

Malcolm drank at my wellspring, lapping at me with his tongue. I could feel him working up my labia, slowly unfolding me like a rose. This was what I’d had in mind for our evening. Not some boring argument, no conversational pyrotechnics; just the sensual heat of a relaxed encounter with a close friend and lover. I could feel his tongue seeking out my secret places, changing tempo and rhythm, applying pressure and relaxing it. His hand insinuated itself into the mouth of my cunt, a finger carefully working the outer ring of muscle and finding those sensitive areas no prick, no matter how talented, can reach. I drew myself up on my toes, tensing my lower body in the exquisite agony of lust, working my legs in time with his teasings. I began to rotate involuntarily on his mouth, accepting his mastery of my sex as I rose by degrees to that final explosion.

And then, he stopped.

He had his cock out and was stroking it—as much for my eyes as his sensation. He stood and, taking my hand, placed the velvet shaft in my palm, milking his thick cock with my hand, forcing me to his tempo and rhythm. I knew all the delicate folds by heart, and I sought them out, adding my pressures to his own. His

other hand sought out my unbraed breast through the chenille of my dress and cupped me, taking my hardening nipple between thumb and finger and rolling it, giving me a sensation between pleasure and pain.

His cock was full to bursting, and I could tell that it wouldn’t take much before he shot his load all over my carpet. So, with some gentle encouragement, I guided his cock so that it was between my legs, rubbing deliciously down the well-lubricated groove of my pussy. Malcolm’s mouth met mine in a wet, heated kiss, and our tongues twined as we thrust against each other in mutual need. I felt his hands on my breasts, parting the décolletage of my evening dress and taking me in. His mouth trailed down my chin, my neck, to nuzzle at my ears, running his tongue around and around until I was nearly delirious. And then down, to take my breasts, running his tongue in oblique spirals to my nipples, first one, then the other, and then to bite and release each delicately. I couldn’t wait any longer.

With a quick realignment of my hips, he was in me, slipping into my folds like a knife through melting butter. I gasped with delight as he began to thrust into me, lifting me in his arms for a better angle. He walked me this way across the room, propping me up against a pile of cushions so that I could have more freedom for my legs and feet. I rubbed his back, and without causing him to miss a stroke, unbuckled his pants and took them off with my feet.

I ran my hands over the soft hairs of his ass and twined my legs around his as he thrust into me in steady, even strokes. I felt opened and my legs were quivering as he plunged again and again into me. I felt the electricity running through me as though I had a body like his and could feel what he was feeling. I felt the pleasure, the slowing of his thrusts as he tried to hold back. He was barely in and yet we were both on the point of orgasm, of explosion.

I felt the first contractions of his cock buried deep inside me, and I reached down to grasp it at the base,

squeezing off the incipient release. I heard Malcolm gasp, as if in thanks, and then we were off again, rolling and tumbling, thrusting and receiving, moving in that delightful configuration of the beast with two backs. His hands were everywhere: on my clitoris, on my mons, reaching under me to massage the well-oiled groove of my cunt, caressing my asshole, grasping my ass, lifting and guiding me in time with his thrusts.

I was not idle. My hands found his back, his ass, his chest, tangled themselves in his hair, insinuated themselves around the root of his cock, held his balls in their velvet sac as a mother hen would hold a chick.

We moved around the room as if by teleportation: first here then there, with no knowledge of how we got from A to B—the sofa, the chair, on the rug, by the fireplace. All the while in an alien heat, dancing at the end of time, clothes finally shed in slow stages, hands and feet and mouths and tongues exploring the infinitely complex circuitry of lust, caresses that sent electric shivers up my spine, and all the while, Malcolm's cock pounding into my heated quim.

Positions changed, though not with the *Kama Sutra* drill team heartlessness of every poor fool who's been gifted with a dog-eared copy of *The Joy of Sex* lent him by an older brother or friend. Movement was mercurial, changing from form to form in effortless flow, as water from cup to pitcher and thence back. There was the sensation of eternity I've come to associate with sex. Time itself takes a different flavor, space is truncated to our private world of cock and cunt, of tongue and tit and twat and tease. Cause precedes effect, and which is which, no one can say. For the timeless time of sex, we were alone within our own universe, the only two dwellers in a land of reds and golds coloring orange as coals fanned in a dying fire. We did everything we could to prolong it.

A time for strong bodies. Weak ones would have suffered exhaustion too early. A time for lips that touched heated angry purples and reds, that drew lines of dew

from my cunt, from his cock. A time for laughter and wordless moans. And yet the world did everything in its power to deny us our absolution: lubrication dried, tender skin chafed, pubic hairs matted and tangled, entropy crept in, and heat hied away on cat's paws, leaving us with an orgasm that could not equal the promise glimpsed. Still, it would be enough, and as I gasped in that delicate finality, knowing that delay would only weaken my release, I drew Malcolm's balls into my hand and in that ancient manner of my sex, opened myself to his shot.

He shuddered, his voice rising involuntarily as it came, a bolt of sheer voltage, a vector aimed up my spine to explode at the crown of my head and back down again. The blood raged in my loins and I came, a wave breaking violently against the rocks.

The promised land was once more withheld from me. But I'd seen it again: just a glimpse, but that was enough to tide me over. Somewhere there is a place where one can live in that timeless time, and someday I'll find it. I think that when I first experienced orgasm, lying in a cool barn on a warm day, my inexperienced hand in the down of my suddenly strange and useful cunt, I felt that mystery. Nothing in my life has equalled the sensation, the feeling of almost unbearable pleasure. And as I have lived my life in quest of that place, the mystery has only deepened. The more I know, the more I experience, the deeper the mystery grows. Perhaps the tantrics were right—that there is a thing in sex that touches the godhead. I don't know. At that moment, as at all such moments in my life, I was just another ripple of a broken wave flowing back out to sea.

We lay silent in that vulnerable moment, not wanting to break the spell. Inside me, Malcolm's cock was slowly shrinking, the heat leeching back into his body. I squeezed him tenderly with my cunt in a communication of contentment and, yes, love that words cannot measure, in a tender embrace as old as the species. And then we were no longer godlings but just people, and we put

our sorrow from our minds, as men and women have done from the dawn of time, and pretended to forget and talked with our hands and our lips and searched for a cigarette to spare the necessity of words.

The rhythm of the heat had passed us.

Malcolm sighed. "I do love you, Christina," he said.

"I love you," I said, and I did. But we spoke as friends and lovers: more agape than amor. Perhaps the Greeks were wiser than we. They had three words for love: eros—sexual love; amor—romantic love; agape—impersonal, brotherly love. Still, it is good to be loved and know that that love will not pass through a silly quarrel or harsh words.

And we changed the subject, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Malcolm whispered.

I kissed his neck and held his embrace. "So am I," I whispered. "It's useless to fight. I'm to blame too."

"It was more my fault than yours," Malcolm said.

"Stop," I said. "Or we'll get into a quarrel over quarrelling."

He laughed.

"Let's talk about something else," I said.

"All right. What?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something. How about the White Rose Festival?" I was still a few words away from my destiny. But I *was* feeling reckless, though no longer restless.

"How about something else?"

The Rubicon was crossed with a word. "No. I'm intrigued. Who is this person you've been talking about?"

"Georgiades?"

"Yes," I said.

Malcolm lit the cigarette he'd been toying with. "There's not a whole lot on him. Let's just say he's one of the few men of mystery left in an age that has a dossier on everybody. Nobody knows where he comes from, what he does, or even how old he is. But he's more influential than most people we do know about."

"Like how?" I asked as he passed me the fag.

"Well, I guess you could say that his name keeps popping up in unusual places, always at the forefront of some new movement. It's strange. Just about the time that a movement or an idea begins to gain in public vogue, Georgiades has already been and gone. That thing in Afghanistan, for instance."

"The Russians?" I asked.

"Yeah," Malcolm said. "A good friend of mine in the CIA told me that about the time the Russians actually invaded, the CIA immediately scrambled to infiltrate arms through Pakistan. Now nobody knows this, since it was such an embarrassment, but when the Asian Operations Office men got there, some very polite Afghanistans and Pakistanis provided them with maps and drop points for supplies. The path had already been cleared, and a fellow finally let slip that one G. I. Georgiades had organized the thing a full year before the Russians even considered becoming involved in the region.

"It's strange, but the CIA's gotten used to it. The problem is, the KGB has run into similar things in Africa, on *their* side."

"He's some kind of spy?" I asked.

"Well, my friend doesn't think so. They don't really know. Georgiades also happens to have written several books in several languages, on everything from agriculture to yoga, under a variety of pen names. He takes great delight in them. One, on East/West relations, which has become a classic among the very select group of political science scholars, was penned by 'Preston Johns'—a pun on Prester John, the legendary Christian prelate of Asia who was supposed to be spreading the True Faith among the heathen at a time when Europe had very little idea where Asia even was."

"Sounds like a queer sort of fellow," I said, accepting a drag from Malcolm's cigarette.

"That's not the half of it. Nobody really knows who or what or when or how, and believe me, many people have tried. He has a circle of friends that staggers the

imagination. They are always movers and shakers, and nobody will tell anybody anything. Georgiades hasn't even been photographed, to the best of anyone's knowledge."

"Sounds like fun," I said.

"What sounds like fun?" Malcolm asked.

"Interviewing him," I said with finality.

Malcolm looked at me the way he might look at a cobra who'd cuddled up in his bedroll. "You've got to be joking," he said.

I shook my head. "Nope. I've been thinking about it lately, and I think it's time for the little rich girl to have some fun again."

"Now, Christina," Malcolm began in a fatherly tone.

I cut him off. "Uh-uh," I said. "I'm a big girl, Daddy, and I've been entirely too coddled and coozied lately. It's time for Christina to put a little adventure in her life again."

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "You mean like Half-Moon Bay?"

I nodded. A few months back, I had traded in my designer originals for a camera and notebook and gone back to a bit of reportage, uncovering the secret of the Krupp Colony, a refuge for the elite of the arts. Malcolm maintains that I could have been killed or injured. I maintain that I'm old enough to take care of myself. Besides, hedonism is a nice vacation, but it's no way to live. You get old and fat and useless. "Like Half-Moon Bay," I agreed.

"Forget it," Malcolm said. "Even if you went, I don't seriously think you'll have much more luck than Murphy, and he's been covering this for years on and off."

"I don't know, Malcolm dear," I sniffed. "I'm known for giving great interview."

"Maybe years ago," Malcolm said. "Don't take offense, but you're just a little rusty."

"Would you like to make a little wager?" I inquired sweetly.

"What are you prepared to lose?" Malcolm asked smugly.

"Well," I said, "since money's no object, let's make it a matter of ego."

Malcolm tried to hide the knowing smile. Poor dear, I knew what he was thinking: There's Christina off again, with not a whit of regard for the real world or real consequences. He was worried that I'd blunder into something dangerous one of these days—something that I *wouldn't* be able to handle, and there'd be one less poor little rich girl in the world. "I'd really prefer not to," he said.

"What's the problem?" I asked. "I'm going, whether you like it or not. We have one press pass, and what *World* has, I have."

"You wouldn't!"

"I just did. Now, what would you like to wager?"

A long, resigned pause. "All right," he said finally. "I'll give you a bet. If you *can* interview Georgiades, you can do anything with me you want for a week." His face lit up. "And I'll wear a dog collar with a leash in acknowledgment. If you *can't* do it, the reverse."

"Done," I said. We shook.

He looked at me pityingly. "Well, at least it'll teach you a lesson," he said.

"Oh?"

"It's impossible. But I suppose you've got to find out the hard way. Do you really think you can do something that governments and newspapers the world over have been trying to accomplish for over twenty years?"

I shrugged. "Why not? They said woman would never fly."

Malcolm just shook his head in a What-can-you-do-God? manner.

"Cheer up," I said. "After all, you'll only be wearing the collar for a week. Besides, nobody's ever had the inducement of watching you on a leash before. I'll do okay."

"Oh, shit. I forgot to tell you," Malcolm said in a

manner that indicated he hadn't forgotten at all. "There's a catch."

"Oh?" I asked.

"The festival is being held in three cities connected by a satellite hookup: Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, and Los Angeles. It is just the sort of shell game Georgiades likes to play. He'll be speaking on Sunday, but no one knows where or when."

"And the festival is in three days, right?" I asked.

"Right," Malcolm said.

"Well, I'd say it's a direct challenge to the second oldest profession."

"The what?"

"Who do you think spread the word about the oldest profession?" I asked.

Malcolm didn't say a thing.

A doze later, I awoke to the sensation of Malcolm's cock swelling inside me. I can't quite describe it, but it's one of my favorite parts of sex. Most men want to pull out right away, and I suppose that most women don't want that connection severed, unless it's with a complete stranger. When it's possible in that rare nexus of intimacy, sleep, and immobility, there is nothing like wakening to it. Malcolm hadn't pulled out and now, rested, he was growing again. Our excitement mounted together. He grew and I opened at the same rate. We were still half asleep, our wager all but forgotten, and it was our bodies this time that laid out the groundwork. With a will of their own, they began to fuck in spoon position, Malcolm penetrating me from behind, a strong arm encircling my breasts, a hand running over my belly and my come-soaked pubic hair. His teeth clamped on the back of my neck, biting me powerfully but without pain as he took me in a lion's embrace. It was all I could do to keep time with his thrusts.

We lay on the bed, sheets thrown off. Outside, the snow was still falling. New York was lit with Christmas

decorations. It was a slow yet hurried fuck. Soon, I could feel the rising heat inside. I shuddered and came with him. We slept.

When I woke again, it was morning and Malcolm was dressing for a day at the office. Somewhere I suppose I felt a little jealous of myself. I was the employer, and I was the jilted lover to be left in an empty bed. But the magazine needed running, and I couldn't have persuaded Malcolm to take the day off. We were on deadline for the Christmas issue, and there were a thousand things to do—final brownlines to read, photos and illustrations to correct, late ad mechanicals to get on the phone and scream for.

Thrown over for another woman's employ—mine. I sleepily kissed Malcolm good-bye and muttered for him to keep lunch open. I slept again. I woke.

That bastard! I thought. It hadn't struck me the night before. Or maybe I'd just been too inflated with my own self to see it. He'd set me up. "By the bye, Christina, it'll be on three continents; forgot to tell you while we were making the bet."

Sometimes Malcolm can be a real male chauv piggy. I grabbed the phone, but thought better of it. He'd just chuckle and patronize me infuriatingly, and there was nothing I could do or say that would change that. Not one whit. All right, Malcolm Gold, I thought, we'll just see who gets the last laugh.

I called up *World*, got through to the research department, and talked to David Nettleton. I swore him to secrecy.

"No problem," David said. "Malcolm doesn't have any idea what we're doing in here most of the time. There's always the odd bit of research for some last-minute article. And then there's the dart tournament."

I smiled. One of the rituals I'd grown up with. Every afternoon around three o'clock everybody who's not busy in Editorial (and some who are) shows up in

Research for darts. It usually involves little bets of who buys lunch, or grudge matches between the associate editor and the copy editor who blue-lined half the AE's latest article. Legend has it that it began back during the war with a picture of Mussolini. Anyway, the tournament continued every day at threeish, and it keeps office politics from graduating to sharper bickering. A happy gang of editors is an efficient gang of editors, they say. Poor Malcolm can't play any more. Working stiff only. Sometimes I think more work is accomplished on the magazine during the dart tournament than the rest of the day—which is what David meant.

"Whatever you can find, David," I said.

"I'll ask around. I think Murphy was covering the Afghan thing."

"And see if you can find me anything on the attendees of the White Rose Festival. I'd like any info or background you might care to dig up."

"What is this for?" David asked.

"A little bet."

"With Malcolm?"

"Yes," I said. "So don't breathe a word of it to him."

"And you're going to look for G. I. Georgiades."

I was surprised. "How did you know?" I asked.

"I know you," David said. "You decided to prove some obscure point and wound up wagering your Newport estate against a donut that you could find somebody nobody else could find, or else why would you be asking about all this? You know, don't take this wrong, but one of these days your luck is going to give out, and you're going to be waiting for the cavalry and it won't come. This Georgiades is supposed to be a dangerous guy."

"Thank you, David," I said, "but I need information, not advice."

He caught the note of silly wounded pride in my voice. "I'm just telling you as a friend," David said. "If you wanted to, it would be easier to back out than get

involved with something that could be a lot tougher than you bargained for."

I knew what he was thinking—that I was going off on another little picnic because I was bored and too proud to admit it. Who was I to tell him he was wrong? So I apologized.

He laughed. "I'm just worried about *you*, Christina."

"I'll be okay," I said. "But you're right. I may just be biting off more than I can chew."

"We'd all hate to lose you. The magazine wouldn't be the same without our crazy lady publisher."

"Thanks," I said. "Tell you what. Don't do anything about this. I'll call you back later."

He must have known what I was thinking because he suggested, "Malcolm's in his office right now."

It's nice to have people around you who care enough to tell you when you're being an asshole. Unfortunately for me, it doesn't always stop me from being an asshole anyway. I rang Malcolm.

"Malcolm?"

"I know," he said. "You thought it over and decided you couldn't do it, so you're trying to beg off." He laughed. It was not funny.

And so, feeling reckless, I crossed the final barrier into the Georgiades affair, spurred on by arrogance and stupid pride. If I'd been a bit more grown up, I'd have said yes, and Malcolm probably would have apologized for even bringing it up. This is what I *did* say: "I am not trying to beg off, Malcolm *dear*. I was just calling to find out what size you take in a dog collar." I was more than a little annoyed.

"Seventeen," Malcolm said. "Anything else?"

"No," I said and hung up.

I called David. "Get me that information!" I snapped.

"You didn't . . ." He sounded disappointed in me.

"I did," I said. "And keep your nose in your own business and out of mine." I hung up. I felt like a total

bitch, but it was too late. For some reason, I felt like I had to prove something, and so I nearly caused a lot of grief for a lot of nice people.

I was committed.

I went out and shopped furiously. I picked up new outfits—all the best of the winter fashions until I realized that Sydney and Rio are both south of the equator. It would be midsummer in that part of the world and, much as I looked great in furs and wool, I had a feeling that I'd look just as ridiculous as a penguin in the Sahara.

Maybe Malcolm *was* right. I was getting rusty. When I was a working girl, I always checked the weather wherever it was I'd been assigned. It only took one bikini in the middle of a blizzard to make me check regularly. Now I'd forgotten. Rusty, that was what I was. I went to Neiman-Marcus and picked up a summer's wardrobe on sale.

I wandered through stores, playing the little game of maybe next week. I could have had anything I wanted, but it's more fun to want it without buying. Soon, I'd almost forgotten my little flub. So I shopped until I forgot.

By the time I called David, I had put the incident out of my mind, and if there was a note of hurt in his voice, I didn't notice it.

"What have you got for me?" I asked.

"Not much, I'm afraid," David said. "Georgiades seems to know how to stay out of print, and what little there is on him . . . well, you judge for yourself."

"Shoot," I said.

"The earliest reference we have is a mention of Georgiades standing with Faisal against his brother, the then-king of Saudi Arabia. His brother, you remember, was the one who attacked the Turks at Lawrence of Arabia's instigation."

"I remember," I said.

"Then," David continued, "Georgiades appears in

newspaper accounts of the Indian independence movement, bailing Gandhi's followers out of jail. Cuba against Batista, and Afghanistan."

"I know about those," I said. "So he's political."

"Well, no," David said. "Or if he is, it's a damned strange politics. For the British in Arabia and against in India. For the Revolution in Cuba, and against one in Afghanistan. From all indications, he continued to support Castro, even after he broke with the U.S. and allied with the Russians. There's an indirect reference to him during the Bay of Pigs invasion."

"Strange," I said.

"Worse," David said. "We find him associated for a short time with Aleister Crowley during Crowley's Italian period, and with the Golden Dawn after Crowley had broken with them. He shows up in Ouspensky's American groups—"

"Ouspensky?" I asked.

"P. D. Ouspensky. The disciple of Gurdjieff who essentially packaged Gurdjieff's philosophy. A Russian mystic."

"Yes," I said. "I remember now."

"Then, Georgiades seems to have been associated with various arms merchants in Paris during both world wars."

"How old is this fellow?" I asked.

"Well, he seems to be in his seventies, but there are quite a number of things he's done recently that simply don't gibe with a seventy-year-old man. That's the problem. There are references, but no real way to track them down. Perhaps Georgiades was a code name used by one of the old European intelligence services, and we're talking about several men. It seems that way anyway. At any event, he seems to have done some of his own myth-making. Disinformation, you know?"

"Oh, yes," I said. Disinformation was a new term for an old practice: spreading false rumors to obscure a trail.

David went on. "I ran across a former editor who

told me some unprintable stories about Georgiades. Not unprintable in the sense of obscene, but in the sense of unverifiable. It seems that during the late sixties and early seventies, when everyone all over the world was trying to compile as many dossiers and computer files as they could, an American Interpol operative started a file on Georgiades. A week later, the file was filled with entries, but no one knew where they came from. Another week, and the file was empty, with the single sentence, 'You'll have to do better than this,' written in. Information about the fellow has a way of disappearing. He counts as friends some of the world's most influential men. And they have a way of doing him favors. An FBI man once told Murphy that Hoover himself ordered the file on Georgiades destroyed, and heaven help the G-man who tried to reopen it."

"But none of that helps me," I said. "Is there a photo or a description anywhere?"

David laughed. "Oh, yes. Several. Unfortunately, at least one of them is of Aristotle Onassis, and the other ones are probably just as phony."

"Which leaves me nowhere," I said.

"Not quite," David said. "You know that trying to find Georgiades is like trying to screw fog. And you know that he's different from everybody else in that he *doesn't* have much in the way of personal history."

"Maybe I can find him by reverse. You know Sherlock Holmes: when you've thrown out all the impossibilities . . ."

"The answer, no matter how improbable, is what remains," David finished. "Good luck."

"Thanks," I said. I started to ask another question, but he had hung up. I suddenly remembered why. Christina, I told myself, You're going to have to make this up to him. When I get back, I answered. I talk to myself too much.

I didn't get much sleep that night.

I kept thinking of Georgiades, of the bet, and wondering whether I still had what it took to get my man—

interview-wise, that is. don't have any problems in the physical department.

Malcolm woke me up. He was the strange person who was buzzing at my door at the ungodly early hour of nine A.M. I dragged myself out of bed, ran a hand through my hair, pulled on my favorite Marcus Musashi silk kimono, and padded to the front door. I peeped through the peephole. Malcolm with a package. I let him in.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Mysterious presents," Malcolm said, indicating the oversize manila envelope he was holding. We went into the living room and sat down. I felt ill at ease. I was unbathed, uncombed, as unmade as my bed.

"What have you got?" I asked.

"Guard this with your life," Malcolm said. "It's one of the few press passes issued by the festival committee. There are a few competitors who would like to get their hands on it."

Years ago, I was given a photo pass to the funeral of a famous world leader. My lover at the time, a bureau chief for one of the new international papers, waited for me to fall asleep and disappeared with my precious pass. The next day, he waltzed into the funeral with a cheap camera around his neck, and I stood behind police lines all day. Luck was with me. I got the only photos of three terrorist leaders traveling incognito. What goes around comes around, they say, and my lover was fired three weeks later while I got a nice fat promotion. Journalists are not one of the most moral groups around; professional ethics are the worst this side of Congress.

I took the pass. Malcolm handed me my tickets, an itinerary, and a list of possible contacts. Even though we had a bet, Malcolm is an editor, and he wanted a story. Either way it went, he would win, in a sense. I was to fly to Rio first, thence to Australia, then to Los Angeles.

As usual, I'd have *World* stringers and contacts

around for help, and as usual I wouldn't know who they happened to be until I called Malcolm for help. He likes it that way. He feels if I depend on myself, I'm all right, and if I need help it usually is more effective if it comes from an unseen corner. I tend to agree.

I was to leave Kennedy for Rio de Janeiro on the following morning, Wednesday. Since the festival was to start on Thursday and run until the following Sunday, I'd be doing a lot of night flying.

"I've got another surprise for you," Malcolm said, unzipping his trousers.

"You took the day off," I said, moving closer to him.

"Right," he said. "How'd you guess?"

Though I answered with my mouth, I didn't say a word.

CHAPTER TWO

Sugarloaf was barely visible in the twilight of nightfall. Still, even unseen, it dominates the nights and days of the city. Rio de Janeiro was a field of twinkling stars below us. As the jetliner circled on its final approach, I shook myself from the last of my nap and searched blindly for my handbag under my seat. Then, as if to reassure myself, I felt for the press pass hidden underneath my dress. I figured by the time someone knew what it was, they'd be interested in other things anyway.

We fell from the night sky, and Rio rose up around us. In the terminal, a man was waiting to take me to the hotel. The chauffeur was smooth, efficient, and the drive consequently forgettable. Within an hour, I was checked into the Hotel d'Adrienne.

It was magnificently appointed: a hotel in the grand style of the finest European hotels, with chandeliers and gilt-framed originals hanging in polished, shimmering ballrooms and banquet halls. Everywhere deep, luxuriant Oriental rugs produced grand geometrical patterns. They looked so inviting I couldn't help kicking off my heels and walking barefoot through the magnificent grand concourse.

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The staff was polite, efficient, and dignified—traits rarely seen in the world today. Every bellboy was as pressed and polished as a general. My suite was superb—baroque furniture and lavish wall hangings, with art deco lamps worth a fortune in New York or Los Angeles. Signed, too. I checked.

The air conditioning was perfect: not too hot, not too cold, but I opened a window and let the warm sea breeze waft into the room, throwing off my dress and other trappings, and unpacking in the nude. There is something about Rio—or at least there was *that* time—that makes you want to shuck your clothes and your inhibitions and devil take the hindmost. Immediately, I began to feel restless. I toyed idly with the notion of sending down for room service, even as I toyed somewhat less idly with myself. Who knew what they'd send up—fillet of maître d' perhaps? Or maybe a nice bellboy bouillabaisse, or my favorite dish, cock au vin. Ah, Rio. Already, I could feel that this excursion was going to produce a beneficial change of scenery. After all, all play and no work makes Christina a dull girl. And vice versa.

Masturbation was a mere aperitif, however. Surely something more substantial would rear its purpled head soon. I was merely whetting my appetite. After all, this *was* a convention, and be they attended by proctologists or space cadets, conventions are, ultimately, an excuse for the debauch of the saturnalia, the dry heat of the bacchanal, and the frenzy of the Roman orgy. Good food, good liquor, good dope, and great sex. Well, I was ready for them. Trot out those hard cocks and risqué situations, bring on the musclemen and the Musketeers (all four, if you please, and at once—*deeper, deeper, my darling D'Artagnon! Pork moi, Porthos! Eat me Athos, oh yes Aramis!*). I visualized scenes and situations from the *Arabian Nights*, and what nights! Scottish pikemen and Bengal Lancers. Just playing with myself a little, see? Nothing important, just a little

stroke, a little caress. A finger working the delicate folds of my rosebud. A little of the big O before; for luck. After all, every big trip should start out with a bang. Mmmn. That felt nice. And there. And there! Oh shit, I do know how to do myself. And why not? I've had plenty of practice. Lots and lots and lots and lots and, oh Jesus, that feels good and his tongue's on my clit and I'm stroking his shaft . . . deeper, deeper, take me! Overwhelm me and set me free . . . mmmmmmmnn.

I diddled and dabbled at it, I frigged and frolicked and fondled and flayed it. I saw, I came, I was conquered, and the tides swelled and the waves crashed, and, my goodness, that felt good.

Such a degenerate I am. Lying with windows open fondling my privates in a most provocative manner! All the way round the window wall, the peepers were apeeking. The telltale glint of binoculars informed me that my private performance was well-received in the sky-rise across the way. I pointedly neglected to pull the curtains, though I dimmed the room lights somewhat by the ancient expedient of a handkerchief over the shade, tinting the room a lusty burgundy.

Now to fuck.

I decided to go downstairs and mingle. There was, my handy press kit informed me, an informal get-together for the early arrivals in the Honoré de Balzac Ballroom, with bar and hors d'oeuvres. I went through my closet and chose a black and white tiger-print summer dress, one of my new acquisitions. A bit of purple over the shading to give my eyes a subtly bizarre highlight, and a touch of maroon on my lower lip, over my regular "Vagina Vermilion" lip gloss.

And I was ready to meet my fate, however well-hung it might be. I was feeling restless—quite restless in fact—and after two lines of Peruvian Snowflake (thoughtfully provided by Malcolm in the bathroom cabinet of my Rio suite through machinations I didn't care to consider) I was ready to be rendered hors de combat over

hors d'oeuvres. I left my room and one very sad set of binoculars to take my first step into the world of the White Rose Festival, whatever that might entail.

His name, he said, was Sulieman Jones. I *had* read his stuff. How could anyone not? He was considered the best writer in science fiction, with a style as clean as Hemingway's, a sense of story as keen as Dickens', and a bank account as full as a king's.

I asked some idiot question about his being an octoroon, and he laughed and told me how few people even knew what an octoroon was, in this day and age, and he was really a quadroon, and did I want a drink?

I ordered a cognac stinger, as long as it was Rémy Martin V.S.O.P. and not that cheap V.S. or V.S.P. crap. Jones was impressed and said he'd have one of the same, and managed to rub up against my ass for a second while ordering. I could see that this was going to be the beginning of a deep friendship—maybe not that friendly, but, if the bulge in his trousers was any indication, definitely deep, and he *was* happy to see me.

Is it true what they say about black men?

Sulieman Jones was charming. Sulieman Jones was golden brown and silver-tongued. Sulieman Jones was hung. Like a horse. Sort of the masturbatory wish-fulfillment of every pubescent girl who lies abed on a summer Saturday, tilting the man in the boat to the steamy parts of *Mandingo*, a book whose writer has a generation of female orgasms to answer for on Judgment Day:

VOICE OF THE RECORDING ANGEL: Do you realize that you're singularly responsible for the fantasy life of half the women in the Western world?

WRITER: No. Really?

R.A.: You're entirely too modest. Here it is, right here. (Shows W. space marked in The Book.) See? Right under "Vibrator Accidents"?

W.: My God, I didn't know! This is amazing!
R.A.: That's what I call influence. You see the power of one little book?

W.: Gee, I just hoped I'd get a nice advance.
R.A.: Of course there's a certain amount of expiation involved.

W.: (A little uneasy.) What sort of expiation? I mean, I didn't, I wouldn't . . .

R.A.: (Winks.) I think, in this case, something, ah, *minor*. You see, the effects weren't exactly negative.

W.: Oh?

R.A.: (Conspiratorially.) My wife, you see . . .

W.: Oh.

R.A.: (Businesslike.) Now, as to your wings fitting a bit too smugly . . .
(Darkness)

I can't help it. It must have been the effects of the coke. By the time drinks had arrived, Jones's thigh and mine were in delightful proximity under the table. In the vast cavern of the ballroom, I suppose we must have looked suspiciously intimate, but, then, since we were there was no sense of disgrace. The stinger went down cool with a nice afterburn that sidestepped my stomach and headed straight for my crotch. My *mmmmn* was as much for delights anticipated as pleasures at hand—and Sulieman's hand was hovering like a nervous butterfly at my knee. It alighted, and a wordless exchange confirmed, in a glance, our intentions.

We sipped our stingers, letting the anticipation build.

"I don't suppose you're here to explore solar heating methods," Jones said, cocking an amused eye at me.

"No," I admitted. "I suppose you *are*?" I asked.

"No." He laughed. "I'm here for my honorarium."

"Your last book was wonderful," I said.

He looked at me as if gauging my honesty. "Thank you," he said. "I hoped *someone* liked it."

"It seemed like something was going on between the

lines," I said. "As though what you were really saying was getting through on other levels."

He smiled. "I never divulge trade secrets," he said, and winked.

What a wink it was! Warm and sexy and unhurried. The fires in my panties got another load of fuel. I *would* bed this man. "I thought your descriptions were wonderful," I gushed, setting the trap.

He nodded as if in appreciation.

"Especially the way you described the heroine—"

"Maillinne," he completed.

"I love the way she sucks cock," I purred. "Have you experienced something like it, or did you make that up?"

"Made up, I'm afraid," he said. "But I've hoped."

"Then you couldn't have been to bed with me," I joked. "I was certain that you'd been describing me."

His eyes widened, lidded. "I'm sure I'd remember it."

I sighed. "Then I was mistaken." He knew what I meant; I knew that he knew. It had nothing to do with our conversation.

His hand found mine under the table. I allowed myself to be guided as he spoke. "More's the pity," quoth he. "It isn't every day that I meet someone who's read my novels."

My hand was gently closed around his cock, which must have been taken from his trousers while we were talking. It pulsed in my hand, and I felt my knees turn to water. "Most of them," I admitted. I squeezed.

He rose a little in his chair. "Which one was your favorite?" he asked.

"*The Jewels of Space*," I said, taking his balls gently in hand for emphasis.

He choked a little on his next sentence. "R-really?"

"MMMnn-hmnnn," I purred, caressing the velvety flesh of his shaft. I drew the foreskin back and manipulated it slowly.

"It's not one of my more popular books," he said, pumping himself in my hand.

"Let's fuck," I said.

"Zip me up," he said.

Fade out; fade in.

We moved through the doorway of my suite three minutes later, his hand tucked under the leg of my panties. He was stroking my pussy hair with three fingers, manipulating my clitoris with his index.

As I shut the door, I realized that the voyeur was still watching. I didn't look; I just felt the sensation of being watched. I pulled my enameled bric-a-brac stash box from my purse and selected a joint of red sinsemillia. He accepted it, and lit it, taking a deep draw before passing it to me.

We sat on the deep pile, an ashtray between us. Unconsciously, I positioned myself so that my unseen watcher could get the best view.

I took a deep drag, and immediately there was that rush of expansion that comes with good grass. Suddenly I felt more sensual, more alive, more alert. I was intoxicated with sex. Suddenly my nose opened up to scents that I had not been aware of. The scent of raw heat, the scents of cock and cunt, male and female, the slight trace of sweat, of breath. I turned the joint around in my mouth and shotgunned the joint for Sulieman, and his lips came to mine, drinking in my breath. He took as much as he could, and I continued to anoint him, blowing ribbons of smoke over his nose, his cheeks, his forehead, his ears.

He gestured for the joint. "My turn," he said.

And with a practiced flair, took the jay, and, reversing it, placed the coal end in his mouth with the mouthpiece between his lips. I took a deep hit.

"The suck is great at this end," I said. "Let's just see what it's like down here."

With practiced hand, I drew open buckle, slide fastener, and took the tongue of his zipper between thumb

and finger, gliding down with the sound of a knife through velvet. I took his cock out through the legband of silk trunks, and drew the hardening shaft to my lips.

She took the solitary eye with the tip of her tongue, a velvet knife of pure juice; impaling him, even as he would impale her. . . . The scene leapt unbidden to mind. I had memorized it word for word while masturbating a thousand times to it. (I really *did* like his last book.)

I laved his cock, measuring and controlling the ring of pressure, my mouth a hot circle of fire.

She held his enormous balls, thinking of a bullock, feeling the animal power in them. As if in obeisance to some strange god of Men, she offered her tongue to them; first one . . . and then the other. . . .

His hand grasped the back of my head, forcing my mouth to take him deeply, once. I moaned with pleasure. I applied delicate pressure on his anus and at the root of his cock. Battle was joined. I would coax the fiery serpent from him. What he held in his balls was mine . . . soon. He was master and slave. He held a tangle of blond hair, steadying me to receive him. He thrust himself into my mouth, fucking it. His fingers found my lips and toyed with them, using them to apply subtle pressures to his every stroke. I ran my nails down his ass, testing the firm tension of his buttocks through the raw silk trousers.

He ripped open the front of her bodice, taking her breasts in rough yet gentle hands. He twisted her nipples alternately, tugging at the very depth of her womb.

He pulled me away regretfully. I strained to catch the last taste of him. He rolled me back on the floor and, pulling aside the material of my panties, spread my labia and entered me.

At first it was just the head pulsing at the doorway of my cunt. And then, by slow degrees, he entered me, retreating and advancing by millimeters, shaping me to the topography of his prick, molding me as a potter molds clay. Each shallow stroke increased in depth,

until he was buried in me; I was hors de combat, the dragon lady impaled on his lance. Only then did he lift me until I was astride him, as in control as a rag doll in his powerful arms. Then he began to fuck me.

His hands caught her wrists, guiding her by them to his every movement. Thrust and counterthrust in a pas de deux of rising heat. Cock and cunt, joined and slithering, together, the serpent entering the warm grotto; the stallion having his way with the quivering flanks of the mare. . . .

This man fucked the way he wrote—with grace and power and a sensual regard for detail. My fantasy—his story—was becoming real. We fucked as he had imagined it and I had read it. His eyes never averted from mine. I read his heat, felt his need, communicated my pleasure. The time of words had passed. There was no need to speak; it was all in our eyes.

He lifted me, and I settled, taking up the rhythm where he left it and improvising. I reared back on my haunches, rippling my inner muscles up his cock, squeezing and bending it over my clitoris. I reached down to my cunt, and he nodded, as much a command as acceptance. I began to masturbate, my living fantasy inside me. I pleased myself on him, and soon I was in the rising throes of orgasm, my cunt twitching uncontrollably around him, my body clutching his. And then he took his pleasure of me.

As he thrust into her—taking her as he might savor some fine meal—she felt her own heat rising again, and she watched as he rose to the summit only to stop and fondle her flesh wantonly. And then he rode her again. She was his creature, molten in his arms, his to do with as he pleased. He sucked her nipples, one by one, back and forth as she arched to give herself to his mouth.

Finally, when I couldn't take it any more, I began to shudder. I squeezed him with my legs, my ass, my cunt.

"So you want it?" he grunted.

"Yes!" I said wordlessly. My mouth opened in a moan . . . in a silent gasp.

He pumped more forcefully now, taking himself to the brink, and toying with his orgasm. He could come any time he decided to. Still he teetered on the brink, and I used every trick I could think of to distract his self-control. I bit his neck. He almost came. I grasped the root of his cock. He moaned. I raked my nails across his back. He pinched my nipples. I came.

She came in a series of silent explosions, a soft drifting of butterflies down, drifting feathers on a summer breeze. She was transfigured; the image of Shakti replaced her face in a flickering, a candle stroked by an errant breeze. The crimson flared down through breasts, belly, the forest of her cunt, and the spiced oyster pulsing deep and red. She forced her tongue into his mouth and pressed him everywhere, as though trying to squeeze his entire being into her flesh, to meld, to melt.

And still he held off.

I slithered off him, butter down a hot knife. He shifted, and his cock was in my half-open mouth.

"Lick me," he said, and I did. He continued to take me slowly, savoring me. I was fucked out, sucking greedily at him. I sucked the heat, I sucked the juice, I sucked the scented leavings of our congress, nibbling at him, tasting him in my mouth, and rising once again to his heat.

And then I was on my back and he was above me, supported on his arms, cojoined at the waist. My legs, as if willed by themselves, wrapped, locking around his ass to capture him. He fucked me, and I writhed under him.

She opened herself to his lazy thrusts, and became pure Woman, a droplet in a vast and powerful river moving inexorably onward toward a distant sea. She felt the powerful whorls and eddies, and was pulled helplessly along by the deep currents. . . .

He wrote good, but he fucked better.

Jones pulled out of me, still erect. He hadn't come, but I had. Had I. Had I ever! "Would you like to continue this later?" he asked.

I nodded.

Then, as if in answer to the query my eyes held, he explained: "If I come now, I'm finished for the evening. Oh, I could come again, once, twice, five times . . . but why don't we make a night of it? You're absofucking-lutely *mmmmn!*"

"You're not so bad yourself," I teased. "Yes," I said. "Let's do make a night of it."

And so we did.

The next morning I remembered the voyeur. We'd put on quite a show for him. I rolled over and bit the back of Sulieman's neck. "Sulieman?" I whispered.

"Try Lee," he whispered back.

"Lee?"

"Yes?"

"Let's do it again."

He rolled over and took me in his arms. "After breakfast. I don't know about you, but I could eat about three hundred eggs, twenty links of sausage, with about ten cups of coffee to wash it all down."

I sighed in mock-exasperation. "Well, what a party-poooper!" I grabbed his cock. It was hard. "You seemed to like my little box enough last night."

He tried to squirm away, but I wasn't having it. It took me until almost three A.M. to make this bastard pop, and I was going to have a little morning cream before my coffee. I slid down to it in a flash, and began to suck him. Nothing fancy, just lick and jerk. In less than a minute, he gasped and shot his load. Mmmn. Just the thing to start the day. And so full of vitamins too! A girlfriend of mine maintains that come is better for the overall picture than multivitamins, which, you'll have to admit, aren't nearly so fun to get out of the dispenser. I might agree with her. At least, I'd like to think so. It's produced great results for me. One of these days I just might have to do a scientific survey—"The Effects of Oral Ingestion of Semen on the Physiology of Homo Sapiens Females." Ah, Matutinalia!

And thus it was that I found a helpful guide for the White Rose Festival. Lee seemed to know everybody who was anybody, and there were quite a few anybodies.

The Honoré de Balzac Ballroom remained a mixing area for quiet conversations over drinks or snacks. Booths displaying the various paraphernalia of the New Age were located in the Voltaire Auditorium, with lectures and various speeches taking place in the Hall Descartes, located between the previously mentioned rooms. Of course, since most in attendance spoke English, the programs merely listed them as “B,” “V,” and “D” for short.

We started at V, browsing through the booths. A quick shower and an exquisite breakfast of omelettes and orange juice in the hotel restaurant had set Lee and me up for the official beginning of the White Rose Festival. After a quick tour of the booths in V, we checked the drinks in B, before proceeding to hear the various speakers in D.

The program opened with a typical “Hi folks, glad you could make it” speaker—a redhead by the name of Bernadette Faber, who was just flawed enough in her features to be truly beautiful. She had that classic young Bacall look, with a touch of Joan Crawford thrown in. She explained the purpose of the festival, what there was to see, who was there, and so forth. I forgot what she said as soon as she said it. There was polite applause, and the first speaker was trotted off to make room for an Indian holy man, who invoked every deity he could think of for ecumenicism’s sake, and gave a blessing.

Then there was a break before the first actual lecture of the day by an ecology writer of some note.

Lee and I headed for B and another round of Bloody Marys. B seemed to be where it was happening. Immediately, Lee saw an old friend, and we were invited to join him at his table.

He was introduced as “Winfield Thomas gladta-meecha.”

“How do you do?” I replied, and seated myself.

“Winnie’s involved with the Hydrogen Economy Study Center,” Lee explained. “Aren’t you, Winnie?”

The man in question, who was blond, tanned, and just this side of thirty, smiled. “Bloody nuisance, that name,” he said in an upper-middle-class British accent.

“And just what is a ‘Hydrogen Economy’?” I asked.

He winked at me. “You might say it’s an attempt to let the economy pass gas instead of the politicians blowing hot air.”

I kept a straight face. There was a twinkle in Winfield Thomas’ eye. Immediately, I liked his sense of humor. “Oh?” I asked. “And just how do you propose to break this wind on the general public?”

“Dunno,” he said in perfect deadpan. “Beats the shit out of me.”

We all laughed.

“It’s an easy enough concept,” Lee said.

“Sure,” Winfield added. “Hydrogen instead of electricity as a secondary energy source.”

“Why would anyone want to get rid of electricity?” I asked. “And—in *English please*—what on earth is a ‘secondary energy source’?”

Winfield and Lee exchanged glances. “You tell her,” Lee said. “You’re the pro.”

“Okay,” Winfield said. “A secondary energy source is a source of energy created by another primary energy source like, say, the sun. Sunlight can’t run a factory. But electricity *can*. So, with solar cells we convert sunlight into electricity and run the factory. It’s alchemy in a way: we transmute very subtle energies into other energies. An auto converts the latent chemical energy of gasoline into a small explosion of light and heat—fire—and then that explosion is converted into mechanical energy—inertial force—which sends pistons pumping, and a cam shaft spinning—rotational force. The rota-

tion is transferred linearly to a U-joint—transferred to a plane perpendicular to its rotation—and this spins the wheels. Now, that centripetal force turns the wheels on the highway and we shoot forward to the supermarket in our new Datsun.”

“Whew!” Lee said. “Have another drink and slow down.”

“That was the hard part,” Winfield said. “In a sense you could say that gasoline was the secondary source. It was the middleman. A car can’t burn oil—it won’t explode correctly. So we distill gasoline from oil, and burn the gasoline. A dam, a windmill, or a nuclear reactor all do the same thing: they convert a primary energy into a secondary energy that can be transmitted. Our group merely advocates using hydrogen instead of gasoline and electricity. We could solve the energy crisis in fifteen years, only because hydrogen increases the *efficiency* of transmission. Electricity loses eighty-five percent of its energy in transmission. Did you know that?”

I shook my head.

“Ah, but hydrogen loses less than two percent in transmission—by pipelines and trucks, in this case. That’s enough energy to use for a century in just a few months’ current production.”

“But isn’t hydrogen dangerous?” I asked.

“Hindenburg syndrome,” Winnie said with a smile. “Do you know who was killed in the Hindenburg explosion?”

“No,” I said.

“The people who jumped. Look, hydrogen is the same as gasoline or natural gas, which we’re already using, only hydrogen is actually less explosive. In the Hindenburg, the gas merely exploded harmlessly *upward* and floated to the ground. Not at all like a DC-10.”

We all laughed. I liked this Winnie. He had a bubbling sense of humor, and while his mind seemed to work in a very complex manner, his way of explaining

things was basically simple. “All right, all right,” I said. “You’ve convinced me. Where do I sign up?”

“Wait!” said Winnie. “You haven’t even asked when it will run out.”

“Is it worth it?” I asked.

“Could be,” he said.

“Will I regret asking?” I asked.

“Probably,” Lee said.

“Undoubtedly!” Winnie laughed.

“All right,” I said. “When will hydrogen run out?”

“Just before the sun dies down,” Winnie said, “which is a good thing. That way, when we run out of fuel next time, we’ll know that the sun is about to go out, and we can all prepare for a relaxed, languorous apocalypse.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Welcome to the New Age, Christina,” Lee said.

“Cheers!” quoth Winnie Thomas.

I had the distinct impression I’d run into the Mutt and Jeff of the Space Cadet Corps. We ordered another round of drinks.

Winnie was the sort of man who designed and built large buildings; he had that feeling of an engineer about him. His fingernails were bitten short so that each finger looked like a monk, in a way. On his left hand, there was a slight discoloration, caused no doubt by a wedding ring stored away in his suitcase upstairs. This was, after all, a convention. I smiled.

“What are you looking so smug about?” Winnie asked suddenly.

“Just counting my millions,” I said. “Pay no attention.”

“Watch out for her,” Lee said. “She’s a little *strange*.”

“Oh?” I intoned imperiously. “I feel ‘weird’ is a more uh, *adequate* description.”

Winnie laughed. Lee leaned over conspiratorially. “See what I mean?” he asked.

“That I do,” Winnie said.

I was feeling flirtatious, frisky, and more than a little tipsy. Otherwise this sort of thing might have gone on all afternoon. Fortunately, we were saved by the arrival of a tall bearded man who looked like he'd been born with a Sierra Club membership in his mouth.

"Winnie! Lee!" Woody Woodchuck said.

"Randy Rasmussen!" Lee said. "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Same old thing," Rasmussen said. "You?"

"Another novel," Lee replied.

"Another kid," Winnie said. And looking at me, added, "Whoops!"

I winked. "I think your tan needs a mending," I said. "And I'm Christina van Bell," I told Rasmussen. "If someone here would have the good manners to introduce me."

"Pleased to meet you." To Lee: "Is she the . . ."

Lee smiled. "No, she's not the dragon lady. She'll be here later."

Winnie was examining his left hand. He started laughing. "Ah, I see! Yes, very good. Thank you, Christina."

Lee looked at me. "What?" he asked.

"Private joke," I said. "Let's not let our guest stand." I winked at Winnie. He winked back.

Rasmussen pulled up a chair. He ordered a beer, which I gathered was the strongest drink he took, and then only on special occasions, from the way he looked at it when it arrived. Kirin. A light Japanese beer.

"So," Lee said. "Any progress on the Sun River project?"

"It's coming," Rasmussen said. "Congressional hearings in June, but we've basically got the go-ahead."

"Sorry to hear about Lefty," Winnie said. "Good man."

Rasmussen nodded, and I remembered. Sun River project. Fatality in the final phase of the geothermal plant. I'd read about it. In *World*, of course. Where else? So this was the young unflappable project chief who'd calmly stared down twelve snarling Congressmen

and waltzed out of Washington with a \$20 million appropriation for geothermal testing in the middle of a meat-cleaver budget session. Evidently, this man knew how to get his way.

"Blowing off steam?" I asked innocently.

Lee shot me a withering look. I stuck out my tongue.

"No," Rasmussen said. "I'm here to meet some colleagues on a new project I'm working on."

"'Blowing off steam,'" Winnie said. "It was a joke, Randy." Then, to me: "He's known far and wide for his total absence of a sense of humor."

Then I understood Lee's look. No sensayumor. What a total pain in the ass. I mean rilly. Totally to the max groddey.

"Oh, I've got a sense of humor," Randy Rasmussen said. "I just keep it safely indoors where it won't harm children and small women."

Lee missed it. I smiled. Definitely the sort of man who gets what he wants. Question was, did he want me? And if so, did I want to be wanted by him? In a very real sense, he did strike me as basically humorless, and that's dangerous territory as far as I'm concerned.

But even this didn't last long. We were almost immediately joined by Leigh Taylor-Ross, who even I recognized from the many articles and stories which had been done on Feil'ann, an Irish agricultural commune of sorts. They were doing incredible things there with plants—cabbages as big as watermelons, carrots the size of baseball bats.

"Leigh!" Winnie said, and bade her sit down.

The amazing thing about all of this was not so much that all of these people were here, but rather that they all seemed to know one another, even though their work was so different. I had the strange sense that they were all working for the same company, albeit a highly diversified one.

And what the connection was, I couldn't at first fathom until I reached into my purse and pulled out my program. There, under the unicorn graphic, I started

taking my notes for the eventual article. I looked through the Rio program and saw that whatever point of view was represented, it had to do with rearranging the physical characteristics of society for the future. These were the builders, the doers.

"And who might this charming lass be?" Leigh Taylor-Ross asked, jerking me from my pondering. She was a stunning woman, perhaps fifty, but with the vibrance of any twenty-year-old. An Irish earth mother, she seemed to have stepped full grown from an illustration of Rhiannon in the Mabinogi.

"Christina van Bell," Lee announced, "meet Leigh Taylor-Ross."

Pleased I was, and she.

"Perhaps you've heard something of our work?" she asked pleasantly.

I nodded.

"Well, then," she said with a lilt in her voice, "we'll not have to trouble you with it, shall we?" She laughed.

I felt very strange. It was not sexual at all. I just felt as though being a friend of this woman was the most important thing I could be, and that being close to her was all I wanted from life. I think they call it charisma, but that is too tame a word. I understood the press's fascination with her.

"No," I said, extending a hand. Her handshake was firm and gentle. Quite a woman.

But again there was no time. Another fellow, who looked like he'd stepped from the pages of *True Adventure* magazine, stepped up.

"Any word on Georgie?" he asked.

Leigh Taylor-Ross smiled and shook her head.

Georgie—Georgiades? I wondered.

"Have a seat, Trav," Winnie said.

"Travis Darkhorse," Lee whispered. To Darkhorse: "How's Crow River Lodge?"

A tall, rangy Indian. "Just waiting for the apocalypse," Darkhorse said. Then followed yet another round of introductions. Talk about a cozy little crowd.

Pretty soon, there were no less than fifteen people in the room: environmentalists, alternate-energy-source people, conservationists, survivalists—you name it. But builders one and all. Everyone had some pet project they were building, had built, or were scraping money together to build.

Finally, Travis Darkhorse got into an argument with Randy Rasmussen over pessimism versus realism.

Something like this:

Darkhorse: It's pessimistic to think we'll use the bomb?

Rasmussen: I'm just saying that there's enough of a chance that we won't warrant us working to *save* things.

D.: And I'm not saying that?

R.: Frankly, no.

D.: And what do you think I *am* saying?

R.: That we might as well find a nice island somewhere and stick our heads in the sand. At least I'm trying to save what we've got.

D. Really? And what if this unimaginable thing happens? Where is all of your optimistic planning? I'll tell you: it'll be smoking rubble, like everything else. And my people will be happy with our foodstuffs, and our self-contained technology, and we'll be sharing it with all the optimists who haven't got a hope in hell of keeping themselves alive on their own.

R. And if it doesn't happen, you'll be sitting on a mountain of dehydrated apple chunks, and we'll be that much farther behind.

D.: Behind what? You couldn't hope to change the structure of our present civilization in two hundred years. There are a number of possibilities, and none of them are nice.

R.: Great. Just run away. What about computers and information? If we can get our networking on-line in the next five years, they'll have to come to us.

The communications network will be run by conscious individuals, not conglomerates.

D.: (Smiling.) And what about the conglomerates? Do you really think that those in power will meekly bow to your vision of the future—even if it is a better one? You're living in a fool's paradise if you do.

R.: Maybe. But remember the Quakers. They've been standing up to the power structure for four hundred years and winning. And there's a lot more of us now. According to the Stanford Research Institute, we're twenty percent of the population now. That's the one-in-five threshold.

D.: (Shaking his head.) The problem is, I *agree* with you, Randy. But that kind of change requires a price, and when the old civilization goes, it'll go with a crash. We're trying to set up a framework for the next one.

R.: So are we.

D.: Then we're doing the same thing.

R.: (Laughing.) I guess. At least whoever's right, the basic idea will win out.

D.: I'm not against it.

R.: I just think you're wrong.

D.: That's okay. I think the point was that it was all right to disagree.

R.: I disagree! (Laughter.) No, I can see your point.

D.: Great. Now, what I wanted to talk to you about was computers.

R.: In the woods?

D.: Sure. They're portable, don't use much energy, and are just as adapted to post-holocaust civilization as pre.

R.: If you say so. But sure. Let's talk.

And off they went, to come up with another way of saving the world. I was beginning to see why Malcolm was having difficulties dealing with this crowd. The term "space cadets" hadn't been given them by acci-

dent. Still, there was something exciting about it all. The fact that such natural adversaries as Rasmussen and Darkhorse could come to any terms was evidence that something *was* happening, and it was quite different from what we usually expect.

Heady stuff, I suppose. And for one who'd just fallen down a rabbit hole, I felt that I comported myself well. So this was what the New Age crowd was like. And Sydney would probably be even stranger. There, the real space cadets would be lobbying for space stations side by side with tarot readers and people with names like Swami Ghkjashajhdk and Sunshine Moonchild.

Well, that was certainly nice. I personally wondered whether, when the lights were out, they fucked any differently than anyone else. Which was, after all, half of my reason for coming (no pun intended). If I *couldn't* find Georgiades, I was at least going to get laid. Often and well.

We stayed for a time, and talked our little talk, drank our little drinks, and smiled our little smiles. It was deadly dull, after a while, everyone talking about their work, agreeing and disagreeing, exchanging information and contacts, and generally plotting the overthrow of the current status quo. I was reminded of that wonderful little gentleman in *The Quiet Man* who, leaving John Wayne, remarked that it was a fine evening to drink and talk some treason with old friends. I knew this much: wherever the revolution of the sixties had disappeared to in the seventies, it had merely gone underground—*really* underground, as in taproots. And here was the proof. I had the feeling that this trip wasn't going to be at all what I expected. And so thinking—and still feeling reckless—I carried onward with my program of finding and capturing the elusive Mr. Georgiades.

Later, after the interminable speeches and after the drinks and the endless discussions and after a sad sort of little man spent his every spare moment modulating a beautiful speaking voice into a screech that filled the

room so that everyone could hear and see and watch this sad lonely man—later, I slipped away from the brouhaha and the old friends, and I found a quiet alcove where I could stand for a moment and watch.

“Sad, isn’t it?” a voice asked from behind. It was Winnie.

I nodded. I understood his tone. “So much life, so much talent, and there’s still all the loneliness and pain.”

I turned and he smiled, saying, “*C’est la vie*, as the French say. Everyone in that room is running from something, hiding behind a wall of work, work, work.”

“You?” I asked.

He smiled a sad smile. “I suppose,” he said. “You?”

It was my turn to smile. “No,” I said, but he knew what I meant.

“Play is work too.”

“Shh,” I said, putting a finger over his mouth. “One day I’ll grow up. But not now. Not today.”

Later we made love in his room, on the terrace in the moonlight. It was a sad sort of lovemaking, bittersweet and melancholy.

We made love for all the lonely people, and for the two lonely people in our room. He, a married man trying to forget the attachments, and I, a single woman trying to imagine them. A sad sort of lovemaking, but sweet. We went on and on, trying positions, kissing, caressing. For hours we put off the ending, neither wanting to come, neither wanting release.

While we were joined, we could touch another, feel another, and on that night, in the summer breeze and moonlight, that was the only thing that either of us wanted.

I do not know why it happened. Perhaps it was the wall that I always see when I’m with people. In a sense, I suppose I’m shy. That was what made me a photographer. It trained my eyes to see people as they really are. I took a picture once, when I was covering riots in India, and the chief of police was motioning an angry,

confused crowd back. You could see it in his eyes, the sadness. He didn’t want this. Didn’t want to even be here. But it was his duty, and he would have to blow the whistle around his neck and send his officers into battle against a crowd containing his friends and possibly his family. The photo was up for a Pulitzer, but I felt ashamed, and I withdrew it. It reminded me too much of my own sorrow, and I hated it. I felt as though I had stripped that man of his soul with one click of my camera.

Now, I cannot forget my training any more than I can forget to read. When I look at people, I see them, and very often I wish that I hadn’t. Not because of anything horrible or hideous. And not because I despise them. But I think it’s because I see myself, and contrary to what anybody says, in the misery of existence nobody loves company.

So I close my eyes and do my best to forget the tragedy that life so often is. And I pull away from the crowd to be alone. And I find a warm and willing body to share my pain with. That night it was Winnie, and all the Winnies and all the ghosts who had ever crossed my path were in the room that night.

I did not like that melancholy, but it would not go away. So we made love in the dappled moonlight and spoke the language that lovers speak, played the games that lovers play, and took our pleasure as lovers do. But we were not lovers, and pleasure is a very poor salve for loneliness, so we finished up and I left without a word.

It was a long, sleepless night.

CHAPTER THREE

Sulieman Jones was at my door at precisely nine A.M. I heard the knock through a strange dream. I was in a strange country where everyone wore yellow, and I was the only one wearing red. They didn't seem to mind, but I did, and finally I was so embarrassed that I hid myself in a closet. In the closet there were many clothes, but all of them were red. I kept searching the rack for something yellow, but I couldn't find anything. And then, someone began to knock on the closet door. There was a sound of laughter—not unlike the laughter my aunt used to make when I was little, laughing at childishness, but with affection. I didn't like that laughter. I wished the laughter and the knocking would go away. I wished that there was something in the closet that was yellow.

And I realized that it was the door.

"Who's there?" I yelled, waking.

"Lee."

"It's open."

He came in, wearing a modified dashiki, which was seeing the weather—a pretty good idea. It was yellow.

"How's the girl?" Lee asked.

I rolled out of bed. I caught my reflection in the mir-

ror. The bed looked better than I did, and it looked awful. "Great," I said. "Never better. You?"

"You wandered off last night. I was worried."

"I need to be alone," I said grumpily.

Lee smiled. "Well you picked the wrong time. I had someone lined up for you to meet."

"Lee," I said, "the last thing I wanted last night was to meet one more person. Didn't I meet just about everyone in this hemisphere who speaks English last night?"

He shrugged. "Bernadette Faber would like to meet you. I trust you've heard of her?"

I searched my memory. "Adventurer?"

"Author, scientist, and other things. The first woman to climb the south face of K2. Yeah, that's her."

"And why might I want to meet her?" I asked.

"She likes to meet her guests. She's the lady what runs dis show, ma'am," Lee said. "Course, iffen youse don's wans to meet wif her . . ."

I sighed. "Look. I'm sorry. I . . . Coffee. Nice and hot, black and strong."

He smiled. "That's better. Why don't you do a couple of lines and I'll be right back."

I did and he was, with a pot of coffee thick as mud. Two cups, and I was flying. I'm always amused at my friends who gulp coffee and tea and cigarettes and staunchly maintain that they're drug free. Maybe it's because we're so used to caffeine and nicotine and chocolate that we've forgotten they were originally classified as dangerous drugs. Soon after the pernicious cocoa was brought to Europe via the New World, priests were rushing everywhere trying to get the nuns to stop sipping chocolate in mass. I guess they just had a Hershey bar on their backs. At any rate, caffeine sets off a definite reaction in me. I try to take it sparingly so that it will have the effect I want when I want it. It had the effect I needed then.

I pulled on a bikini and a beach caftan of madras cot-

ton in red, and followed Lee downstairs to the dining room. There, a breakfast fit for a queen awaited us—croissants and eggs in marvelous ways. Which was wonderful, since I don't usually like meeting people first thing in the morning. Add to that the intuition that I wasn't going to enjoy my encounter with whatever-her-name-was, and you'll see why I needed a wholesome, nutritious breakfast. I get plenty of rest, exercise, and a good diet. But just to be sure, I have sex once a day. It's my life—I think I'll keep it.

Thus, as the last of the dishes were carted away and I sipped a demitasse of exquisite coffee, Bernadette Faber approached the table, right on cue.

Lee rose. "Bernadette, I'd like you to meet Miss Christina van Bell." One more introduction and I was going to kill Lee.

She was a striking woman. No, "striking" is not the right word. She was a truly beautiful woman, and I felt an immediate sense of self-consciousness. She was perfectly made, with, as I said before, just enough flaws to make her truly stunning. Her nose was a bit crooked and her mouth a bit thin. Her jaw showed a pronounced underbite that somehow enhanced her features. But she was a redhead, hair the color of pink copper in the sun, and my old Chinese face-reading lessons told me that jut-jaw equals ego, the more the bigger. She extended a perfect hand. "Charmed," she said in a vague contralto, warm and smooth as desert honey.

I answered. It was difficult not to be awed in the presence of this woman.

"I understand you're our sole representative of the press," she said, not unpleasantly.

I think it was the coffee—I mean, it must have been. I was feeling reckless again, and like an idiot I didn't see it until it was too late. I was on a collision course of another sort, though I didn't know it. "Yes," I said. "I thought I'd do something impossible for Christmas this year like interview G. I. Georgiades."

Her eyes narrowed. The smile turned sour. "Then

you definitely *have* picked an impossible task," she said. And left. Pleasantly.

Inwardly, I kicked myself.

"How to make friends and influence people!" Lee quoted.

And I knew it.

"Really, Christina," he said.

"Totally wrong?" I asked.

"Without a doubt, the prize-winning Hoof-In-Mouth performance of the year."

"In other words, she's not thrilled with the idea."

"Let me tell you something," Lee said.

"Lay it on me, bruthuh," I replied.

"I'm not too thrilled about it myself."

"All right, interviewing Georgiades isn't such a good idea," I agreed politely.

"My opinion is not."

"So don't push it," I said, reading his look.

"Too late," Lee said. "You just pushed all the wrong buttons. That's one lady who's gonna stick close as glue from now on."

"Oh?" I asked. "Is it me or my deodorant?"

Lee laughed. "A little of both," he said. "I don't know if you know this. It isn't any secret that she grew up in a poor family."

"Who didn't?" I asked. I'd paid dues.

"That's not how she sees it," Lee said.

"What makes you so positive?" I asked, with a trace of bitchiness. Still reckless after all these years, Lord.

"I'm a writer," Lee said. "People and people-reading are my business, and what I saw was one very pissed off lady. Add the fact that she hates women generally, and you're in the deep shits, I'd say."

"She hates women?" I asked.

"I don't know if she knows it, at least consciously. But it's been obvious to me for a long time. She always gives herself away."

"How?"

"Tone of voice, a slight stiffness. Little things. But

I've learned that people will tell you everything you need to know about themselves in five minutes without saying a word. You look at their posture, how they focus their gaze, how they sit and stand. It's all there for anyone to see. I'll tell you a little secret," Lee said. "I'm always having people come up to me asking how to be writers. And I always tell them to get inside the other person. But do they do it? No. They are concerned with *themselves*, and *their* writing, and how they feel. A couple of them write best sellers now. And the hilarious shame of it all is that once you start to watch people—other people—you find out that they're just as scared and lonely and afraid of you as you are of them. It's being a one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind."

"You could tell all that?" I asked, tongue in cheek.

"Sure," Lee said. "For instance, I can tell right now that you have absolutely no interest in all of this, that you're going to interview Georgiades anyway, and that you'd like to fuck."

"All that?" I said. "And you're really sure I'd like to fuck?"

"Absolutely," Lee said. "Although," he added, "it might not necessarily be me you're interested in."

"You'll do," I said with haughty demeanor. "Shall we repair to my lodgings?"

"I've got a better idea," Lee said. "Are you afraid of heights, by any chance?"

I shook my head.

The view was spectacular. Way down, you could see some ants that were people, and some matchboxes that were houses, and in the steaming heat, Rio de Janeiro was laid out like El Dorado in the midday sun.

Lee's idea turned out to be the tram up Sugarloaf, which, by virtue of a happy bribe to the sleepy attendant, was entirely ours to command for the trip up. We had perhaps half an hour.

"Come here," he said, and I did. There was a strange tension between us, as though the barriers were up, and

a strange reluctance. Then he kissed me, and suddenly the barriers were gone, the human forms replaced by the gods of heat. His hands were all over me, barely touching, but desperate to make sure that everything was there. I took his head in my hands, running my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. He moaned, and I felt his cock hardening against my leg, and even through the layers of cloth I could feel the heat.

He thrust himself against my mons, and ground his cock against me as I felt my knees weaken, and my hips rotating against his in mutual need.

His hands roamed over my breasts, found the button that held the front of my blouse, and reached in to cup them, first one and then the other. Mouth to tit, then nipple biting, then nipple tonguing. Past mons and Venus, from slit so sly to curve of derriere, bringing us by commodious recirculation back to mouth muscle and environs.

Ah, I felt like Molly Bloom, unchained and free to frolick fuck fondle and fancy. His cock sprang into my hand lubricated with his delicious fluids. I stooped to catch a driblet of his effluvium. My tongue circled the crown of his prick, velvet and flared like Spanish coronation armor. I tongued the cleft of his prick and caught his balls with a quick hand. "Now I've got you," I whispered. "Your balls are in the palm of my hand."

He looked at me questioningly.

"And you're gonna shoot your nice thick load when I tell you to, aren't you?"

He stared at me.

I squeezed his sac. "Mmmn," I purred. "Is this load for me?" I began to suck him slowly, taking my time with his prick and balls. I milked his shaft slowly, teasing up the foreskin to my lips and sucking a little. And again.

Lee's hips began to buck slowly.

I began to make soft purring noises around the head of his cock, humming gently on the tip. The gentle swaying of the gondola and the endless expanse of sky

above made it feel like making love on a cloud. It was fortunate that I am not subject to acrophobia. Instead, I mouthed Lee's lengthening shaft while we hung suspended among the heavens. His hand found repose in my hair, and he grunted in pleased surprise as I found ever-changing rhythms and textures. My pussy was flushed, and the old black magic was beginning to rumble in my loins. I needed this man. What tomorrow would bring, I couldn't say, but for the moment, in that place and time, I needed him.

I rose, taking him in my hand.

"I want it," I breathed in his ear, biting for emphasis.

"It's all yours," he whispered while his hands cupped the cheeks of my ass through my dress, pulling me to him.

I parted the folds of my skirt and drew my panties aside, mounting him with the same motion. I felt his heat penetrating me, steel and velvet. I wrapped a leg around his, and leaned into him. He planted himself against the side of the gondola, and began to pump into me, taking my waist in his hands and steadying me for his thrusts. Slow and powerful, each drew a gasp to my lips as he rammed me. No pretenses here: he took me, each stroke a statement of mastery, deep and unstoppable. I melted backwards, opening myself to the inevitable. He held me as a child holds a rag doll and rammed himself into me again and again, taking his pleasure from me. I could merely hold on.

Below us, Rio was laid out like a child's playroom, and birds of prey circled in the sky. The ocean glinted, reflecting the gold of the sun, and I rose in the heavens, impaled on Lee's cock. I felt as helpless as a mare quivering beneath a stallion. I opened myself still wider, and he fucked me with a depth and ferocity I could scarcely believe. But for the engineering of Mother Nature, I'd have been split apart, but she planned for this eons ago.

A primal fuck—I was as helpless as a leaf in the wind, rising farther and farther toward heaven. Lee grabbed

the hair at my nape and forced my gaze on his as he began to move faster and faster in rhythm.

"Take it!" he grunted, and blasted into me.

And I opened like a rose, exploding with him. I could feel it jetting into me, splashing up against my cervix, and some overflowed, dripping down my inner thighs. I was had: fucked and finished off, opened and spattered and porked and planted. Pure yin.

All the while we continued to rise into the heavens amid the fleecy clouds.

Lee pulled out of me, and I felt hollow. He forced my mouth to his cock, and I licked him clean. I caught a dribble from my cunt, and tasted him as I looked into his eyes. He reached inside my blouse and took my breast roughly, as though stamping it with his ownership.

"I'm getting hard again," he said.

We were now close enough to the peak that those waiting to go back down could see us. "But the people..." I whispered.

He grabbed a handful of blond. "Suck," he said.

His cock was in my mouth even as I tried to protest again, and I could only open to him again as he fucked my mouth with his swelling cock. It was even faster this time, and before I knew it another bolt was spilt, this one overflowing yet again as a thin strand dripped down from my chin to my blouse. I swallowed as he continued pumping in my mouth and I felt thoroughly taken. On one level, I was almost insulted. This *was*, after all, the age of equality. But on another, more primitive level I could only feel sort of weak and weepy. At that level, I was fulfilled. At that level, I existed as a fertile plot of earth, readied and willing. And I could only feel a strange love for the plow which had opened me, and the seed which had been sown in me.

Some of these things are ancient.

The gondola locked into place, and we disembarked. A couple from America, Kodaked and Bermudaed, stared at us as if we had arrived from Alpha Centauri, but Lee's look froze them, and they looked away. Ditto

some local *machos*, who seemed to fancy the idea of a dark-skinned man fucking a nice American *huero* goddess. Instead of embarrassment, I felt an animal pride, and I could lock gazes with anyone on the platform. All looked away, embarrassed.

Strange, I think, that the pure expression of anything seems to freeze people, to make them uneasy. I did my best not to think about it. I just tried to feel.

We did not talk about it at all. We didn't even speak until we were back down on the ground. Then we spoke as if nothing had happened, sensing, perhaps, that to put any bit of it into words would destroy the pleasure of the fuck.

I still masturbate to that secret movie late at night when my "sophisticated" mind isn't watching. And I never speak about it. To anyone.

Later. Bad Bloody Marys and good margaritas at a real wood table in the Balzac Ballroom. Lee fondling my pussy under the table, and yet another acquaintance spotting us across the room. Who would believe that one man could know so many people?

"Ramón Santayana," Lee whispered sotto voce.

"Joy," I whispered. "Who or what is a 'Ramón Santayana'?"

"Shhh." To Santayana: "Ramón! Back from Antarctica so soon?"

"Not back. I just flew in for the festival. Any word on G?" Santayana was a dark, slim man, with that look of an Indian guide, or a hunter of the deep rain forest.

G? I wondered. There were entirely too many odd references lately. I studied Lee as he answered.

He glanced sideways at me. "Not a thing," Lee said.

"Los Angeles, I'd say."

Santayana nodded. Then he saw me. He raised an eyebrow at Lee.

"Ramón, this is Christina van Bell," Lee said.

"Had I known you knew such creatures, I'd

spend less time in the snow." Then, taking my hand: "Charmed."

"A pleasure," I said. "The name's familiar, but I can't place it."

He smiled. "An ecologist," he said. "Few have heard of my work. You surprise me."

A genuinely humble man. Not interested in talking about himself, this Ramón Santayana. Of course, that is the one form of bait that draws out the journalist in me. "I'm certain that I have somewhere," I said.

Lee smiled and said nothing.

"Perhaps it was someone else," Santayana said.

"Perhaps it was," I replied.

"May I have the honor of the next round?" Santayana asked.

"It's free," Lee said. "But you could order. Your choice."

I nodded in assent.

"Stolichnaya," Santayana said. "On the rocks."

"Not straight?" Lee asked. To me: "He always drinks it straight."

"It's too hot here," Santayana said. "I need something cold."

We laughed. Antarctica to Rio is quite a jump.

"And you, pretty one. What do you do?" Santayana asked so suddenly that I felt compelled to answer him.

"I publish a magazine. Uh, *World*. Magazine, I mean."

"I have never read this *Uhw*orld magazine," Santayana said, looking apologetic. "I'm certain that it is a well-put-together magazine."

Lee laughed at the double meaning of Santayana's innocent remark. Ramón looked at him.

"Have I said anything wrong?" he asked.

Lee sighed. "No, Ramón. It's just that it could have been taken in other ways."

Santayana looked at me gravely. "I did not mean to offend you, señorita. If I have, then a thousand

apologies would not suffice.”

I hoped that Lee would take this the right way. To Ramón, I said, deadpan, “You could always fuck me then.”

Lee fell out of his chair laughing.

Santayana looked bewildered. “What is this ‘fuck’?” he asked.

I couldn’t believe it. The only English-speaking person in the world who didn’t know what “fuck” meant.

Lee lay on the floor, howling. “You’d better educate him, Christina!” he gasped.

Well, I guess when all’s said and done, I *do* know how to break the ice at social get-togethers. Now what was I to do? Santayana, being the obvious gentleman he was, would blanch like a turnip when this was all explained. “Uh,” I said.

Ramón was not sure whether to be offended or amused. Puzzled, he looked. “What is fuck?” he asked in a louder voice.

The bartender turned around.

Everybody who was doing their best to ignore Lee began to take notice now. Lee was in convulsions. I didn’t know what to say.

“What is **FUCK!**” Ramón demanded. “**FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!!**” Ramón yelled. “What is?!”

The servants began to giggle. In the corner, a lady from the Save the Seals Foundation turned white.

Lee howled louder every time Ramón said “fuck,” and Ramón yelled it louder every time Lee howled. Women began retreating in earnest now. Handbags were hastily scooped, and high heels chattered on the floor like insects.

“What is **FUCK!**” Ramón screamed.

People from the lecture hall began to cluster at the door. Passing maids stopped their carts to watch. And I wanted to suddenly become liquid and slither through the floorboards. A man near our table was trying to leave the room, but was finding he was too drunk to navigate successfully. Lee was roaring out of control.

The drunk careened off of a table filled with geothermal engineers, spilling food and drink all over their carefully laid out charts and graphs.

One of the engineers grabbed the drunk, and belted him. Somebody took the drunk’s side, and belted the engineer.

Soon, the Balzac Ballroom looked like Dodge City on a Saturday night, and furniture was flying thicker than an explosion in a sofa factory. An armchair took our table out from under our drinks. Santayana spotted the offender and heaved a nearby chair in his direction. The fighters took this as an open invitation, and our little island of placidity was suddenly engulfed by the mob.

People were spilling in from the auditorium to defend their compatriots, and the barmen were putting on a manly show of defending the bar from the rampaging mob.

Lee was still howling with laughter when somebody caught him in the gut with a well-timed right, and he staggered back into Ramón and me. The wind was knocked out of him, and he was making horrible noises—the sounds of somebody trying to laugh after they’ve had the wind knocked out of them. Ramón plunged through the melee, swinging wildly.

And all through it, he was still yelling “**FUCK, FUCK!**” at the top of his lungs. Sort of an impromptu battle cry. The room resounded with the cry, as though someone had loosed a rabid, mutant chicken into a kennel of Chihuahuas.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t saying a goddamn thing. But I *was* fighting as furiously. The Seal Lady and her crony were attacking me, wielding their outsize purses like heavy maces. I grabbed a chair and did my best to keep them at bay.

Lee, meantime, had regained his breath and was working his way through the fracas toward me. In the distance were the sounds of sirens. Luckily, Lee is so goddamn big that he could simply lift people and throw them out of his way. Behind him, protecting his rear,

Ramón held several Sierra Club members off with a plastic liter bottle of Dr. Pepper.

At last they reached me, and together we formed a flying wedge for the doorway. The house detective tried to stop us, but with Lee in the lead, we were scattering bodies before us like bowling pins. We made the door just in time to spot the police coming up the hall. We turned the corner quickly, and after tossing a couple of bellboys out of the way, Lee led us to an elevator that was just opening.

I don't know if I can say just how he did it, but somehow he managed to insert his frame into the elevator and pop ten or fifteen people out of it while dragging Ramón and me inside. We went up.

Fifteen floors later we jumped out and took the stairs up to my penthouse. I had the feeling that as far as views of the future were concerned, I'd just left a pretty good pre-enactment of World War III.

We flopped down just inside the door, and Lee started laughing all over again, which started me, which started Ramón, and before we knew it, we were all rolling on the carpeting with a terminal case of the giggles.

How long this went on, I don't know. But eventually we managed to pull ourselves together enough to speak.

"There is a moral to this," I managed to gasp.

"What . . . what's that?" Lee stammered weakly.

"Never yell . . ." I began to giggle. "Never yell 'fuck' in a crowded bar." I giggled uncontrollably. Lee and Ramón howled.

And so on until our lungs ached.

Finally, we sobered our demeanor enough to partake of the crystalline essence of coca, prepared, as mine was, by the finest craftsmen of the Peruvian hinterlands, and ferried to me with great trouble and expense by several Peruvian fishermen, whose bon mots and witticisms formed such a portion of my dialectic when roused to anger. In other words: we snorted nearly a full gram of crystalline coke.

The intended effect was to prolong our euphoria, but

something strange happened. Instead of the golden rush of ersatz pleasure, there was instead an increased clarity, and almost at once I felt a sense of shame. Downstairs, there were several people, some of whom I knew, who were paying for my loose words. I've always believed that my freedom ends where another person's nose begins, and I reflected that I'd overstepped the bounds of my freedom. I had been feeling reckless, and now several other people were paying for it in bruises and perhaps jail cells.

It was suddenly not as funny as I'd thought.

I had been feeling reckless. That was the whole problem. Ever since this whole affair had started, I'd been pushing and shoving people around, not caring who or what got in my way, and with the clarity of the coke, I felt a great need to apologize and face the music. Perhaps it was because of people like me that Georgiades felt compelled to maintain his anonymity.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it. It was easier to pretend that the whole thing was a lark, and that I wasn't responsible, and my mind began cranking out rationalizations with the speed of a Kord-25 cranking out tabloid pages. Soon I'd convinced myself, and when I emerged into the real world again, Lee and Ramón were discussing something *heavy* with nary a glance in my direction.

Such is the nature of the dream we live. I could suddenly withdraw to a dimension of the mind and just as suddenly reappear to find my fellows off on the astral planes, oblivious of my reappearance in the world. Which is fair, I suppose, since I had disappeared first. The fact that our physical bodies shared approximately the same space through all of this seemed to make it all right. Odd, isn't it?

Lee was saying, "And then Ron got the grant, of course, but since funding was going to be cut off in the next fiscal year, there wasn't much point in going ahead with hiring staff and acquiring research materials."

"He must have gotten something," Ramón said.

"Some hardware and supplies, but if he hadn't wasted all that time on documenting the grant proposal, he'd have ended up with nearly twice as much."

"A sad waste of talent," Ramón said, "that we must depend on popinjay bureaucrats and political establishments. I fear that we become what we must deal with."

"And you don't think there is any hope?"

Ramón shook his head sadly, "None that I can see, my friend. Our civilization is like a set of Japanese Christmas tree lights. When one light goes, they all go. Only in this case, I fear that by the time a spare light has been found, the children will have burnt down the house trying to light the candles."

"I do have several friends who are interested in setting up a conduit," Lee said.

I noticed that as long as I appeared deep in thought, they took no notice of me. I looked appropriately transfixed by the ceiling.

"Good," Ramón said. "Now convince your friends that they are merely investing in a real savings account, like their Swiss ones. After all, pieces of paper or gold don't mean much without an economy. I doubt that they'll go for it."

"They may," Lee said.

"When you have dealt with as many as I have, you soon find that the old ideas are fixed. Once, in Caracas, I burnt a hundred dollar bills in front of a merchant while explaining that it was only paper. He burned both hands rescuing the bills from the fireplace. The hospital bills on his hands ran into the thousands of pesos, but he still feels that he made a hundred free dollars. They cannot think in terms of anything other than paper, friend."

"I suppose not," Lee said. "But perhaps some do. I have a friend in St. Louis who will not deal in any form of currency whatsoever. Everything he transacts is in the form of barter. A warehouse in New Orleans for a boat in Singapore. He's worth a lot of boats."

"He will help us," Ramón said with finality.

"There are others. G knows of several behind the Iron Curtain."

G! The references were too numerous. My ears pricked up. Unfortunately, the conversation drifted off in another direction, and I was left in the dark again.

Well, that was that, I decided. And the coke clarity seemed to be creeping downward. It was time to interject myself into the conversation. Besides, who could sit through all that technical junk about solar collectors and ocean thermal gradients?

But I did remember where I'd heard Santayana's name before. It was in an article we'd done on the Survivalists—people who don't hold out much hope for Western civilization and stockpile those items needed to survive the coming holocaust. There was one group in particular called the Vultures. And Santayana headed it.

The Vultures were an odd group even by Survivalist standards. Where most survival groups tend toward paranoia and xenophobia, the Vultures were friendly, well-organized, and fairly open. They ran several expensive seminars during the year, wherein they would train people in survival under the most rugged conditions, which included everything from building fire from a pair of sticks found in the forest to building generators, radios, and even computers from parts salvaged from junkyards. Complete self-sufficiency was their goal, and their credo was that the future belongs to those who can scavenge effectively. Hence their name. And I knew why Santayana had flown in from the desolation of Antarctica. A tough bunch of dudes, Malcolm had called them.

"Now I remember you," I said to Santayana.

Santayana's eyes lit up. "My secret is uncovered."

Lee laughed. "You're so damned poor at being humble, Ramón."

"I'm in practice," he said. "It's getting better." To me: "And I know you. You're the rich *gringa* lady who squanders one of the finest photojournalistic talents on the planet."

"Yes," I admitted, shocked. He'd nailed me. I wanted to crawl under the bed. A strange sense of shame flooded me.

Lee laughed again. "It's all right, Christina. Civilization's going to hell in a handbasket, so what's a few pictures more or less?"

Lee had his tongue in his cheek. But he'd nailed me too.

They exchanged glances.

"You're the papa Vulture," I said.

"At your service," Santayana replied, mercifully changing the subject, for which I was eternally grateful. "Is there anything you'd like to know?"

I shook my head. "Not really," I said.

Ramón smiled. "That's a relief. I become very tired of answering questions after a time."

"She's not like that," Lee said. "I get the feeling that she knows what she wants to know about you. She's an excellent observer."

"So I noticed," Ramón said. "And have you observed, little one?" he asked me.

I smiled. "This and that," I said.

"Now, perhaps you'll tell me what this 'fuck' means," Ramón said.

Lee snickered.

"Stop that," I said, and kicked him in the shin. He shut up. "The last time you did that, all hell broke loose," I said sweetly. "Ramón, you wish to know what 'fuck' means?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Good," I said. "I'll tell you. 'Fucking' is what a man does between a lady's legs." Ramón blanched. "But," I continued, "that doesn't really capture the nuance or the subtlety of the term."

Lee stared at me.

I continued. "Fucking is a gut term. It's one of the old Anglo-Saxon words that nobody can really handle, so we usually say 'make love' or 'have sex' or 'ball,' all of which are euphemisms. When a man says to me,

'Let's fuck,' I at least know he's honest. If he says 'Let's make love,' I know he's a bullshit artist.

"But *fuck* isn't just a verb for copulating. It's the king of the English language. You can use it as a noun, as in 'I had a great *fuck*,' or as a verb—'*Fuck* you'—or as an adjective—'*That fucking asshole*'—or as an adverb—'*You'd fucking well better not do that.*' You can utilize it as the all-purpose term in English-language conversation, to wit: '*That fucking asshole fucking wants to fuck me. He can fucking well go fuck himself for all I fucking care.*'

"There is a vast panoply of usages for the word. You often hear *fucking asshole*, or *fuck you*, or *get fucked*, or he's trying to *fuck me over*, or *fuck off*. None of these have anything to do with what a gentleman does between a lady's legs.

"And, of course," I continued, "the term gains added emphasis when used with the prefix 'mother.' *Motherfucker* is of course an original term for a man unable to transcend his Oedipal urges, but the word itself, like *fuck*, has a context much greater than its original meaning. It is a term useful in altering the meter of speech, when *fuck* begins to become monotonous. *MUH-thu-FUCK-er* has a melodious rhythm. Let me see . . . Here's a good example. You've just dropped a piece of lumber on your toe, and you're explaining that it really hurts. To merely punctuate your discourse with *fuck* wouldn't quite communicate what you really want to say. Thusly: 'I dropped a *fucking* two-by-four on my *fucking* toe, you *fuckhead*!' It doesn't really communicate the deeply felt emotion of the moment. This is when *motherfucking* really comes into its own: '*Fucking shit! I dropped a motherfucking two-by-four on my fucking toe. Motherrrrfuck!*' You can even add another *Fuuuuuuuuck* afterwards as a sort of coda. You can see how *motherfuck* adds an essential rhythm that mere *fuck* couldn't."

Ramón nodded. Lee nodded. They seemed to be enjoying this.

“Of course,” I continued, “*fuck* and its antecedents have a long and somewhat confused history in English. An entire mythology has been built up around this word that everyone uses but no one will admit to using. And so in print for centuries, *fuck* was notable by its absence. Latinisms and turns of phrase were imported into the language to avoid using the term in print, but it was never *copulate you* or *fornicating hell*. No. *Fuck* exercised a magical power over its practitioners, capturing the imagination of all English-speaking peoples in all ages. *Fuck* has been the greatest democratic word in the language, a term used, in all its manifestations and variants, by poets, priests, philosophers, and scribes, not to mention by coal miners and chimney sweeps and working men of all ages. The king and the serf may have had nothing in common, save that they both screamed ‘Fuck!’ when they stubbed their toes.

“In the early sixties, the word finally was allowed into the presence of polite society, to an extent, finding its way into a few bold dictionaries. Immediately the etymologists paid the price of having shunned poor *fuck*, as they would have shunned a leper. They could not figure out where *fuck* came from. Some Victorian wag had suggested, in a clandestine magazine, that *fuck* derived from an ancient acronym, and proceeded to tell a shaggy dog story about how in certain instances unwed persons could, with the consent of the king, engage in sexual dalliance. Therefore, *fuck* really meant *Fornication Under Consent of the King*—which anyone with brains will realize is a joke. Unfortunately, etymologists usually tend to be persons utterly devoid of a sense of humor, and they dutifully reported in their dictionaries that *fuck* came from this source.

“Fortunately, someone sane inadvertently was shunted into the odd world of etymology and noticed immediately that this derivation of *fuck*’s mysterious origins bore about as much semblance of sanity as saying, ‘If you pick up a Chihuahua by its tail, its eyes will fall out.’ This hardy soul traced the obscure origins of

the word *fuck* back to Middle English and a term *fucken*, a Germanic verb meaning to strike or penetrate. Of course, it’s still termed slang, and called ‘a vulgar term,’ but it was real progress. Slang is usually a term that comes in and out of vogue, like ‘twenty-three skid-doo,’ or ‘groovy,’ and it makes about as much sense to call *fuck* slang as it does to call the English monarchy a transitional form of government. And then there’s the moral judgment of ‘a vulgar term.’ Well, what can you expect from the sort of person who calls a john a ‘com-mode’ (which means, literally, something convenient), or refers to a cunt as a ‘vagina’—which only means sheath—or calls a rubber a ‘prophylactic,’ which means something that prevents disease, and could just as easily mean soap and water, usage-wise. Still, *fuck* has to bear the terrible onus of the lexicographer, and fuck now enjoys a usage comparable only with such words as ‘the,’ ‘and,’ ‘but,’ and ‘I.’

“But lexicographers still disagree, and there is no universally accepted origin for *fuck*. To which, I assume, *fuck* would respond ‘fuck ’em.’ ” I stopped to catch my breath.

“Essentially correct,” Lee said.

“Marvelous!” Ramón said. “Now I can see why the brouhaha began. A powerful word, this ‘fuck.’ ”

“You can say that again,” I said.

“A powerful word, this ‘fuck,’ ” Ramón said obediently.

I rolled my eyes. I had forgotten the literalism that anyone not fluent in a tongue gives statements made in that tongue.

Lee giggled.

“Go fuck yourself,” I said, and we all began to laugh.

“Sounds good to me,” Lee said. “I’d better get downstairs and check out the carnage.”

“We’ll all go,” Ramón said.

“No,” Lee said. “There’s only a need for one sacrificial lamb. Stay here. I’ll be back in a bit.”

He left, leaving Ramón and me to our own devices.

Ramón looked at me.

I looked at Ramón.

“Do you want to fuck?” Ramón asked.

I don’t know if it was the devilish glint in his eye or the innocent and unfamiliar manner in which he used the word, but there was no question about my answer.

“I’d be happy to have you between my legs,” I said graciously, and then we were laughing, and then we were kissing. The transition was barely conscious. One moment we had been acquaintances, the next, lovers. There was a sudden sense of heat and all barriers dropped.

CHAPTER FOUR

There was a psychic heat in the room.

You couldn’t say whether you felt it with your skin or with your soul. But it was there.

Ramón closed with me in a warm, open kiss. There was an immediate recognition. His hands closed over my breasts and ran over my body in appreciation. His touch was the promise of exploration, and he made a small noise, as an artist makes upon seeing some object of beauty. He appreciated my body, and I felt a little strange, since I tend to take it for granted. I certainly didn’t get as much enjoyment as he from its form. His hands returned to my breasts, squeezing me just where breast meets arm, and down the side, finding a sensitive spot and moving over it with a gentle caress.

God! I wasn’t aware that my body could feel such things. It was as if someone had given him a map of my nervous system and asked for a recital. And then his hands were moving down across my belly, touching me here and there, to my thighs, where he circled and returned back to breasts and neck. There was no doubt that what he was doing was by design. He seemed to know exactly what each touch and caress would do for me. And I was almost frightened by him. It was nearly

CHAPTER FIVE

Fingers on the cool metal of the zipper. The rounded tongue metal against my skin, drawn down. No underwear. A thick forest of pubic hair. My hand gentle against him as I seek, locate, extract his cock. Uncircumcised, purplish-colored shaft, with a ridge of twilight color along the foreskin. Cock head light and moist, like a dog's. Like a horse's cock when he takes a piss. Pulling the pants down. His ballocks heavy and hanging low, like a bull's. I take the head in my mouth. Animal taste, animal scent, so thick and heavy that I have to accept it completely or retch. Total surrender to the act. A drop of semen oozing. Clear and slightly viscous. I lick it with my tongue. He's light and sweet, in contrast to his scent. Come changes taste and flavor. From man to man. From time to time in one man. Now, he was clear and clean, like mountain snow-water.

Sucking. Licking. I took it deeper.

Moaning. From him. His hands in my hair. Forcing his cock into my mouth. Pulling me up. I don't want the intimacy of full fuck—instead my eyes say *it's all right. I just want to suck you off. I swallow it. No trips.*

He seems satisfied. I suck. Heavy balls in my hand.

My tongue snaking out of my mouth to sideswipe the undershaft at each swipe. Hand and nails to the drumskin of belly and abdomen, pulling his energy down, bringing his mind to his cock. I can hear him. He's *here* with me as I suck. The taste renews itself in my mouth. Little dribs and drabs of come, little reminders of his scent. The smell is thick and hot around us, stag in rut, mare in heat. I suck.

I suck the head, play with his balls. I pump the shaft, let him use my mouth as a cunt, set the pace. Hand to tit, and nipple pinching. Face to fuck and man moaning. Cock to tongue and back again. Pumping him. Squeezing it off and bringing it back up. Thermometer rising, and he grabs my head and grunts, shooting it into my mouth. I feel the first blast, like thick gravy. I swallow it in time for the next spurt. Less, but still tasty. Less still on the next contraction. Cock spasming in my mouth. A few dry pumps from nature's hydraulics, and a final ooze. Dry well. Move on to the next one.

I pull my dress up and button. I head back for the hotel, but am intercepted by Riviere and LaRoche. They take me to a nearby building. Inside, an old Apollo simulator, loaned by the U.S. government. We pile in. Undress in the narrow seats like contortionists. I end up sprawled across the three seats, buttons digging into my tits and thighs. In the far seat, Riviere is playing with my cunt. Middle seat is my torso, and far seat opposite is my head in LaRoche's lap. They turn on some of the board and my ears are assaulted by the incessant chirping of the radio on scan. It's picking up a few seconds here and there in a mad demonic/unique broadcast that's making sense in a strange way, though we're the only people on Earth receiving this broadcast.

I allow myself to be manipulated. LaRoche's cock is in my mouth, and it tastes nothing like Dark's. Riviere has inserted two fingers in my cunt.

Radio: "Brush your teeth, Brush your teeth, Brush . . . in my vaginal area, and I'd never seen anything like that before . . . Lebanon today, thirty leftist Phalangists

. . . whipped the Dodgers in twelve innings. Scoring came off the bat of . . . President Reagan's ranch in Santa Barbara, where he expressed shock and outrage at what he termed . . . basting is best done every ten minutes or so, but if you want to do it every five, you're perfectly . . . within God's perfect plan for your life. He didn't TELL you to take the money. He didn't TELL you to buy the plane tickets . . . to war-torn . . . Anaheim . . . U.S. Marines . . . House Speaker 'Tip' O'Neill . . . recommended by the American Council of Dental Therapeutics. . . ."

Odd. The radio only seemed to be picking up American programs and news. On the tubes, several cable channels. LaRoche wrapped my hair around his cock, and began to masturbate with it. Riviere inserted a well-slicked finger in my anus.

I watched the programs, fascinated.

Woman unbuttoning her blouse. Italian, impatient, tearing it. Nixon resigning. Road Runner laughing at poor Coyote. David Bowie's new video of Australia. Commercial for Calvin Klein jeans. Johnny Carson. Stock footage of Brezhnev's funeral. Bogey and Bacall having a spat. John Wayne. Ronald Reagan on "Death Valley Days." Ronald Reagan on Capitol Hill. Commercial for Water Pik. Elizabeth Taylor on the cover of *People*. An interview with an average housewife. An actress playing a housewife on a soap. A housewife on hidden camera. An actress pretending to be a housewife buying laundry detergent. A sex therapist answering questions about housewives. A game show host hugging a housewife. Goofy trying to ride a horse. Charlie Chaplin. Me, with Jean's cock up my asshole.

I suddenly came out of the strange hypnotic torpor the televisions had put me into. It was closed circuit, and Jean really *was* fucking me in the ass. LaRoche was masturbating to the image of my violation with the tresses of my hair. He seemed oblivious to my presence.

I was watching the Italian's thick cock going in and out of the girl in the porn movie. They cut, but you

could see come on her chin. John Wayne stepping off the LVT onto Iwo Jima. Going to commercial. A man in a cowboy hat selling cars. A madman selling stereo equipment. A jeaned actress selling herself. You had to buy the jeans, though.

Footage from Vietnam during the Tet offensive. Chicago in '68. An old clip of the Jefferson Airplane at Monterey. A fifties atom bomb test at Bikini. Fay Wray. Gary Cooper. Mae West. Steve Reeves. Ethel Merman. Ronald Colman. Farrah Fawcett. Guy Williams as Zorro.

Batman was cozying up to the Cat Woman when I felt the warmth on my scalp. LaRoche had popped his wad in my hair. I saw that Riviere was ready to come, but I saw it in his expression on the television. Perhaps he was acting for the camera. I heard him grunt, and then he too came. I could feel it jetting into me, warm and deep.

I resolved never to smoke so much marijuana again.

Fade out.

Morning came, and so did Georgiades.

My spies at the main desk rang me to tell me so.

I dragged myself out of bed and jumped in the shower. I remembered to turn the shower on when I realized that the bar of soap felt funny on my skin. I was lagged. I tried to wake up, but I was sort of half there, seeing the world through a thick layer of gauze.

I threw on an outfit, realized that it was all wrong, and went to my closet to try and pick out something that would be just right. He was speaking in half an hour. I had to hurry up, but I couldn't seem to focus on what I was doing. Finally I just said fuck it and threw on jeans and a T.

I hastily collected my mini-35 and my microcassette, and locked myself out of my room. There wasn't any time now. I ran down the hall and punched the elevator button. I waited. I punched the elevator button again. It didn't help, I knew, but it made me feel better. I waited. I started banging on the elevator button, and it came,

empty. I got in and punched "G" and it just sort of stood there ignoring me. I punched "G" again, and nothing happened. Finally, the elevator doors closed, and we went down, the elevator and I. One floor down. Some lady was trying to drag her poodle into the elevator. We pretended we didn't know each other. Another wait. Another eternity. Another floor.

At last I arrived at the shuttle area. The last one was disappearing down Pitt Street. I grabbed the doorman and had him hail me a cab. No cabs in sight. He went inside and picked up his little phone. He came back out.

" 'E's on 'is break. Sez 'ill beyout inna minute."

I had him repeat it until I understood what he was saying. The cab driver was delayed in some way, I divined.

An eternity later, he came ambling out of the Mile-Long Bar. "Wehtolov?"

"The Opera House, and step on it," I answered.

I'm glad I didn't ask him to just hurry. If we'd been merely hurrying, I'd still be in that cab. We arrived at said Opera House, I paid, and went in. A security guard stopped me.

"ID?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've got it right here in my purse." I scrounged through my purse. My press pass wasn't there. Oh, shit, thought I. All the way back to the hotel? I goddamn was not. I patted my jeans. Press pass was there, thank God.

The security guard checked my pass. Behind him, another guard was closing the door, and putting up a sign. *Lecture In Progress*, read the sign. *No Admittance*.

"Looks okay to me," said the guard, and turning, added, "Oh, I'm sorry, miss. You can't go in there."

"What the fuck do you mean I can't go in there?" I asked.

"Sorry, no admittance after the start of the lecture," he said. "That's the rules."

"But I was here before the lecture started!" I said.

He stared at me stonily.

"If you wouldn't have been fucking around looking at my press pass, I'd have been in in plenty of time."

"Move along, miss," he said, grabbing my arm.

I yanked it out of his grip. "Leggo, pigfucker!" I said.

"Now come on, miss," he said, and seemingly formed a wall of Rent-A-Cop that pressed me back, farther and farther from my goal.

In the background, a little old lady emerged from a side door and was let into the auditorium by the other Rent-A-Cop. I howled, pointing. J. Edgar Hoover didn't waste a glance. I was propelled back away from the Opera House.

I managed to sneak back in the direction of the auditorium. I was at the door. Locked. The Rent-A-Cops were conferring a little way from me. I put my ear to the door. Here and there, I heard Georgiades' voice, rich and deep. I couldn't really make out what he was saying.

For nearly half an hour, I played cat-and-mouse with the Rent-A-Cops, hiding behind some nearby shrubbery when they checked the door. Once, someone came out of the auditorium, but as luck would have it, I was cut off by the turkeys in blue. I caught a glimpse of the speaker's arm. Well, I thought cynically, if I ever see him, I can always identify his arm.

Finally, I could tell the lecture had ended by the applause. The doors swung open and a long figure emerged. Here was my chance, thought I. I made a beeline for the door, just in time to meet a flood tide of humanity head-on. I was pressed all the way back to the street.

By the time I made it inside the auditorium, it was deserted, and the smirk on the Rent-A-Cop's face told me all I needed to know. You got this feeling that my inability to get into Georgiades' lecture was no accident. I had the feeling that "F" had quite a bit to do with my predicament.

That was when something tall and black ran into me.
 “Christina! What are you doing out here?”

It was Sulieman Jones.

“Lee?” I asked. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I came to see if I could help you out,” he said. “I got the feeling you’d need it.”

I told him what had happened. He shook his head and told me he’d made a tape. “We can go back to the hotel and listen to it, if you think it’ll be any help,” he said.

We took the shuttle back to the Sydney Excelsior.

It was a strange tape. Some of it was audible, and some was not. The problem with bootlegs, I suppose. But the snatches of intellegible conversation I heard seemed as Dark, LaRoche, and Riviere had made out: that you could just about support any given point of view with Georgiades’ statements. There was something hypnotic, even compelling about that voice. And I felt that I had been given a definite challenge. So they weren’t going to let me within a hundred yards of G? Well, we’d just see about that. I had a little bone to pick with Ms. Bernadette Faber in the meantime too. But I *was* going to find Georgiades, if it took all damned year. All right, I thought, you’ve fucked around with the wrong girl, kiddies. If Miss Faber thought that she was going to get rid of me as easily as that, she had another think coming, Rent-A-Cops or not.

Lee clicked off the tape when it had finished.

“The quality’s not too red hot,” he began.

“Never mind that,” I said. “It was fine. And thank you for showing up when I needed you.”

“The cavalry always shows up in the nick of time,” Lee said. “So what’s your next move?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’m going to assume that Georgiades is staying somewhere here in town. Now I’ve just got to find out where. I’d wager that Miss Bernadette Faber might have something to say on the subject.”

He looked at me. “You’re not serious.”

“Well, yes and no,” I said. “I was thinking more about body language.”

He smiled. “I think I know what you mean. And yes, she does have a little something going on with G.”

Of course. It fit. That was the reason for Bernadette’s enmity toward yours truly. She was having an affair with Georgiades. No wonder she was so damned hot on my ass to try and stop me. And I’d blundered right into it. I was reaping the results of a whole lot of recklessness this trip, I reflected ruefully. Well, there was nothing to be done at this point. Just do my best to try and bull through. But maybe next time I’d have the good sense to keep myself out of these messes. Knowing me, I’d go charging in next time, just like this time, and the time before that, and the time before that. Rehabilitation is not, I fear, a word in my vocabulary.

Now was the time for the big push. I had Georgiades in my sights, and with any luck at all, doggedness would pay off. Lee roused me from my revelry. Or self-indulgence.

“I’d wager she’s going to see him tonight,” he said.

Sun was setting. It was hotter than a fresh pizza outside, and muggy. I didn’t really feel like braving the heat, but duty being what it was, I said, “Sure.”

Seldom has a single word been more recklessly uttered, or with rottener consequences.

“Let’s go then,” Lee said. “I rented a car at the airport.”

Great car. It was one of those Japanese jobs that they don’t sell in the U.S.A. It was called a Sandpiper, and the most complimentary thing you could say about it was that it had upholstery. The engine made that happy sort of noise usually associated with putting chicken bones in a blender and hitting *puree*. No radio, no air conditioning, and in place of dials and gauges, they gave you a magnetized needle and some string.

In our best Kojak imitation, we waited half a block away from the Pitt Street exit to the hotel.

Dutifully, Bernadette Faber emerged, and taking a

waiting Black and White Cab, she headed north. This, Lee took as an invitation to vehicular homicide, and we proceeded north with Christina clinging on for dear life. We crossed over the Harbor Bridge, although I have to say that I was never so happy to leave a bridge in my life. I had this distinct impression that we were going to get a good look at the underside of the structure. On our way down, I mean.

The cab continued to head north and east, and I noticed that the architecture was getting ritzier the farther north we traveled. It seemed that Sydney was organized with the poorer sections to the south, in the direction of the airport, and the wealthier sections moving north.

We followed the cab for about an hour, until we saw that Bernadette's final destination was the marina area. When she got out, so did we, and followed her at a safe distance. She wended her way through the intricate network of the marina docks admirably, which is more than I can say for us. We had a hard time keeping up with her. Over and over again, we took the wrong turn, and ended on a dead end. We had to retrace our steps several times before we finally lost her.

I don't know where she went. One minute I saw her, and the next minute she was gone. She had walked behind a long sailboat and didn't emerge.

I ran to the spot where I'd seen her last. No trace. The sailboat was clearly uninhabited, so it wasn't there that she'd disappeared to. We continued looking, heading off in several likely directions in the dark. Before long, we were completely lost. I had lost any sense of direction whatsoever, and Lee was as befuddled as I.

Yup. Lost. In the dark. And with that labyrinth of piers and boats, I couldn't even tell which direction was ocean and which was land. We were definitely lost.

"We're lost," I said to Lee.

"Naw," he said. "Not really. I can retrace our steps."

"Lead on," quoth I.

And so he did, leading us still farther and farther into

this Sargasso of the leisure class. I began to have visions of never finding my way out when a form popped out of a nearby yacht and dove into the dark brine. I never saw him reemerge. Great, thought I.

Lee's idea of retracing our steps was great, except that we seemed to be retracing certain routes several times. It was much like being lost in a maze. It *was* being lost in a maze.

At length, a head poked out of a nearby boat. "'Avin trouble, mate?" it asked Lee. The speaker was a gap-toothed fellow with leathery skin and blond hair. His face looked like someone had worked out math problems on it with baseball cleats. Or perhaps it was just the ravages of the final conflict between the forces of Goodness and the forces of Acne.

"We seem to be lost," Lee said. "Perhaps you could tell us the way out?"

Leather-face pulled his head back into the boat like a turtle. Another face appeared. "*Ja! Ist ein schwarze!*" It disappeared. The first head reemerged. "'Oo's the filly?" he asked.

I whispered to Lee, "We'd better get out of here."

He whispered back, "Good idea." To Leather-face: "This is my employer, sir. And I suggest that you refrain from using vulgarity in her presence."

"On three," I whispered.

Leather-face seemed puzzled. "Don't come the raw prawn wif mate!"

"One . . . two . . ." I counted.

"Not at all, sir," Lee said politely.

The other fellow appeared. Eichmann's kid brother, I guessed. I noticed that these guys had biceps as big around as their heads. "Hey, *schwarze!*" he yelled.

"Three!" I said.

We turned tail and ran like hell. No sense in getting killed on our first meeting with the natives. Behind us, there were footsteps on the planking of the dock.

We stumbled around in the dark for several minutes before the sound of footsteps died away. That was when

we fell in the water of the marina.

There was this unfinished dock, see, and Lee was behind me, looking back. I saw it just in time for Lee to bump into me, and we fell, a tangled mess of thrashing limbs, into the salty brine. I inhaled a little water and came up coughing and sputtering. Lee came up a second later. We swam for the near piling, and then I looked behind us. There, sitting by the water where we'd left it, was our Sandpiper. I never thought I'd be glad to see that miserable excuse for a car. We dragged ourselves out of the water and dripped over to the car. A soggy hour later, we were sitting in my bathroom wrapped with thick hotel towels, drinking warm brandy that room service had brought up.

You see, Lee had this great idea of rolling down the windows to dry us off on the way back. Well, I had the idea, but Lee agreed to it, so it's just as much his fault as mine. What with the high humidity, and the wind-chill factor, we were on the verge of double pneumonia by the time we got back. We thought that the shivers were caused by our near-brush with danger and physical harm. We chattered all the way back before we noticed that for a summer night, we were both freezing and colds were on the way.

It was as much his fault as mine. That's what I say.

So we were sitting there hacking away, and trying to smoke a joint (which was really bright, I must say) and gulping brandy down to soothe our throats. And Lee says to me,

"You wanna go to an orgy?"

And I think about it and decide that this is a pretty good idea, even though it's a bit weird, and I, like a dummy, say yeah, it's okay with me and end up getting myself in a whole bunch'a trouble.

I had attired myself in frills and finery. Lee was dressed casually in slacks and a shirt. Evidently there was a science fiction convention happening in the Excelsior at the same time. I had seen them scuttling here and

there around the hotel. Lee, as a science fiction writer of some stature, had been invited to a little soiree in one of their suites, invitation only and Rent-A-Cop at the door. There would be coke and champagne.

I wanted to look my best.

I figured that it would be a lot of fun. After all, science fiction people tend to be among the most intelligent class of people, right? And many of them jet here and there all year round, attending the endless round of conventions all over the world, right? And they all probably look like Harrison Ford, right?

Uh-huh.

By the time I'd made that little discovery, it was too late. Immediately upon my entering the room, all heads turned in my direction. It was a fascinating response. In the eyes of every male in the room I could see only one thought—somebody's going to fuck her and it isn't going to be me.

Add to that the fact that the overall wardrobe was either two sizes too big, or equally small, and undoubtedly from the seconds rack at J. C. Penney's, and you'll get the idea. Well, maybe you won't. I'd better elucidate further. They weren't really much different from other sorts of people. It was just that if, as they say, clothing determines class, these folk had no class at all. These were the outcasts, the untouchables, at least by the standard of personal hygiene. But they weren't that bad looking. I wanted to do a Shavian paraphrase, and remold them, redress them. They could, with a little spiffing up, have been accepted anywhere.

The coke was great, though. And the champagne.

Did I ever tell you what I think of champagne? Good champagne? Great. That way I won't have to struggle for inadequate words. Korbelt. Mumm's. Piper-Heidsieck, brut and extra dry. Pink and white. Cordon Negro (Lee thought that one hilarious) and Cordon Blanc. Such champagne as I have never seen. Somebody had done his homework. As a matter of fact, the trouble with science fiction people was, as I saw it, they always

did their homework. They just didn't ever bother leaving home once they'd done it.

In the next room, the orgy was getting started. Happily, the lights were dim in there and bright in the other room so that those who wished to remain clothed would, and those who wished to undress would use the darker room. It makes for a more relaxed orgy that way. From what I could see, the SF folk were practiced at orgying, since everyone knew what meant what, and where and with whom. With whom? Whomever.

The champagne was having its effect on me. Someone had procured some KB. I inquired after Foster's and was met with stares of cool rebuff. Didn't I know, someone told me, that Foster's was a *Victorian* beer? Maybe it was okay for Melbourne (which was filled with stuck-up Brits), but this was *Sydney*.

Don't ask me. Such insanities are endemic to the race. In Texas, you'd damned well like Pearl or Shiner. In Colorado, Budweiser is a dirty word. Gimme a Coors. Henry Weinhard is the name in the Northwest, or Hamm's. Old Milwaukee? Well, make sure you know where you are. Australia was no different. To me, beer is beer. Oy vey.

In the next room, things were coalescing. As with most, the removal of clothing had facilitated a transformation. People looked like people. Clothes make the man, as they say, but nekkidness shows the man. Some of these dudes were okay.

Of course, there were inevitable exceptions. And the women tended to be built along Rubenesque lines. Especially one who stands out in my memory. Red-headed and pallid, she was all tits and flesh. Pink and doughy as freshly boiled shrimp, she was going down on a fellow who had been pretending to be Hemingway. You know the type: the military epaulets, the thin mustache. Trying to look as though he'd be at home in a khaki baseball cap, which was exactly what he was wearing.

And in the corner, some guy with a Prince Valiant

haircut going down on a skinny blonde who was as white as a fresh clam. That sort of wedge-of-lettuce look to his hair, as though someone had poured epoxy over his hair and cut it using a bowl.

A faded hippie in an even more faded fedora. All hair and hat. Another hippie—long straight hair and a straw hat. A short fellow trying to get it into tolerable upness. The dwellers on the vestibule.

Dante visited hell, so they say. And there was a circle wherein those who were not good enough for Heaven nor evil enough for Hell dwelt. They remained in the limbo of the vestibule. Perhaps he spoke of ones like these.

But I was being too critical. These were people, after all. I didn't remember much of Georgiades' speech, but I had been impressed by a single statement that now sprang to mind: "Judge your brother at your own peril—he'll judge you right back." I wasn't perfect. What right had I? Too much champagne, I thought. No. That wasn't it. I was just being young and snotty. It becomes the adolescent, but it wasn't much good for being an adult. So I was being reckless again.

I looked again. Coke and champagne and that most potent of all drugs, conscience. They weren't bad people. Just odd. This was the clique for those who didn't fit into cliques. And they were doing what all the cliques do eventually. Getting down to that most basic level of sex. Who was I to judge?

Fuck it, I decided. Skin is skin. I wandered into the back room and removed frills and finery. Why not? Hadn't G said that we should plunge into the experience of living? God! I was already under the man's spell. One badly recorded tape, and I was taking the things he said to heart. But they made sense. I decided to fuck and be fucked, and let the karma fall where it may.

There was a fairly good looking gent, alone, white bearded and wise in a Santa Claus sort of way. But in the corner, drinking a Foster's was a tall blond fellow, a little spare tire around his middle, who looked like a lion

with blond beard and a crown of hair that pulled straight back like a mane.

Something about him: he didn't give a goddamn for convention. He was watching it all with great good humor and didn't seem to care in the least that he wasn't getting laid.

That was my man.

I waltzed over to him. His eyes met mine. He seemed uninterested in me below the neck, just in looking into my eyes as if he were looking right through my sham. Whatever he saw, he saw what I really had on my mind.

"Loneliness is the chief malady of the human race," he said.

"Who says I'm lonely?" I asked.

"Your eyes."

"And you can relieve my loneliness?"

"Never said that. I'm just commenting."

"Are you with these people?" I asked.

"To change the subject, sure," he said. "At least I'm occupying the physical space."

A strange dude. An American, it seemed. He seemed as interested in talking to me as not. That is something that I won't abide. "What do you do, O man of mystery?" I asked.

"Sit at parties talking to pretty girls."

I flushed. The bastard. I could see that in a sense, he was laughing at me. "Cute," I said.

He looked at me the way a grandfather would a favorite granddaughter. "So upset," he said. "And such a nice blond cunt too."

I double-took. He was fucking with my head. "You're fuckin' with me 'ead," I said.

"Sure," he said. "But I don't mean any harm. You're lonely and I'm trying to cheer you up."

"And what makes you think that I need cheering up?" I asked.

"Ees my chob," he said. He laughed.

I saw that he wasn't laughing at me. He was, in a funny way, laughing *with* me. Definitely, I thought.

This is the one for me. "So I'm lonely," I said.

"Yup."

"Well, maybe you could make me feel a little less lonely?"

He stuck out his lower lip in mock disapproval. "Fucking isn't the answer."

"Yeah," I said. "But it's a hell of a lot of fun."

He sighed. He smiled, and I was completely bowled over. Such pretty blue eyes. Such dimples. Such a cute ass. "You want to fuck?" he asked.

I smiled. It was my turn. "Maybe," I said. There was, after all, the chase to attend to. It's in the genes and chromosomes, when all is said and done.

"You want to fuck," he stated.

I pouted. "Sir, you abuse my honor," I said.

"I'd rather abuse your clit," he said.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. He said it in such a detached way. I was intrigued. I was interested. I was aware that everyone in the orgy room was staring at me.

"Let's split," he said.

I was never so relieved. "Yes," I agreed.

On the way out, Lee caught us.

"Watch out for that guy," Lee said seriously. "He's crazy."

I could see that his concern was real. But I'm nothing if not a judge of character in males. This fellow, whoever he was, was most definitely not crazy. He just marched to the beat of a different drummer.

We repaired to my suite.

I pulled out a fresh gram.

"Ah," he said. "False euphoria."

I looked at him.

"It's okay," he laughed. "There's nothing wrong with a little false euphoria now and again."

I liked this man. He made me laugh.

We tooted a little coke. He bent me over the bed and removed my panties. I began to protest.

"Shhh," he said. "This is the best part for me."

He was wrong. It was the best part for *me*

I don't quite know how he did it, but, having what we in the girl business call a "hung tongue," he proceeded to interface with my autonomic nervous system almost instantly. I felt his tongue on my feminine portions, delving into me. He traced the terra incognita of my cunt-labia, inner thighs, clit, mons, and cunt itself. Hands and strokes.

"It's wonderrrrrful!" I purred.

He purred too. Right on my clittie. Christ! Such a *mensch*. I writhed. Hands and fingers traced arabesques on my body. I was made aware of nerve routes that I had not known existed. Down the side of the tit, shiatzu pressures that sent me fluttering upward. Little hummingbird flicks of his tongue that drew me up and up. And then slowing the pace, finding a plateau where I could stop, and taking me higher still.

I'm not sure exactly what I thought and felt. I guess you could say that it was purple. That's the only way to describe it. In an odd fantasia world, he was worshipping me, and I felt the archetypal female within me responding. His tongue was in some magical, mysterious manner performing a sacrament within my flower, and while he worshipped at my shrine, he was in not the least debased in so doing.

If anything, he was becoming less and less a mere man and more a force of nature. I could feel his cock throbbing, even though I had no contact with it. There was an overload of sexual energy in the room, perceivable only on certain unreal levels. But it was, someway, there just the same. I was on the verge of climaxing. He pulled away from me.

"Would you prefer to come this way?" he asked.

"No," I moaned. "I want you inside me."

He had managed to shed his pants while valiantly tonguing me, and now his cock sprang toward my waiting pussy. I could not help a single sybaritic appraisal, and I grasped it before he put it in me, checking its girth and length. He was hung, although not unnaturally so.

He was longer than average, but the width made all the difference. He had one of those wonderful tapered cocks—wide at the head, narrow at the base—so that as he entered me, I felt his shaft in the deepest recesses of my quivering quim.

I felt filled up, and he made sure that I stayed that way, drawing it out teasingly and plunging it in again, slowly. He didn't seem in any hurry, thank God, and I settled in for a long, hard ride.

He drove into me, his hands all over my tits and ass, taking a certain sybaritic pleasure in my body. No. More the pure enjoyment of a pig at a trough, though I don't mean he was a pig. Just totally abandoned to fucking—so very few men can do that. Or perhaps only with a total stranger, where you don't have any ego to protect and you can let it all hang out.

Or all stick in. You know what I mean.

I responded in kind, grabbing the muscled cheeks of his ass, and delighting in the firm movement under the skin as he pumped again and again into me. That feeling of appreciation, of awe you get when you watch one of the big cats pacing his cage at the zoo. The rippling muscles of the lion. And the rippling muscles of the loins. He was driving into me, arms supporting him, with my legs hiked up around his shoulders as he rammed me into the bedsprings. Heaven. I swear to Christ you'd have sworn that the bed was a musical instrument and he was using me to play it. Just enough pressure on the springs for me to rise in counterthrust to him, meeting his cock with my mons on each stroke. I couldn't take much before I began to moan and wriggle.

"Oh, let me *have it!*" I moaned.

He didn't say a thing. I clenched my legs around his neck and my cunt around his cock. He just rammed it in harder. No fair, I thought. *I'm* supposed to be in control. Uh-huh. He slowed the pace just as I was tantalizingly close to the edge and speeded suddenly just as I was sliding back. I went off like a skyrocket. All sparks and a trail that got lost in the clouds. I sighed and flut-

tered. He began to fuck me his way, riding my cunt in the ways that would give him the most pleasure. He rotated me on his prick 180° and began to fuck me from above, wrapping his arms around my tits and slamming deep into me. You can get a lot deeper from behind. I felt his balls slapping up against my cheeks with each stroke.

He scissored my legs together, and I felt my cunt tighten around him until it was nearly unbearable. I twisted my head around and bit his neck, and he responded by clinging even harder to my breasts. I could feel his sweat dripping down onto me, running down my legs, my sides, into my hair, and even into the crack of my ass. Hot and steamy sex. Just the way I like it.

And then he grunted and I could feel him jetting into me. Seven full spurts. Some of it managed to dribble back out of me and run into my pubic hair. It was delectable. It was delicious. It was too bad it was over so quickly.

I decided to take the bull by the horns, and before he could get soft, I was down at his waist, sucking him hard again. I was halfway there, and I wanted to try out that skyrocket again. I mouthed him all the way to my throat, and squeezed the blood back into his cock by pressing on the base of his shaft. Somewhat detached from all this, I sampled the flavor of his sex. Mmmmn. Nice bouquet. Slightly woody. A dry, heavy taste, but not bitter to the palate. Just the right amount of saltiness.

All right. He was up. In my mind's eye, the Japanese referee yelled "Two points for Hardon!" Cock in my hand, I swung up onto him and inserted his cock. We rolled over and he pumped me again. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Nice and solid. A steady beat, and you can dance to it lying down. I gave it a ninety-eight. We caught and synchronized magnetic fields. Stabilized our feedback loop. He moaned, I moaned. He thrust, I thrust back. I squeezed his balls. He caressed my asshole. I came, he

came—his shots perfectly synchronized to my openings and closings.

Sigh.

Back down, into the Land of Afterward. A friend of mine who is very dear to me and for whom I would do just about anything says that the Land of Afterward is that moment when the sexes have balanced, and it is no longer man and woman but just two people. I wanted to know something about this one.

"You're not Australian?"

"No," he said. "Wyoming."

"What brings you all the way here from Wyoming?" I asked.

"I haven't lived in Wyoming in fourteen years. I'm just here for the convention," he said.

"Must have been a slow boat," I said.

He laughed. "It was. Very, very slow."

"What are you?" I asked off the top of my head.

"I have no earthly idea, lady," he said.

I looked at him questioningly.

"If you're serious, I'll answer you as best I can," he said.

"I'm serious," I said. "Go ahead."

"I do a lot of things," he said. "I'm a writer. I'm a musician. I'm an artist. I do carpentry. Computers, motorcycles. I sell things—books, records, printing. I've got a résumé that would do for three or five people, but none of those things are what I am. To tell you the truth, I have no idea what I am, but ever since I was born, I've had the feeling I was going to find out one of these days. Sometimes I feel like a gift waiting to be unwrapped." He looked to see if he was boring me. He wasn't. He smiled a wry smile. "Sometimes I feel like I'm nothing at all. Other times, I feel like I'm here to do something that's never been done before. To *be* something that's never been before. Maybe I'm a paradigm. Or a pissant. I don't know. Maybe I never will, but then again maybe you can tell me. It doesn't really matter

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much one way or the other. I'm fairly happy, and that's what counts.

"Pray tell, what are you?" he asked, adding, "besides being a lovely creature and an exquisite fuck."

I liked the way he said "exquisite." "God knows," I said. "Maybe the same thing as you. I'm rich and famous, and I do all sorts of marvelous things, but I don't feel like they're really *me*. Do you understand what I mean?"

He smiled. "Yes," he said. "I do understand."

"But I'll make you a deal," I said.

He lifted an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"When I find out, I'll tell you, and when you find out, you tell me."

"Sounds fair to me," he said.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, where can I get in touch with you?" I asked.

"I have this feeling that we're fated to meet again. I have this feeling we've met before," he said. "Let's leave it to the gods, eh?"

"Agreed," I said. I wanted to ask him something. "Where could we have met before?"

"Not in this lifetime. Not in this time and place. But it's a feeling I have, and what can I say?" He winked.

I shook my head. I had the same feeling. I didn't want to think about it. "I don't like talking about things like that," I said. "Spooky."

He smiled. "Don't talk about it. Don't even think about it. It's not important. Being happy is."

And then he had to leave. I didn't even know his name.

CHAPTER SIX

Morning again.

My mysterious stranger had long since departed, and I was left only dreams and memories that were somewhat hazy in the light of morning. I came out of that half-state between, and hovered for a few seconds. An inspiration was hanging over me, and I've learned that if you hang between waking and dreaming, you can often find the answers to problems. It's as if the answers come from somewhere else. All I have to do is wait. An idea began to form, and I realized what I should do. Soon, the idea had formed completely, and I pulled myself awake and got out of bed.

In the shower, I went over the vision I'd had, to see if it made any sense in the light of day. The problem with some of the things you get from sleep is that they may seem perfectly apparent and workable in that twilight zone, but when you get back down to the real world, they don't quite make it. I mean, if a solution has to do with flying, sans plane, that's all well and good in dreams, because you can do it. But on this level, it's a little difficult.

The plan seemed solid enough on terra firma, so I

CHAPTER FIVE

Fingers on the cool metal of the zipper. The rounded tongue metal against my skin, drawn down. No underwear. A thick forest of pubic hair. My hand gentle against him as I seek, locate, extract his cock. Uncircumcised, purplish-colored shaft, with a ridge of twilight color along the foreskin. Cock head light and moist, like a dog's. Like a horse's cock when he takes a piss. Pulling the pants down. His ballocks heavy and hanging low, like a bull's. I take the head in my mouth. Animal taste, animal scent, so thick and heavy that I have to accept it completely or retch. Total surrender to the act. A drop of semen oozing. Clear and slightly viscous. I lick it with my tongue. He's light and sweet, in contrast to his scent. Come changes taste and flavor. From man to man. From time to time in one man. Now, he was clear and clean, like mountain snow-water.

Sucking. Licking. I took it deeper.

Moaning. From him. His hands in my hair. Forcing his cock into my mouth. Pulling me up. I don't want the intimacy of full fuck—instead my eyes say *it's all right. I just want to suck you off. I swallow it. No trips.*

He seems satisfied. I suck. Heavy balls in my hand.

My tongue snaking out of my mouth to sideswipe the undershaft at each swipe. Hand and nails to the drumskin of belly and abdomen, pulling his energy down, bringing his mind to his cock. I can hear him. He's *here* with me as I suck. The taste renews itself in my mouth. Little dribs and drabs of come, little reminders of his scent. The smell is thick and hot around us, stag in rut, mare in heat. I suck.

I suck the head, play with his balls. I pump the shaft, let him use my mouth as a cunt, set the pace. Hand to tit, and nipple pinching. Face to fuck and man moaning. Cock to tongue and back again. Pumping him. Squeezing it off and bringing it back up. Thermometer rising, and he grabs my head and grunts, shooting it into my mouth. I feel the first blast, like thick gravy. I swallow it in time for the next spurt. Less, but still tasty. Less still on the next contraction. Cock spasming in my mouth. A few dry pumps from nature's hydraulics, and a final ooze. Dry well. Move on to the next one.

I pull my dress up and button. I head back for the hotel, but am intercepted by Riviere and LaRoche. They take me to a nearby building. Inside, an old Apollo simulator, loaned by the U.S. government. We pile in. Undress in the narrow seats like contortionists. I end up sprawled across the three seats, buttons digging into my tits and thighs. In the far seat, Riviere is playing with my cunt. Middle seat is my torso, and far seat opposite is my head in LaRoche's lap. They turn on some of the board and my ears are assaulted by the incessant chirping of the radio on scan. It's picking up a few seconds here and there in a mad demonic/unique broadcast that's making sense in a strange way, though we're the only people on Earth receiving this broadcast.

I allow myself to be manipulated. LaRoche's cock is in my mouth, and it tastes nothing like Dark's. Riviere has inserted two fingers in my cunt.

Radio: "Brush your teeth, Brush your teeth, Brush . . . in my vaginal area, and I'd never seen anything like that before . . . Lebanon today, thirty leftist Phalangists

. . . whipped the Dodgers in twelve innings. Scoring came off the bat of . . . President Reagan's ranch in Santa Barbara, where he expressed shock and outrage at what he termed . . . basting is best done every ten minutes or so, but if you want to do it every five, you're perfectly . . . within God's perfect plan for your life. He didn't TELL you to take the money. He didn't TELL you to buy the plane tickets . . . to war-torn . . . Anaheim . . . U.S. Marines . . . House Speaker 'Tip' O'Neill . . . recommended by the American Council of Dental Therapeutics. . . ."

Odd. The radio only seemed to be picking up American programs and news. On the tubes, several cable channels. LaRoche wrapped my hair around his cock, and began to masturbate with it. Riviere inserted a well-slicked finger in my anus.

I watched the programs, fascinated.

Woman unbuttoning her blouse. Italian, impatient, tearing it. Nixon resigning. Road Runner laughing at poor Coyote. David Bowie's new video of Australia. Commercial for Calvin Klein jeans. Johnny Carson. Stock footage of Brezhnev's funeral. Bogey and Bacall having a spat. John Wayne. Ronald Reagan on "Death Valley Days." Ronald Reagan on Capitol Hill. Commercial for Water Pik. Elizabeth Taylor on the cover of *People*. An interview with an average housewife. An actress playing a housewife on a soap. A housewife on hidden camera. An actress pretending to be a housewife buying laundry detergent. A sex therapist answering questions about housewives. A game show host hugging a housewife. Goofy trying to ride a horse. Charlie Chaplin. Me, with Jean's cock up my asshole.

I suddenly came out of the strange hypnotic torpor the televisions had put me into. It was closed circuit, and Jean really *was* fucking me in the ass. LaRoche was masturbating to the image of my violation with the tresses of my hair. He seemed oblivious to my presence.

I was watching the Italian's thick cock going in and out of the girl in the porn movie. They cut, but you

could see come on her chin. John Wayne stepping off the LVT onto Iwo Jima. Going to commercial. A man in a cowboy hat selling cars. A madman selling stereo equipment. A jeaned actress selling herself. You had to buy the jeans, though.

Footage from Vietnam during the Tet offensive. Chicago in '68. An old clip of the Jefferson Airplane at Monterey. A fifties atom bomb test at Bikini. Fay Wray. Gary Cooper. Mae West. Steve Reeves. Ethel Merman. Ronald Colman. Farrah Fawcett. Guy Williams as Zorro.

Batman was cozying up to the Cat Woman when I felt the warmth on my scalp. LaRoche had popped his wad in my hair. I saw that Riviere was ready to come, but I saw it in his expression on the television. Perhaps he was acting for the camera. I heard him grunt, and then he too came. I could feel it jetting into me, warm and deep.

I resolved never to smoke so much marijuana again.

Fade out.

Morning came, and so did Georgiades.

My spies at the main desk rang me to tell me so.

I dragged myself out of bed and jumped in the shower. I remembered to turn the shower on when I realized that the bar of soap felt funny on my skin. I was lagged. I tried to wake up, but I was sort of half there, seeing the world through a thick layer of gauze.

I threw on an outfit, realized that it was all wrong, and went to my closet to try and pick out something that would be just right. He was speaking in half an hour. I had to hurry up, but I couldn't seem to focus on what I was doing. Finally I just said fuck it and threw on jeans and a T.

I hastily collected my mini-35 and my microcassette, and locked myself out of my room. There wasn't any time now. I ran down the hall and punched the elevator button. I waited. I punched the elevator button again. It didn't help, I knew, but it made me feel better. I waited. I started banging on the elevator button, and it came,

empty. I got in and punched "G" and it just sort of stood there ignoring me. I punched "G" again, and nothing happened. Finally, the elevator doors closed, and we went down, the elevator and I. One floor down. Some lady was trying to drag her poodle into the elevator. We pretended we didn't know each other. Another wait. Another eternity. Another floor.

At last I arrived at the shuttle area. The last one was disappearing down Pitt Street. I grabbed the doorman and had him hail me a cab. No cabs in sight. He went inside and picked up his little phone. He came back out.

" 'E's on 'is break. Sez 'ill beyout inna minute."

I had him repeat it until I understood what he was saying. The cab driver was delayed in some way, I divined.

An eternity later, he came ambling out of the Mile-Long Bar. "Wehtolov?"

"The Opera House, and step on it," I answered.

I'm glad I didn't ask him to just hurry. If we'd been merely hurrying, I'd still be in that cab. We arrived at said Opera House, I paid, and went in. A security guard stopped me.

"ID?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've got it right here in my purse." I scrounged through my purse. My press pass wasn't there. Oh, shit, thought I. All the way back to the hotel? I goddamn was not. I patted my jeans. Press pass was there, thank God.

The security guard checked my pass. Behind him, another guard was closing the door, and putting up a sign. *Lecture In Progress*, read the sign. *No Admittance*.

"Looks okay to me," said the guard, and turning, added, "Oh, I'm sorry, miss. You can't go in there."

"What the fuck do you mean I can't go in there?" I asked.

"Sorry, no admittance after the start of the lecture," he said. "That's the rules."

"But I was here before the lecture started!" I said.

He stared at me stonily.

"If you wouldn't have been fucking around looking at my press pass, I'd have been in in plenty of time."

"Move along, miss," he said, grabbing my arm.

I yanked it out of his grip. "Leggo, pigfucker!" I said.

"Now come on, miss," he said, and seemingly formed a wall of Rent-A-Cop that pressed me back, farther and farther from my goal.

In the background, a little old lady emerged from a side door and was let into the auditorium by the other Rent-A-Cop. I howled, pointing. J. Edgar Hoover didn't waste a glance. I was propelled back away from the Opera House.

I managed to sneak back in the direction of the auditorium. I was at the door. Locked. The Rent-A-Cops were conferring a little way from me. I put my ear to the door. Here and there, I heard Georgiades' voice, rich and deep. I couldn't really make out what he was saying.

For nearly half an hour, I played cat-and-mouse with the Rent-A-Cops, hiding behind some nearby shrubbery when they checked the door. Once, someone came out of the auditorium, but as luck would have it, I was cut off by the turkeys in blue. I caught a glimpse of the speaker's arm. Well, I thought cynically, if I ever see him, I can always identify his arm.

Finally, I could tell the lecture had ended by the applause. The doors swung open and a long figure emerged. Here was my chance, thought I. I made a beeline for the door, just in time to meet a flood tide of humanity head-on. I was pressed all the way back to the street.

By the time I made it inside the auditorium, it was deserted, and the smirk on the Rent-A-Cop's face told me all I needed to know. You got this feeling that my inability to get into Georgiades' lecture was no accident. I had the feeling that "F" had quite a bit to do with my predicament.

That was when something tall and black ran into me.
 “Christina! What are you doing out here?”

It was Sulieman Jones.

“Lee?” I asked. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I came to see if I could help you out,” he said. “I got the feeling you’d need it.”

I told him what had happened. He shook his head and told me he’d made a tape. “We can go back to the hotel and listen to it, if you think it’ll be any help,” he said.

We took the shuttle back to the Sydney Excelsior.

It was a strange tape. Some of it was audible, and some was not. The problem with bootlegs, I suppose. But the snatches of intellegible conversation I heard seemed as Dark, LaRoche, and Riviere had made out: that you could just about support any given point of view with Georgiades’ statements. There was something hypnotic, even compelling about that voice. And I felt that I had been given a definite challenge. So they weren’t going to let me within a hundred yards of G? Well, we’d just see about that. I had a little bone to pick with Ms. Bernadette Faber in the meantime too. But I *was* going to find Georgiades, if it took all damned year. All right, I thought, you’ve fucked around with the wrong girl, kiddies. If Miss Faber thought that she was going to get rid of me as easily as that, she had another think coming, Rent-A-Cops or not.

Lee clicked off the tape when it had finished.

“The quality’s not too red hot,” he began.

“Never mind that,” I said. “It was fine. And thank you for showing up when I needed you.”

“The cavalry always shows up in the nick of time,” Lee said. “So what’s your next move?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’m going to assume that Georgiades is staying somewhere here in town. Now I’ve just got to find out where. I’d wager that Miss Bernadette Faber might have something to say on the subject.”

He looked at me. “You’re not serious.”

“Well, yes and no,” I said. “I was thinking more about body language.”

He smiled. “I think I know what you mean. And yes, she does have a little something going on with G.”

Of course. It fit. That was the reason for Bernadette’s enmity toward yours truly. She was having an affair with Georgiades. No wonder she was so damned hot on my ass to try and stop me. And I’d blundered right into it. I was reaping the results of a whole lot of recklessness this trip, I reflected ruefully. Well, there was nothing to be done at this point. Just do my best to try and bull through. But maybe next time I’d have the good sense to keep myself out of these messes. Knowing me, I’d go charging in next time, just like this time, and the time before that, and the time before that. Rehabilitation is not, I fear, a word in my vocabulary.

Now was the time for the big push. I had Georgiades in my sights, and with any luck at all, doggedness would pay off. Lee roused me from my revelry. Or self-indulgence.

“I’d wager she’s going to see him tonight,” he said.

Sun was setting. It was hotter than a fresh pizza outside, and muggy. I didn’t really feel like braving the heat, but duty being what it was, I said, “Sure.”

Seldom has a single word been more recklessly uttered, or with rottener consequences.

“Let’s go then,” Lee said. “I rented a car at the airport.”

Great car. It was one of those Japanese jobs that they don’t sell in the U.S.A. It was called a Sandpiper, and the most complimentary thing you could say about it was that it had upholstery. The engine made that happy sort of noise usually associated with putting chicken bones in a blender and hitting *puree*. No radio, no air conditioning, and in place of dials and gauges, they gave you a magnetized needle and some string.

In our best Kojak imitation, we waited half a block away from the Pitt Street exit to the hotel.

Dutifully, Bernadette Faber emerged, and taking a

waiting Black and White Cab, she headed north. This, Lee took as an invitation to vehicular homicide, and we proceeded north with Christina clinging on for dear life. We crossed over the Harbor Bridge, although I have to say that I was never so happy to leave a bridge in my life. I had this distinct impression that we were going to get a good look at the underside of the structure. On our way down, I mean.

The cab continued to head north and east, and I noticed that the architecture was getting ritzier the farther north we traveled. It seemed that Sydney was organized with the poorer sections to the south, in the direction of the airport, and the wealthier sections moving north.

We followed the cab for about an hour, until we saw that Bernadette's final destination was the marina area. When she got out, so did we, and followed her at a safe distance. She wended her way through the intricate network of the marina docks admirably, which is more than I can say for us. We had a hard time keeping up with her. Over and over again, we took the wrong turn, and ended on a dead end. We had to retrace our steps several times before we finally lost her.

I don't know where she went. One minute I saw her, and the next minute she was gone. She had walked behind a long sailboat and didn't emerge.

I ran to the spot where I'd seen her last. No trace. The sailboat was clearly uninhabited, so it wasn't there that she'd disappeared to. We continued looking, heading off in several likely directions in the dark. Before long, we were completely lost. I had lost any sense of direction whatsoever, and Lee was as befuddled as I.

Yup. Lost. In the dark. And with that labyrinth of piers and boats, I couldn't even tell which direction was ocean and which was land. We were definitely lost.

"We're lost," I said to Lee.

"Naw," he said. "Not really. I can retrace our steps."

"Lead on," quoth I.

And so he did, leading us still farther and farther into

this Sargasso of the leisure class. I began to have visions of never finding my way out when a form popped out of a nearby yacht and dove into the dark brine. I never saw him reemerge. Great, thought I.

Lee's idea of retracing our steps was great, except that we seemed to be retracing certain routes several times. It was much like being lost in a maze. It was being lost in a maze.

At length, a head poked out of a nearby boat. "'Avin trouble, mate?" it asked Lee. The speaker was a gap-toothed fellow with leathery skin and blond hair. His face looked like someone had worked out math problems on it with baseball cleats. Or perhaps it was just the ravages of the final conflict between the forces of Goodness and the forces of Acne.

"We seem to be lost," Lee said. "Perhaps you could tell us the way out?"

Leather-face pulled his head back into the boat like a turtle. Another face appeared. "*Ja! Ist ein schwarze!*" It disappeared. The first head reemerged. "'Oo's the filly?" he asked.

I whispered to Lee, "We'd better get out of here."

He whispered back, "Good idea." To Leather-face: "This is my employer, sir. And I suggest that you refrain from using vulgarity in her presence."

"On three," I whispered.

Leather-face seemed puzzled. "Don't come the raw prawn wif mate!"

"One . . . two . . ." I counted.

"Not at all, sir," Lee said politely.

The other fellow appeared. Eichmann's kid brother, I guessed. I noticed that these guys had biceps as big around as their heads. "Hey, *schwarze!*" he yelled.

"Three!" I said.

We turned tail and ran like hell. No sense in getting killed on our first meeting with the natives. Behind us, there were footsteps on the planking of the dock.

We stumbled around in the dark for several minutes before the sound of footsteps died away. That was when

we fell in the water of the marina.

There was this unfinished dock, see, and Lee was behind me, looking back. I saw it just in time for Lee to bump into me, and we fell, a tangled mess of thrashing limbs, into the salty brine. I inhaled a little water and came up coughing and sputtering. Lee came up a second later. We swam for the near piling, and then I looked behind us. There, sitting by the water where we'd left it, was our Sandpiper. I never thought I'd be glad to see that miserable excuse for a car. We dragged ourselves out of the water and dripped over to the car. A soggy hour later, we were sitting in my bathroom wrapped with thick hotel towels, drinking warm brandy that room service had brought up.

You see, Lee had this great idea of rolling down the windows to dry us off on the way back. Well, *I* had the idea, but Lee agreed to it, so it's just as much his fault as mine. What with the high humidity, and the wind-chill factor, we were on the verge of double pneumonia by the time we got back. We thought that the shivers were caused by our near-brush with danger and physical harm. We chattered all the way back before we noticed that for a summer night, we were both freezing and colds were on the way.

It was as much his fault as mine. That's what I say.

So we were sitting there hacking away, and trying to smoke a joint (which was really bright, I must say) and gulping brandy down to soothe our throats. And Lee says to me,

"You wanna go to an orgy?"

And I think about it and decide that this is a pretty good idea, even though it's a bit weird, and I, like a dummy, say yeah, it's okay with me and end up getting myself in a whole bunch'a trouble.

I had attired myself in frills and finery. Lee was dressed casually in slacks and a shirt. Evidently there was a science fiction convention happening in the Excelsior at the same time. I had seen them scuttling here and

there around the hotel. Lee, as a science fiction writer of some stature, had been invited to a little soiree in one of their suites, invitation only and Rent-A-Cop at the door. There would be coke and champagne.

I wanted to look my best.

I figured that it would be a lot of fun. After all, science fiction people tend to be among the most intelligent class of people, right? And many of them jet here and there all year round, attending the endless round of conventions all over the world, right? And they all probably look like Harrison Ford, right?

Uh-huh.

By the time I'd made that little discovery, it was too late. Immediately upon my entering the room, all heads turned in my direction. It was a fascinating response. In the eyes of every male in the room I could see only one thought—somebody's going to fuck her and it isn't going to be me.

Add to that the fact that the overall wardrobe was either two sizes too big, or equally small, and undoubtedly from the seconds rack at J. C. Penney's, and you'll get the idea. Well, maybe you won't. I'd better elucidate further. They weren't really much different from other sorts of people. It was just that if, as they say, clothing determines class, these folk had no class at all. These were the outcasts, the untouchables, at least by the standard of personal hygiene. But they weren't that bad looking. I wanted to do a Shavian paraphrase, and remold them, redress them. They could, with a little spiffing up, have been accepted anywhere.

The coke was great, though. And the champagne.

Did I ever tell you what I think of champagne? Good champagne? Great. That way I won't have to struggle for inadequate words. Korbelt. Mumm's. Piper-Heidsieck, brut and extra dry. Pink and white. Cordon Negro (Lee thought that one hilarious) and Cordon Blanc. Such champagne as I have never seen. Somebody had done his homework. As a matter of fact, the trouble with science fiction people was, as I saw it, they always

did their homework. They just didn't ever bother leaving home once they'd done it.

In the next room, the orgy was getting started. Happily, the lights were dim in there and bright in the other room so that those who wished to remain clothed would, and those who wished to undress would use the darker room. It makes for a more relaxed orgy that way. From what I could see, the SF folk were practiced at orgying, since everyone knew what meant what, and where and with whom. With whom? Whomever.

The champagne was having its effect on me. Someone had procured some KB. I inquired after Foster's and was met with stares of cool rebuff. Didn't I know, someone told me, that Foster's was a *Victorian* beer? Maybe it was okay for Melbourne (which was filled with stuck-up Brits), but this was *Sydney*.

Don't ask me. Such insanities are endemic to the race. In Texas, you'd damned well like Pearl or Shiner. In Colorado, Budweiser is a dirty word. Gimme a Coors. Henry Weinhard is the name in the Northwest, or Hamm's. Old Milwaukee? Well, make sure you know where you are. Australia was no different. To me, beer is beer. Oy vey.

In the next room, things were coalescing. As with most, the removal of clothing had facilitated a transformation. People looked like people. Clothes make the man, as they say, but nekkidness shows the man. Some of these dudes were okay.

Of course, there were inevitable exceptions. And the women tended to be built along Rubenesque lines. Especially one who stands out in my memory. Red-headed and pallid, she was all tits and flesh. Pink and doughy as freshly boiled shrimp, she was going down on a fellow who had been pretending to be Hemingway. You know the type: the military epaulets, the thin mustache. Trying to look as though he'd be at home in a khaki baseball cap, which was exactly what he was wearing.

And in the corner, some guy with a Prince Valiant

haircut going down on a skinny blonde who was as white as a fresh clam. That sort of wedge-of-lettuce look to his hair, as though someone had poured epoxy over his hair and cut it using a bowl.

A faded hippie in an even more faded fedora. All hair and hat. Another hippie—long straight hair and a straw hat. A short fellow trying to get it into tolerable upness. The dwellers on the vestibule.

Dante visited hell, so they say. And there was a circle wherein those who were not good enough for Heaven nor evil enough for Hell dwelt. They remained in the limbo of the vestibule. Perhaps he spoke of ones like these.

But I was being too critical. These were people, after all. I didn't remember much of Georgiades' speech, but I had been impressed by a single statement that now sprang to mind: "Judge your brother at your own peril—he'll judge you right back." I wasn't perfect. What right had I? Too much champagne, I thought. No. That wasn't it. I was just being young and snotty. It becomes the adolescent, but it wasn't much good for being an adult. So I was being reckless again.

I looked again. Coke and champagne and that most potent of all drugs, conscience. They weren't bad people. Just odd. This was the clique for those who didn't fit into cliques. And they were doing what all the cliques do eventually. Getting down to that most basic level of sex. Who was I to judge?

Fuck it, I decided. Skin is skin. I wandered into the back room and removed frills and finery. Why not? Hadn't G said that we should plunge into the experience of living? God! I was already under the man's spell. One badly recorded tape, and I was taking the things he said to heart. But they made sense. I decided to fuck and be fucked, and let the karma fall where it may.

There was a fairly good looking gent, alone, white bearded and wise in a Santa Claus sort of way. But in the corner, drinking a Foster's was a tall blond fellow, a little spare tire around his middle, who looked like a lion

with blond beard and a crown of hair that pulled straight back like a mane.

Something about him: he didn't give a goddamn for convention. He was watching it all with great good humor and didn't seem to care in the least that he wasn't getting laid.

That was my man.

I waltzed over to him. His eyes met mine. He seemed uninterested in me below the neck, just in looking into my eyes as if he were looking right through my sham. Whatever he saw, he saw what I really had on my mind.

"Loneliness is the chief malady of the human race," he said.

"Who says I'm lonely?" I asked.

"Your eyes."

"And you can relieve my loneliness?"

"Never said that. I'm just commenting."

"Are you with these people?" I asked.

"To change the subject, sure," he said. "At least I'm occupying the physical space."

A strange dude. An American, it seemed. He seemed as interested in talking to me as not. That is something that I won't abide. "What do you do, O man of mystery?" I asked.

"Sit at parties talking to pretty girls."

I flushed. The bastard. I could see that in a sense, he was laughing at me. "Cute," I said.

He looked at me the way a grandfather would a favorite granddaughter. "So upset," he said. "And such a nice blond cunt too."

I double-took. He was fucking with my head. "You're fuckin' with me 'ead," I said.

"Sure," he said. "But I don't mean any harm. You're lonely and I'm trying to cheer you up."

"And what makes you think that I need cheering up?" I asked.

"Ees my chob," he said. He laughed.

I saw that he wasn't laughing at me. He was, in a funny way, laughing *with* me. Definitely, I thought.

This is the one for me. "So I'm lonely," I said.

"Yup."

"Well, maybe you could make me feel a little less lonely?"

He stuck out his lower lip in mock disapproval. "Fucking isn't the answer."

"Yeah," I said. "But it's a hell of a lot of fun."

He sighed. He smiled, and I was completely bowled over. Such pretty blue eyes. Such dimples. Such a cute ass. "You want to fuck?" he asked.

I smiled. It was my turn. "Maybe," I said. There was, after all, the chase to attend to. It's in the genes and chromosomes, when all is said and done.

"You want to fuck," he stated.

I pouted. "Sir, you abuse my honor," I said.

"I'd rather abuse your clit," he said.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. He said it in such a detached way. I was intrigued. I was interested. I was aware that everyone in the orgy room was staring at me.

"Let's split," he said.

I was never so relieved. "Yes," I agreed.

On the way out, Lee caught us.

"Watch out for that guy," Lee said seriously. "He's crazy."

I could see that his concern was real. But I'm nothing if not a judge of character in males. This fellow, whoever he was, was most definitely not crazy. He just marched to the beat of a different drummer.

We repaired to my suite.

I pulled out a fresh gram.

"Ah," he said. "False euphoria."

I looked at him.

"It's okay," he laughed. "There's nothing wrong with a little false euphoria now and again."

I liked this man. He made me laugh.

We tooted a little coke. He bent me over the bed and removed my panties. I began to protest.

"Shhh," he said. "This is the best part for me."

He was wrong. It was the best part for *me*

I don't quite know how he did it, but, having what we in the girl business call a "hung tongue," he proceeded to interface with my autonomic nervous system almost instantly. I felt his tongue on my feminine portions, delving into me. He traced the terra incognita of my cunt-labia, inner thighs, clit, mons, and cunt itself. Hands and strokes.

"It's wonderrrrrful!" I purred.

He purred too. Right on my clittie. Christ! Such a *mensch*. I writhed. Hands and fingers traced arabesques on my body. I was made aware of nerve routes that I had not known existed. Down the side of the tit, shiatzu pressures that sent me fluttering upward. Little hummingbird flicks of his tongue that drew me up and up. And then slowing the pace, finding a plateau where I could stop, and taking me higher still.

I'm not sure exactly what I thought and felt. I guess you could say that it was purple. That's the only way to describe it. In an odd fantasia world, he was worshipping me, and I felt the archetypal female within me responding. His tongue was in some magical, mysterious manner performing a sacrament within my flower, and while he worshipped at my shrine, he was in not the least debased in so doing.

If anything, he was becoming less and less a mere man and more a force of nature. I could feel his cock throbbing, even though I had no contact with it. There was an overload of sexual energy in the room, perceivable only on certain unreal levels. But it was, someway, there just the same. I was on the verge of climaxing. He pulled away from me.

"Would you prefer to come this way?" he asked.

"No," I moaned. "I want you inside me."

He had managed to shed his pants while valiantly tonguing me, and now his cock sprang toward my waiting pussy. I could not help a single sybaritic appraisal, and I grasped it before he put it in me, checking its girth and length. He was hung, although not unnaturally so.

He was longer than average, but the width made all the difference. He had one of those wonderful tapered cocks—wide at the head, narrow at the base—so that as he entered me, I felt his shaft in the deepest recesses of my quivering quim.

I felt filled up, and he made sure that I stayed that way, drawing it out teasingly and plunging it in again, slowly. He didn't seem in any hurry, thank God, and I settled in for a long, hard ride.

He drove into me, his hands all over my tits and ass, taking a certain sybaritic pleasure in my body. No. More the pure enjoyment of a pig at a trough, though I don't mean he was a pig. Just totally abandoned to fucking—so very few men can do that. Or perhaps only with a total stranger, where you don't have any ego to protect and you can let it all hang out.

Or all stick in. You know what I mean.

I responded in kind, grabbing the muscled cheeks of his ass, and delighting in the firm movement under the skin as he pumped again and again into me. That feeling of appreciation, of awe you get when you watch one of the big cats pacing his cage at the zoo. The rippling muscles of the lion. And the rippling muscles of the loins. He was driving into me, arms supporting him, with my legs hiked up around his shoulders as he rammed me into the bedsprings. Heaven. I swear to Christ you'd have sworn that the bed was a musical instrument and he was using me to play it. Just enough pressure on the springs for me to rise in counterthrust to him, meeting his cock with my mons on each stroke. I couldn't take much before I began to moan and wriggle.

"Oh, let me *have it!*" I moaned.

He didn't say a thing. I clenched my legs around his neck and my cunt around his cock. He just rammed it in harder. No fair, I thought. *I'm* supposed to be in control. Uh-huh. He slowed the pace just as I was tantalizingly close to the edge and speeded suddenly just as I was sliding back. I went off like a skyrocket. All sparks and a trail that got lost in the clouds. I sighed and flut-

tered. He began to fuck me his way, riding my cunt in the ways that would give him the most pleasure. He rotated me on his prick 180° and began to fuck me from above, wrapping his arms around my tits and slamming deep into me. You can get a lot deeper from behind. I felt his balls slapping up against my cheeks with each stroke.

He scissored my legs together, and I felt my cunt tighten around him until it was nearly unbearable. I twisted my head around and bit his neck, and he responded by clinging even harder to my breasts. I could feel his sweat dripping down onto me, running down my legs, my sides, into my hair, and even into the crack of my ass. Hot and steamy sex. Just the way I like it.

And then he grunted and I could feel him jetting into me. Seven full spurts. Some of it managed to dribble back out of me and run into my pubic hair. It was delectable. It was delicious. It was too bad it was over so quickly.

I decided to take the bull by the horns, and before he could get soft, I was down at his waist, sucking him hard again. I was halfway there, and I wanted to try out that skyrocket again. I mouthed him all the way to my throat, and squeezed the blood back into his cock by pressing on the base of his shaft. Somewhat detached from all this, I sampled the flavor of his sex. Mmmmn. Nice bouquet. Slightly woody. A dry, heavy taste, but not bitter to the palate. Just the right amount of saltiness.

All right. He was up. In my mind's eye, the Japanese referee yelled "Two points for Hardon!" Cock in my hand, I swung up onto him and inserted his cock. We rolled over and he pumped me again. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Nice and solid. A steady beat, and you can dance to it lying down. I gave it a ninety-eight. We caught and synchronized magnetic fields. Stabilized our feedback loop. He moaned, I moaned. He thrust, I thrust back. I squeezed his balls. He caressed my asshole. I came, he

came—his shots perfectly synchronized to my openings and closings.

Sigh.

Back down, into the Land of Afterward. A friend of mine who is very dear to me and for whom I would do just about anything says that the Land of Afterward is that moment when the sexes have balanced, and it is no longer man and woman but just two people. I wanted to know something about this one.

"You're not Australian?"

"No," he said. "Wyoming."

"What brings you all the way here from Wyoming?" I asked.

"I haven't lived in Wyoming in fourteen years. I'm just here for the convention," he said.

"Must have been a slow boat," I said.

He laughed. "It was. Very, very slow."

"What are you?" I asked off the top of my head.

"I have no earthly idea, lady," he said.

I looked at him questioningly.

"If you're serious, I'll answer you as best I can," he said.

"I'm serious," I said. "Go ahead."

"I do a lot of things," he said. "I'm a writer. I'm a musician. I'm an artist. I do carpentry. Computers, motorcycles. I sell things—books, records, printing. I've got a résumé that would do for three or five people, but none of those things are what I am. To tell you the truth, I have no idea what I am, but ever since I was born, I've had the feeling I was going to find out one of these days. Sometimes I feel like a gift waiting to be unwrapped." He looked to see if he was boring me. He wasn't. He smiled a wry smile. "Sometimes I feel like I'm nothing at all. Other times, I feel like I'm here to do something that's never been done before. To *be* something that's never been before. Maybe I'm a paradigm. Or a pissant. I don't know. Maybe I never will, but then again maybe you can tell me. It doesn't really matter

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much one way or the other. I'm fairly happy, and that's what counts.

"Pray tell, what are you?" he asked, adding, "besides being a lovely creature and an exquisite fuck."

I liked the way he said "exquisite." "God knows," I said. "Maybe the same thing as you. I'm rich and famous, and I do all sorts of marvelous things, but I don't feel like they're really *me*. Do you understand what I mean?"

He smiled. "Yes," he said. "I do understand."

"But I'll make you a deal," I said.

He lifted an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"When I find out, I'll tell you, and when you find out, you tell me."

"Sounds fair to me," he said.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, where can I get in touch with you?" I asked.

"I have this feeling that we're fated to meet again. I have this feeling we've met before," he said. "Let's leave it to the gods, eh?"

"Agreed," I said. I wanted to ask him something. "Where could we have met before?"

"Not in this lifetime. Not in this time and place. But it's a feeling I have, and what can I say?" He winked.

I shook my head. I had the same feeling. I didn't want to think about it. "I don't like talking about things like that," I said. "Spooky."

He smiled. "Don't talk about it. Don't even think about it. It's not important. Being happy is."

And then he had to leave. I didn't even know his name.

CHAPTER SIX

Morning again.

My mysterious stranger had long since departed, and I was left only dreams and memories that were somewhat hazy in the light of morning. I came out of that half-state between, and hovered for a few seconds. An inspiration was hanging over me, and I've learned that if you hang between waking and dreaming, you can often find the answers to problems. It's as if the answers come from somewhere else. All I have to do is wait. An idea began to form, and I realized what I should do. Soon, the idea had formed completely, and I pulled myself awake and got out of bed.

In the shower, I went over the vision I'd had, to see if it made any sense in the light of day. The problem with some of the things you get from sleep is that they may seem perfectly apparent and workable in that twilight zone, but when you get back down to the real world, they don't quite make it. I mean, if a solution has to do with flying, sans plane, that's all well and good in dreams, because you can do it. But on this level, it's a little difficult.

The plan seemed solid enough on terra firma, so I

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toweled and preened and called downstairs. A hundred-dollar note had found a friend before, and it was that friend I spoke to. (Little note: In Australia, money is graduated in size proportional to the amount of the note. A dollar is more or less the size of an American dollar, but a hundred-dollar note is quite large. They say the Australian government issues them that way so that blind persons can differentiate. And, of course, it makes it kind of difficult to accidentally hand somebody a twenty instead of a five. Clever, these Auckers.)

My friend was a typical Auckerina. She liked mini-skirts and shaved to the knees only. Went in for Hawaiian-style shifts—sleeveless so you could see bra straps—and thongs. And was the assistant manager of the hotel. Well, a little more cash greased her palm, and I got what I wanted—a maid's uniform, a passkey, and a room number.

G was staying at the Excelsior. Right next to Bernadette's room. Of course, my dream had shown me that. It made such perfect sense that I wondered why I hadn't thought of it on my own. Thank God for dreams and corrupt hotel staffs.

Everything was working beautifully, until I got out of the elevator. It was a great little costume, a real eye-catcher. I looked great in it too. And therein lay the rub. Or therein rubbed the lay—it was a bit tight. Problem was, I *did* look good in it, or I wouldn't have had the trouble.

The trouble was in the form of the hotel manager, and his name, I found out later, was Thomas D'Allesandro. Tall, slim, Italian. Dark. Via Veneto pimp mustache, but it didn't look bad. Neither did I. That was what caused the trouble.

I stepped off the elevator on the eighteenth floor with my little tray of towels and et cetera. Unfortunately, the eighteenth floor happened to be the floor that Thomas D'Allesandro was on, checking a plumbing problem in one of the suites. He saw the pretty new maid, and

thought that she looked wonderful. He decided to strike up a conversation with her. Her was me. Then he remembered that he didn't remember hiring the pretty new maid, and he asked me just who the hell I was, and what the hell I thought I was doing.

How do I end up in these messes?

I asked him just who the hell he was, and what the hell he thought he was doing, and he headed for the house dick, with me in tow. I told him that we didn't need to see the house dick, and he told me that I was going to see a dick, one way or the other. I told him that I'd rather suck his than see the hotel's. This pleased Thomas D'Allesandro, and he thought about it. I decided to make a clean breast of things. Meanwhile, he was cleaning my breast with his tongue. We were in an alcove of the hallway. I explained my purpose. His purpose was stiff up against my thigh. He seemed to understand my purpose. I handled him very well, I thought.

"You handle . . . ah . . . that . . . ohhhh," he said.

I handled him through the chit-chat. This helped to make my point. He licked me, and that made a point too. Two pink points, that is. I opened up to him. He opened up his trousers. I manipulated his feelings. He manipulated my clit.

I opened up to him, and he relentlessly drove his theme into me. I toyed with his emotions, but he doggedly repeated his single thrust. And so it went, back and forth, until the discussion reached its climax. His position was virtually unassailable, but my position was constantly shifting to make my point. Still, I could not dislodge him from his basic thrust. His point was well taken.

I accepted the basic direction of his argument, but I delayed the inevitability of his final statement on the matter by virtue of my deft and supple reasoning. Alas, however, it was not to be, and before we could completely agree of a basis of argumentation, his point had been made in the most expressive terms, and I had to ac-

cept his ejaculation of triumphant reasoning.

Veni, Vidi, Vici. I saw, I conquered, I came. Unequivocally, thank you.

After this, Thomas D'Allesandro was much more amenable to my plan of action. I came clean, and he cleaned up the come.

"You have my permission and blessings," Thomas D'Allesandro said. "Of course what you're doing is somewhat illegal."

"I know," I said. "But that's only if I get caught, and I don't intend to get caught."

"I'll keep the detective off this floor."

"Thank you," I said.

"One other thing," he said.

"Yes?" I had a pretty good idea what he wanted. It was okay. I wanted it too.

"Afterwards, you might stop by my office and *personally* return the uniform.

I smiled a sly smile. "There's a distinct possibility that I might let you help me change," I said.

Thomas D'Allesandro walked away singing to himself

Well, there was one more happy hotel manager in the world, but I still had things to do. I located the room that my Auckerina friend had given to me. I wasn't sure how I was going to play it. If someone was in the room I pulled out my passkey and hesitated. I listened carefully. Well, I could always say that I had made a mistake. Thank God there was no "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door.

I inserted the key and carefully clicked the tumblers into place. It opened silently. No squeaks or clicking of newly painted joints. I wheeled my cart inside. No one home. There was a bottle of ouzo on the dresser, with a tumbler. About a thimbleful was gone. Beside the bed, there was a suitcase. It was a nondescript model that would blend in at any airport but not so nondescript that anyone could claim it by mistake. I tried it. It was unlocked. I remembered the door, and ran back to close

it. Then I opened the suitcase.

Inside, there was nothing that would lead me to believe it might be G's. Just a pair of rather dry books on economics and history, and a minimal wardrobe. Two slacks, two socks, two shirts. Open-neck, short-sleeve. Some expensive cologne and a silver toothbrush case. It was all so nondescript that I wondered if G might be chimera, the sort that Cary Grant was looking for in *North By Northwest*. Perhaps he was just a bag of clothes and a room number at a hotel and didn't really exist at all.

I heard someone entering the room next door. I pushed the maid's tray to the door, but I heard a key in the door to this room. I put the tray under the external coatrack, where it wouldn't be noticed (I hoped), and made a dash for the bed. There was just enough room underneath it for me to squeeze in. From the mirrors in the room, I could see nearly every point by reflection from a full-length mirror on the bathroom door. A man entered, but my view of his head was cut off.

The door to the adjoining suite opened, and Bernadette Faber walked in wearing a sort of a negligee. I mean, I'm sure that *she* thought it was a very sexy negligee and all, but it took some effort not to giggle.

"I'm here, dahling," she said in her best husky voice.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

"Very nice," I heard the man's voice say. I still could not see his head, my angle being cut off by the lowness of my hiding place.

"I've dressed as a present, dahling," Bernadette whispered throatily. "Don't you want to unwrap me?"

I bit down so hard I could taste blood.

"Mmmn," the man's voice said. His hands undid the top bow of her negligee. I wanted to yell, "It's not worth it!" and the thought didn't help my control any.

"Do you like my boobies?" she purred, thrusting them forward.

"What was that noise?" the man asked.

"What noise?"

I held my breath. My diaphragm was in spasms. I couldn't control it.

"It sounded like someone choking."

"You're avoiding the subject," Bernadette said, placing one palm on the back of one of his hands and placing his palm on her breast. She rubbed up against his hand and made kissy-kissy on his arm, all the while trying to do her best imitation of Marilyn.

"There," the man said. "I heard it again."

I rapped my knuckle against my shin as hard as silence would permit. It hurt, but not enough.

"Dahling!" she pouted. "Come to me!"

She dragged him to the bed and tore off her night-dress at the same time. It fell over his face. By the time he pulled it off, they were facing away from me. He knelt up on the bed, and she unzipped his trousers. His face was, once again, out of view above my line of vision.

In the mirror I could see that his cock was huge. She opened her mouth and licked around the head. I think she'd been watching too many bad porn movies. She looked up with baby-eyes as she took it in her mouth and sort of rooted it around with her hand and tongue.

"I tell you, I heard a noise!" the man said.

I bit the insides of my cheeks so hard blood flowed.

"Dahling!" she whined. "I'm sucking your peenie! Please try to pay *some* attention!"

"It sounds as though someone's choking. There! You hear it?"

She sighed and moved away forlornly. "I don't hear anything at all. Pleease, Pookie?"

I was dying. If Bernadette Faber had decided to take a pair of steel-toed shoes and kick the hell out of me, my insides wouldn't have hurt any more than they did. The problem was just that she was so goddamned inept, it took an act of sheerest willpower to keep quiet.

"All right," the man said.

Now I knew how Roger Thornhill felt about George Kaplan.

He returned to the business of screwing Bernadette, though I must say she didn't make things any too easy on him. I could tell that he was perfectly aware of just how ridiculous she was acting. He made love to Bernadette *in spite* of what she was doing rather than *because* of what she was doing. She seemed to take great satisfaction in her ability to please her man, and shot several knowing glances at her reflection in the mirror as he manfully plunged into her again and again.

Fortunately, I lost interest entirely in what poor Bernadette was doing very early on. My attention was riveted on him. He was not young, he was not old. He was very well formed and in obvious shape. And he exuded an aura of sheer sexual magnetism that I have rarely encountered before. It wasn't long before my hands had wandered into my recently dampened uniform and were rubbing in time with his thrusts. He had her opened up and was giving her about half-throttle, and it was getting uncomfortably warm under the bed. I didn't care. It was just that it was getting very difficult to control my breathing.

"Oh Goooooooood!" Bernadette moaned, and for once I agreed with her. "You're going to make me come, dahling! You're going to make me *climax*!"

He stopped. "Did you hear it?" he asked. He shook his head and kept going before she could answer.

She was contorting and making faces that were obviously meant to convey indescribable pleasure, but looked more like someone undergoing a root canal without benefit of anesthesia. She pursed her lips and arched her eyebrows and fluttered her eyelids. Nice touch, those eyelids. It really helped nail down the overall impression of a fit.

He seemed to notice something in the corner, near the clothes hangers. The cart. Oh, shit.

For once, Bernadette came to my rescue. She grabbed his hair and pulled his face to her breasts, bludgeoning him with them as she went into the most histrionic orgasm I'll ever see faked. They say that men can't tell.

But you can't fool a woman. Especially one who's actually had them. Orgasms, I mean. This time my strangled laugh was drowned out by *her* strangling noises, or the jig would have been up for sure.

And then a strange thing happened. She grabbed him and started moaning for him to "come inside her," the sure sign of a semifrigid woman—not in the request, but in the manner of asking. He politely but gently pulled away from her.

"No, little one," he said. "There are other levels that you don't see."

"But . . . but, *dahling*," she whined.

No pleading or cajoling would induce him back in, though. At first I thought it was funny. Poor Bernadette. He was just giving out the M.F.—mercy fuck—and she didn't see that. But then I realized that I was the one who wasn't seeing.

He stood up, and if I know my men at all, it should have been the case that he either still had a hard-on, or at least some pain from blue balls. But no. Something had transpired, although *what*, I couldn't say.

"Pleeceeease, Punkin," she was whining.

He dressed quickly, with a certain attention to it that was in some way strange to me. It seemed that there was nothing else in the world that occupied his attention. Just putting his clothes on. And, if it can be imagined, he put his clothes on exceedingly well. Odd, thought I.

And then, without ever showing his face, he left the room, pausing only to say, "You really should call downstairs and say something about the sloppy way the maid leaves her things in the rooms."

That was the last I was to see of G for quite a while.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the last I was to see of Bernadette Faber, who lay on the bed for nearly half an hour (though it seemed more like an eternity), making little sniffing noises and rearranging her negligee carefully lest G return. It was the classical pity-poor-baby ploy, but G didn't show any sign of returning to comfort her, so she carefully daubed the mascara from around her

eyes where she'd inadvertently made it run. Mostly, though, she'd managed that most ancient of feminine feats and cried without setting her makeup amiss. I had to give her credit. At some level she was pure female in her instincts.

Finally, she drew herself up from the bed and, regarding her reflections as if to silence them in advance, walked imperiously back into her suite.

I painfully dragged myself from under the bed and listened at her door to make sure she wasn't coming back immediately. The telltale sound of the shower came through the heavy wood of the door, so I collected my cart and wheeled it carefully to the hall door. I had this funny feeling that G had known what was going on the entire time. Even without seeing his face, he had left a lasting impression on me. It was hard to pin down, but it seemed as though every action had masked something more important from my eyes—like the hand movements of a stage magician. But this effect showed naturally in everything G had done, seemingly without any effort. I was hooked now. There was no turning back. I wanted to . . . I don't know. Fuck him? Well, yes, but that wasn't quite it. Talk to him? That too, but still inadequate. I didn't know. Be in his presence, I suppose. There is no one that has produced that effect in me, and I knew, just from recognizing it in me, that I had to find out what sort of man could make me feel that way.

I checked the hall. The coast was clear. I wheeled the cart out and into the hallway, just in time to see G disappearing into the elevator. And I still didn't get a look at his face. The next time we met, I was afraid that I'd have to look at his cock. That, at least, I could recognize.

I took the cart downstairs. D'Allesandro was out, which was a pity, since I really was feeling awfully randy after watching the scene upstairs. I turned in my uniform and went in search of Sulieman Jones, who I hoped could shed some light on the matter.

• • •

"And she was crying?" Lee asked. "It sounds par for the course."

"You're not being fair," I said, tasting my cognac stinger for a second time to make sure it was as good as the first. It was. "She's not really a bad person," I said.

He sipped his. I'd convinced him to try another one. "Pretty good," he said. "But I think I'll stick with Stolichnaya." He belched loudly. No one in the pub noticed. They were all belching or farting even louder. "She's all right."

"You still haven't told me what the tiles are for," I said, indicating the tiles that covered the floor and went up the wall to nearly my height.

"In Australia," Lee said, "they run tile up the walls about five feet so they can hose down the bar in the evening. You know, puke, spit, piss. People here tend to be very serious drinkers."

"Is that anything to do with the fact that you can only get one brand of beer here?" I asked.

Lee smiled. "Each pub has an exclusive contract with a brewery. The brewery supplies that pub. You want another brand, you go to a different pub." He finished his stinger. "Vodka!" he told the bartender, pointing to his brand. Then to me: "Now we'll change the subject back. You don't want to tell me something, right?"

I nodded.

"You feel strange. Like you trespassed. Like you sinned."

I nodded again. "I don't really know what I feel," I said. "But you're right. I did change the subject. I actually felt sorry for her."

"But you're not in any position to feel sorry for her. That's it, isn't it?" Lee asked.

I shrugged. "Something like that. G made me feel . . . I don't know. Ashamed. It's weird."

"He has that effect on people. Bernadette's okay. She's just trying too hard to be something that she thinks she should be."

"I scared her. On the plane, I mean," I said.

He nodded. "You'd better watch out," he said. There was a twinkle in his eye.

I took the bait. "Why?" I asked.

"You just might find out that you're growing up."

I guess he was right. I was finding it harder and harder to think only of myself. The longer I hung around this scene, the harder it was getting to remain unattached. To pretend that I was just playacting at being a reporter—which is just playacting at being objective and above the battle.

"What does being grown-up mean?" I asked. "Does anybody know what it is?"

Lee smiled. "Maybe yes, maybe no. Maybe it's just a cellular response. You grow up biologically, you have a child. You take responsibility for that creature. You spread out that sense of responsibility to other people, and you're 'mature.'"

"That's not an answer," I said.

"It's as close as you're going to get tonight."

"Another round," I said.

"Sure," Lee said. "Why not?"

We were walking. I was feeling restless and not at all reckless, and I wanted to fuck. Lee picked it up. We were back at the Botanical Gardens and it was a lovely cool evening, with a breeze blowing in from the ocean. Christmas was one day over a week away. I didn't really have any sense of it, though. I asked Lee what day it was. I'd lost track.

"Wednesday," he said. "G speaks in L.A. in four days."

"L.A.?"

"You'll have just enough time to take a jet tomorrow and get there early Saturday. You'll be lagged Saturday and rested up for Sunday."

I was stunned. "Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"You didn't ask."

"I didn't ask this time."

"I know."

"So?"

"So," he said, "it didn't look like you were going to ask. G left for L.A. this evening."

"How do you know?"

"I have my sources."

"Well," I said, taking deliberate slowness with my words, "it looks like I've got all night with nothing to do."

"You want a suggestion?"

"Something like that," I said.

"Got anyone in mind?"

"Could be," I said, catching the latch of his zipper.

"I see," he said.

"No," I said. "I see. Going down," I said, and did.

His cock was growing in my hands and mouth. That was the sensation. One of pulsing to life, of expanding, of growth. But this was, in some mysterious way, not the Lee that I knew. Nor, in an equally mysterious manner, was I the Christina he knew. The mystery again. The scent was different, the taste unfamiliar.

Of all the mysteries of life, that of cock and cunt and their joining is at once the simplest and the most profound. There is always something new.

That acid glow began to show itself, bubbling through my skin, through the velvet flesh of his cock, and we were once more transported. The texture of the world altered so that while we were in the Botanical Gardens (a real place that exists on real maps), we were at the same time in a place that exists on no map—terra incognita.

The world began to dissolve in the manner I've come to associate with drug-related experiences, but this time there were no drugs and I was afraid. "Lee," I whispered, "something's different . . . something . . ."

"It's all right," he said. "*We'll be safe*," he seemed to say, and I was comforted. I continued to suck him. All fluids were suddenly amber and musk. All scents

were sandalwood and myrrh. I cast aside resistance and accepted the rising unreality.

In the corner of my eye, I detected movement among the trees. Something luminous. Not human. Not real in the sense that I am used to reality. I felt a chill rising up my spine, but I was not afraid. For the first time, I recognized that rising of tingles as a flash of the *kundalini*. In some mysterious way, this was all related to my experience of G. I no longer existed in the rational world but, rather, in the magical. I had crossed over.

I continued to suck Lee's cock, and I could feel the spongy flesh of the crown pressing upward against my palate. The taste was no longer merely a taste, but carried with it a color, a sound. I could hear a humming in the background, as if a power generator had switched on. It grew louder, but it was deep, resonant, like the pull of horsehair across a bass viol. It rose in pitch, and returned, ululating. I felt the presence of a forgotten race, of persons who now appeared as luminous beings, circling us, flickering, rising and diminishing in magnitude with the music. Or perhaps they *were* the music. The light was cold blue. And then indigo. Purple, almost ultraviolet.

Waves of orange light were rising from Lee's cock as I mouthed it. I realized that I could actually see his balls through the sac of his scrotum. They glowed orange like coals fanned by an invisible wind. My flesh seemed transparent also. I stood and stripped myself of the clothing which was suddenly unnecessary. Animal forms, outlined in blue-white light and magnified far beyond their normal size, danced about us. Rabbits, koalas, and kangaroos. Sparks of different colors shot from the tips of our fingers. Lee reached out to cup my breast, and I felt the sparks on my skin cold and hot at the same time. I took his cock in my hand, and it was outlined in energy from my fingers. It glowed like the aurora australis. Above us, the Southern Cross glowed in the night sky, and I was taken by the sudden strange-

ness of perspective, as though I could merely reach upward and touch the individual stars. My mind rebelled. I *knew* they were light-years away, but my perception refused to heed reason. They were inches away from my face.

Lee's mouth dipped to my breast, and as he took my nipple in his mouth, I could see a whitish fluid sucked from me. The Milky Way flowed from tit to mouth. And I saw the lines of energy extending through my body and his, until we were twin spiderwebs of minute lines, touching and joined at several points, glowing all the more brightly where we touched.

Above me the music grew louder, and I began to hear, behind the music, voices. I began to make them out.

"My Lord Shiva . . ."

"My Lady Shakti . . ."

And then I was displaced again. I could not contain my consciousness within my body. My body did not exist. Or it existed as a poor net trying to trap water. I flowed out as through a sieve, no longer contained, but *containing* my physical being. I was the color of *yin*. Lee, *yang*. We blended, flowing together as paints of different colors. Nebulae and spiral galaxies formed, and stars began to glow within those clouds. His cock was in my mouth, though I cannot recall moving. Movement was an alien concept. I wanted to laugh, and I did, wordlessly. My light pulsed golden everywhere. My cunt was on his lips, and each flick of his tongue sent orange sparks shooting through the vast grid of energy that was my body.

His cock was in my cunt, and he was licking me at the same time. The experiences were not connected, but *parallel*, and I found that I could change tracks at will. At the same time, I was fucking *and* sucking his cock, and each memory was continuous. It was as though I was traveling several different paths at the same time, and there was no way to compare paths as one might not compare apples and oranges. I could experience each as I chose, or slide backward and forward along each

separate track. I experienced orgasm in many ways. Oral. Anal. With my cunt. And slid back again to the point previous to coming. I experienced Lee's experience of fucking me, and suddenly it was hard to imagine not having a cock and not fucking me with it.

Around us, the creatures glowed brighter, and I saw the spirit of Bennelong wandering among them as they stepped aside for his passage. He was not one of them. He vanished. I was afraid again, but Lee's voice comforted me. I drove upward again. Every minute detail of our sexual union was recorded by my senses, but each action was overlaid with an infinite number of other experiences. Our bodies were vast machines, piston driving, shaft accepting. Our bodies were lakes, streams entering the placid pool. Our bodies were clouds interpenetrating and condensing within one another. Our bodies were flame, flickering in and out of existence. Consuming all available fuel. Around this bonfire, the creatures of the *Dream Time*—for I understood that this was what they were—danced in time to the celestial music that seemed to fill every part of my being.

The force of Heaven flowed down through Lee and into me through his cock. The force of Earth flowed upward through me, and as the two met, there was a terrible conflagration. I felt as though I had been plugged into a 220-volt outlet, not unpleasant, but more energy than I felt I could bear.

I began to become truly afraid, but I did my best to shut off my mind. Each wave of fear turned all colors toward red, and as I rejected the fear, my body pulsed up the spectrum, closer and closer to violet.

Time ceased to have meaning. Space contracted, and I had no idea if Lee was an inch or a million miles away.

And then, as if by a silent clap of thunder, it was gone.

He was in me, churning away, and the scent of cock in cunt was overpowering. His sweat dripped from the end of his nose onto my lips, and I licked the salt into

my mouth. It was cool and aromatic.

I spread further, and he reached around me to run his fingers up the slick walls of my labia as he continued to pound himself into me. Suddenly we were in the familiar world, and I felt safe. A deep portion of me had been frightened, terrorized to the core, and there was a cold void somewhere inside. I thought that in such conditions the best place to be is fucking, since you've got someone to hold onto.

"Squeeze my tits, Lee," I demanded, and he did.

He sucked and bit his way down my neck, and bit my nipple with a strength that nearly made me cry out. I pushed him away, but then he rammed me with a series of strokes that wore away all resistance. I was superheated, attenuated to the slightest touch, sound, taste, scent. I wrapped my legs around his, twining like a vine, and taking him by the cheeks, pressed him to my rhythm, so that I could grind my clitoris against his pubic bone.

He was no longer in the driver's seat, but he continued to drive into me. I rolled us over, and I was on top, his legs trapped by mine, his cock trapped by my cunt. I had all the leverage, and he had none. I began to set my rhythm, and he held my breasts as I pumped on his captive prick. I reached to grasp it at the base, which was fortunate, for a moment later he stared at me wide-mouthed and eyed, and I squeezed off his orgasm as it began to pulse upwards. He wasn't getting away *that* easily.

And then the shift. I was the one who was losing control, and his hands were around my waist, holding me back. The joyous combat enthusiastically joined. And over, me on my back with the grass at my ass and Lee at my cunt. His tongue all over me, licking, licking, caressing and touching, like a flame over my cunt, my ass, my belly, and my breasts.

I took his cock in hand and guided him in yet again, and we were fucking for all we were worth. I raked my nails over his back, and his teeth found my neck, gently,

gently o'er the peaks and valleys of my desire. I clamped my legs around him and gave back as good as I got. I could tell that he was finding his second wind, and he clenched me close with strong arms as we tried to crush each other with our mutual embrace.

And yet again: me on my belly, him on my back. In and out of my cunt from behind, he took me. Over and over, he rammed deeply, penetrating my deepest recesses. Now I was on top and now I was beneath. Lee kept at me, matching my energy and pace stroke for stroke. Yearning, thrusting, rolling, and writhing, we fucked. God! Only a few moments ago we were in another dimension, and now we were fucking madly in the grass, totally here, wherever "here" happened to be.

Once, I came. Down and moaning for two. Flung back with my legs locked around his waist made three. On top of him, with my fingers buried in my velveteen bush for four. Riding again, facing his feet for five; on hands and knees for six.

Then I felt the telltale pulsings against my clit, and I knew that he was going to come. Hanging on for dear life, I opened to his frenzied strokes, and he grunted, his face drawn into a mask of ecstatic, exquisite release. I felt him from deep inside. Spurt and spurt again, he filled my warm egress with his seed.

When he was finished, so was I. He rolled onto his side, breathing heavily. "You're . . . you're . . ." he began.

"Now, now," I comforted. "Only someone like you can bring out the best in me. *Two to tango*, you know."

"Easy, girl," he said as I moved astride him yet again. "Here's a boat that hasn't got a kitchen."

I looked at him with a question on my face.

He didn't say anything. He was falling asleep.

"Lee?" I prodded. "Are you listening to me?"

"Mmmmf?" he asked.

"You're amazing, you know that?" I asked.

"Thank youzzzz," he muttered.

Jesus! Now what was I going to do? Falling asleep in

the Botanical Gardens with one's privates hanging in the breeze is nothing if not a thing to be avoided at all costs. Lee had succumbed to that ancient biological imperative, but biology is one thing and judges another, and I had no interest in seeing the inside of a Sydney jail.

"Come on!" I whispered, elbowing him in the ribs.

And in the distance, a light appeared. Unfortunately, it looked like it was powered by two "D" cells, and propelled by a night watchman of some sort.

"Watch out for the beavers," Lee muttered. "Nice dam, madam. Gloria?"

Now, let me explain: Lee is not a small man. He isn't even a medium-sized specimen. He's big, and all that dead weight was pinioning me quite nicely to tarmac. The light moved closer. Lee began to snore.

I clapped a hand over his mouth, but he just started an even raspier sound through his nose. I tried to lever him over, but I couldn't get a proper position to move him.

I heard a voice in the bush. "Hello there! I say! Come on out of there!"

There was just enough of a quaver in the voice that I could make out the speaker wasn't sure there was anybody there, or if there was he was a little afraid.

I plugged Lee's nose. I held my breath. The flashlight beamed wavered, then continued onward.

And then Lee knocked my hands away and snorted loudly. "Mrrrgh!"

The flashlight beam froze. It swung around. "Come out of there, whoever you are!" came the voice. "I've got a gun so don't you try anything!"

Shit. I twisted Lee's ear. Hard. He screeched in pain.

The flashlight beam quavered and pointed at us through the brush. I began to move forward slowly. Lee wouldn't wake up. So I twisted again and howled as loud as I could at the same time.

The flashlight dropped and rose. It began to move back, quivering. "C' or, blimey!"

I twisted Lee's ear again, and he woke up, howling. I

howled and drowned out his abusive language. After all, it wouldn't do for the watchman to know he was dealing with something human.

Lee, just waking up, was disoriented, and when I howled I think I scared him just as much as we'd scared the night watchman. He jumped up and rushed for the light, tripping over his pants and howling in pain as his knee hit a stone.

This was too much for the night watchman, and the flashlight fell to the ground. He ran off screaming into the night. I think he was right. After all, if I saw a six-foot black thing scrambling out of the brush howling, I think I'd run too. Or maybe he'd read too much Lovecraft. Who can say?

I managed to get Lee calmed and back to the hotel. Later, I explained the situation to him, and he was highly amused. I was too, but for an entirely different reason. You see, Lee had managed to bruise a very sensitive portion of his anatomy during his fall, and he was inspecting the damaged area with a concern that seemed to me entirely too worried under the circumstances.

"It will still work," I said gently.

He looked at me with an I-don't-believe-you look that melted me and moved my Florence Nightingale persona into action.

"Poor baby," I said, taking the injured part in hand. "Mama Christina will kiss it and make it all better."

I took it and kissed the length gently, following with my tongue. "Better?" I asked.

"A little."

I kissed it a little more. It stirred to life. I drew its length into my mouth and let it lengthen to its full extension. Lee moaned a little. His pubic hair tickled my nose. Years ago, when it was chic to nip a trick or two from sword swallows, I'd perfected the technique. Evidently, like most fads, it passed and no one knows how to do it any more. Me, I like it. Feeling filled up, I mean. Of course I have to make sure I'm in control of the rhythm, or breathing can get a little difficult. But

the men seem to like it. Lee did.

I was on my knees, his legs straddling me on either side. I took it all down and out again a few times, and wrapped my fingers around his shaft. Someone hipped me a long time ago that it's the hand that's the key, rather than the mouth. The hand supplies the real stimulation; the mouth supplies the excitement and overall ambience. A good blow-job is a work of art, albeit the art of the chef, whose masterpiece is soon eaten and forgotten. So with a good blow-job. The eating is soon forgotten, though the taste may linger for a while.

I stroked him with my hand, applying discreet pressure to the underside, along the curve of the urethra. My other hand was carefully working at the base of the sac, manipulating the tender nerves of Lee's perineum. Slowly: sucking and massaging him until the hurt was forgotten and pleasure replaced pain. The reflection of golden light in fluid, of the slick textured velvet of cock and lip and tongue, of mirrors that allowed voyeurism and the plants framing us in the room. The scent of recent lust and new musk. The all but inaudible rasp of air crossing larynx in purrings and growls of excitement, anticipation, of pleasure and plea.

And then the inevitability. The pulsing, the balls drawing up in the thickening flesh of the scrotum, the heat, and the full-to-bursting of shaft in mouth. The first tentative pulses and the eager pumping of lust-warmed semen in my mouth. I matched rhythm and helped his cock. A glacé on my lip and chin. A thick strand laid across my tongue like a rune. A thin, slightly viscous spurt of liquid across soft palate and uvula, and the gentle sound of my swallow.

And after—the gauzelike sheen of his ejaculate covering the end of his cock, and the velvet against my cheek as I nuzzled it, drying it with human tissue. In the mirror, a beautiful woman kissing her lover's cock. The glistening juices of their cojoining spread across her cheek. The fine line of her aristocratic nose counterpointed by the softness of shape and curve of cock. The

appreciative gesturings and caresses of her lover's hand in fine blond hair, and the delicate flick of the head that thrust wayward strands back across her shoulder. The plants in golden light—green, greener than plants have a right to be. The soft light. The scent of satiety, of friendship. And the stillness of the room.

We spent the night spooned together, Drained of desire but melded closely, in one creature, sleeping contentedly.

As I checked out the next morning, I saw Thomas D'Allesandro again, standing just away from the desk, a mournful look in his eyes.

"Checking out?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Surely you'll visit our country again?"

I nodded. "Soon," I said, a promise in my eyes.

Poor Thomas, and poor me. There's not enough time to have your cake and eat it too. Not enough time to take every avenue of opportunity. We choose, and fate draws us onward. Away from family, friends, lovers, and finally, from life itself. There was no way to explain this to him, so I did the best I could to buffer his disappointment. And mine. I had wanted to explore it further. When I would return, I could not say. And that he would still be here, no one knew.

Perhaps my nameless friend was wisest of us all. He asked for no addresses, gave no promises except the short time we had. When he was with me, he was with me completely, as if only I, of all powers and principalities, existed in that moment. If we were to meet again, so be it. If not, why dwell on it?

I stared out of the airplane window at the disappearing continent, still thinking of these things.

much one way or the other. I'm fairly happy, and that's what counts.

"Pray tell, what are you?" he asked, adding, "besides being a lovely creature and an exquisite fuck."

I liked the way he said "exquisite." "God knows," I said. "Maybe the same thing as you. I'm rich and famous, and I do all sorts of marvelous things, but I don't feel like they're really *me*. Do you understand what I mean?"

He smiled. "Yes," he said. "I do understand."

"But I'll make you a deal," I said.

He lifted an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"When I find out, I'll tell you, and when you find out, you tell me."

"Sounds fair to me," he said.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, where can I get in touch with you?" I asked.

"I have this feeling that we're fated to meet again. I have this feeling we've met before," he said. "Let's leave it to the gods, eh?"

"Agreed," I said. I wanted to ask him something. "Where could we have met before?"

"Not in this lifetime. Not in this time and place. But it's a feeling I have, and what can I say?" He winked.

I shook my head. I had the same feeling. I didn't want to think about it. "I don't like talking about things like that," I said. "Spooky."

He smiled. "Don't talk about it. Don't even think about it. It's not important. Being happy is."

And then he had to leave. I didn't even know his name.

CHAPTER SIX

Morning again.

My mysterious stranger had long since departed, and I was left only dreams and memories that were somewhat hazy in the light of morning. I came out of that half-state between, and hovered for a few seconds. An inspiration was hanging over me, and I've learned that if you hang between waking and dreaming, you can often find the answers to problems. It's as if the answers come from somewhere else. All I have to do is wait. An idea began to form, and I realized what I should do. Soon, the idea had formed completely, and I pulled myself awake and got out of bed.

In the shower, I went over the vision I'd had, to see if it made any sense in the light of day. The problem with some of the things you get from sleep is that they may seem perfectly apparent and workable in that twilight zone, but when you get back down to the real world, they don't quite make it. I mean, if a solution has to do with flying, sans plane, that's all well and good in dreams, because you can do it. But on this level, it's a little difficult.

The plan seemed solid enough on terra firma, so I

toweled and preened and called downstairs. A hundred-dollar note had found a friend before, and it was that friend I spoke to. (Little note: In Australia, money is graduated in size proportional to the amount of the note. A dollar is more or less the size of an American dollar, but a hundred-dollar note is quite large. They say the Australian government issues them that way so that blind persons can differentiate. And, of course, it makes it kind of difficult to accidentally hand somebody a twenty instead of a five. Clever, these Auckers.)

My friend was a typical Auckerina. She liked mini-skirts and shaved to the knees only. Went in for Hawaiian-style shifts—sleeveless so you could see bra straps—and thongs. And was the assistant manager of the hotel. Well, a little more cash greased her palm, and I got what I wanted—a maid's uniform, a passkey, and a room number.

G was staying at the Excelsior. Right next to Bernadette's room. Of course, my dream had shown me that. It made such perfect sense that I wondered why I hadn't thought of it on my own. Thank God for dreams and corrupt hotel staffs.

Everything was working beautifully, until I got out of the elevator. It was a great little costume, a real eye-catcher. I looked great in it too. And therein lay the rub. Or therein rubbed the lay—it was a bit tight. Problem was, I *did* look good in it, or I wouldn't have had the trouble.

The trouble was in the form of the hotel manager, and his name, I found out later, was Thomas D'Allesandro. Tall, slim, Italian. Dark. Via Veneto pimp mustache, but it didn't look bad. Neither did I. That was what caused the trouble.

I stepped off the elevator on the eighteenth floor with my little tray of towels and et cetera. Unfortunately, the eighteenth floor happened to be the floor that Thomas D'Allesandro was on, checking a plumbing problem in one of the suites. He saw the pretty new maid, and

thought that she looked wonderful. He decided to strike up a conversation with her. Her was me. Then he remembered that he didn't remember hiring the pretty new maid, and he asked me just who the hell I was, and what the hell I thought I was doing.

How do I end up in these messes?

I asked him just who the hell he was, and what the hell he thought he was doing, and he headed for the house dick, with me in tow. I told him that we didn't need to see the house dick, and he told me that I was going to see a dick, one way or the other. I told him that I'd rather suck his than see the hotel's. This pleased Thomas D'Allesandro, and he thought about it. I decided to make a clean breast of things. Meanwhile, he was cleaning my breast with his tongue. We were in an alcove of the hallway. I explained my purpose. His purpose was stiff up against my thigh. He seemed to understand my purpose. I handled him very well, I thought.

"You handle . . . ah . . . that . . . ohhhh," he said.

I handled him through the chit-chat. This helped to make my point. He licked me, and that made a point too. Two pink points, that is. I opened up to him. He opened up his trousers. I manipulated his feelings. He manipulated my clit.

I opened up to him, and he relentlessly drove his theme into me. I toyed with his emotions, but he doggedly repeated his single thrust. And so it went, back and forth, until the discussion reached its climax. His position was virtually unassailable, but my position was constantly shifting to make my point. Still, I could not dislodge him from his basic thrust. His point was well taken.

I accepted the basic direction of his argument, but I delayed the inevitability of his final statement on the matter by virtue of my deft and supple reasoning. Alas, however, it was not to be, and before we could completely agree of a basis of argumentation, his point had been made in the most expressive terms, and I had to ac-

cept his ejaculation of triumphant reasoning.

Veni, Vidi, Vici. I saw, I conquered, I came. Unequivocally, thank you.

After this, Thomas D'Allesandro was much more amenable to my plan of action. I came clean, and he cleaned up the come.

"You have my permission and blessings," Thomas D'Allesandro said. "Of course what you're doing is somewhat illegal."

"I know," I said. "But that's only if I get caught, and I don't intend to get caught."

"I'll keep the detective off this floor."

"Thank you," I said.

"One other thing," he said.

"Yes?" I had a pretty good idea what he wanted. It was okay. I wanted it too.

"Afterwards, you might stop by my office and *personally* return the uniform.

I smiled a sly smile. "There's a distinct possibility that I might let you help me change," I said.

Thomas D'Allesandro walked away singing to himself

Well, there was one more happy hotel manager in the world, but I still had things to do. I located the room that my Auckerina friend had given to me. I wasn't sure how I was going to play it. If someone was in the room I pulled out my passkey and hesitated. I listened carefully. Well, I could always say that I had made a mistake. Thank God there was no "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door.

I inserted the key and carefully clicked the tumblers into place. It opened silently. No squeaks or clicking of newly painted joints. I wheeled my cart inside. No one home. There was a bottle of ouzo on the dresser, with a tumbler. About a thimbleful was gone. Beside the bed, there was a suitcase. It was a nondescript model that would blend in at any airport but not so nondescript that anyone could claim it by mistake. I tried it. It was unlocked. I remembered the door, and ran back to close

it. Then I opened the suitcase.

Inside, there was nothing that would lead me to believe it might be G's. Just a pair of rather dry books on economics and history, and a minimal wardrobe. Two slacks, two socks, two shirts. Open-neck, short-sleeve. Some expensive cologne and a silver toothbrush case. It was all so nondescript that I wondered if G might be chimera, the sort that Cary Grant was looking for in *North By Northwest*. Perhaps he was just a bag of clothes and a room number at a hotel and didn't really exist at all.

I heard someone entering the room next door. I pushed the maid's tray to the door, but I heard a key in the door to this room. I put the tray under the external coatrack, where it wouldn't be noticed (I hoped), and made a dash for the bed. There was just enough room underneath it for me to squeeze in. From the mirrors in the room, I could see nearly every point by reflection from a full-length mirror on the bathroom door. A man entered, but my view of his head was cut off.

The door to the adjoining suite opened, and Bernadette Faber walked in wearing a sort of a negligee. I mean, I'm sure that *she* thought it was a very sexy negligee and all, but it took some effort not to giggle.

"I'm here, dahling," she said in her best husky voice.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

"Very nice," I heard the man's voice say. I still could not see his head, my angle being cut off by the lowness of my hiding place.

"I've dressed as a present, dahling," Bernadette whispered throatily. "Don't you want to unwrap me?"

I bit down so hard I could taste blood.

"Mmmn," the man's voice said. His hands undid the top bow of her negligee. I wanted to yell, "It's not worth it!" and the thought didn't help my control any.

"Do you like my boobies?" she purred, thrusting them forward.

"What was that noise?" the man asked.

"What noise?"

I held my breath. My diaphragm was in spasms. I couldn't control it.

"It sounded like someone choking."

"You're avoiding the subject," Bernadette said, placing one palm on the back of one of his hands and placing his palm on her breast. She rubbed up against his hand and made kissy-kissy on his arm, all the while trying to do her best imitation of Marilyn.

"There," the man said. "I heard it again."

I rapped my knuckle against my shin as hard as silence would permit. It hurt, but not enough.

"Dahling!" she pouted. "Come to me!"

She dragged him to the bed and tore off her night-dress at the same time. It fell over his face. By the time he pulled it off, they were facing away from me. He knelt up on the bed, and she unzipped his trousers. His face was, once again, out of view above my line of vision.

In the mirror I could see that his cock was huge. She opened her mouth and licked around the head. I think she'd been watching too many bad porn movies. She looked up with baby-eyes as she took it in her mouth and sort of rooted it around with her hand and tongue.

"I tell you, I heard a noise!" the man said.

I bit the insides of my cheeks so hard blood flowed.

"Dahling!" she whined. "I'm sucking your peenie! Please try to pay *some* attention!"

"It sounds as though someone's choking. There! You hear it?"

She sighed and moved away forlornly. "I don't hear anything at all. Pleease, Pookie?"

I was dying. If Bernadette Faber had decided to take a pair of steel-toed shoes and kick the hell out of me, my insides wouldn't have hurt any more than they did. The problem was just that she was so goddamned inept, it took an act of sheerest willpower to keep quiet.

"All right," the man said.

Now I knew how Roger Thornhill felt about George Kaplan.

He returned to the business of screwing Bernadette, though I must say she didn't make things any too easy on him. I could tell that he was perfectly aware of just how ridiculous she was acting. He made love to Bernadette *in spite* of what she was doing rather than *because* of what she was doing. She seemed to take great satisfaction in her ability to please her man, and shot several knowing glances at her reflection in the mirror as he manfully plunged into her again and again.

Fortunately, I lost interest entirely in what poor Bernadette was doing very early on. My attention was riveted on him. He was not young, he was not old. He was very well formed and in obvious shape. And he exuded an aura of sheer sexual magnetism that I have rarely encountered before. It wasn't long before my hands had wandered into my recently dampened uniform and were rubbing in time with his thrusts. He had her opened up and was giving her about half-throttle, and it was getting uncomfortably warm under the bed. I didn't care. It was just that it was getting very difficult to control my breathing.

"Oh Goooooooood!" Bernadette moaned, and for once I agreed with her. "You're going to make me come, dahling! You're going to make me *climax*!"

He stopped. "Did you hear it?" he asked. He shook his head and kept going before she could answer.

She was contorting and making faces that were obviously meant to convey indescribable pleasure, but looked more like someone undergoing a root canal without benefit of anesthesia. She pursed her lips and arched her eyebrows and fluttered her eyelids. Nice touch, those eyelids. It really helped nail down the overall impression of a fit.

He seemed to notice something in the corner, near the clothes hangers. The cart. Oh, shit.

For once, Bernadette came to my rescue. She grabbed his hair and pulled his face to her breasts, bludgeoning him with them as she went into the most histrionic orgasm I'll ever see faked. They say that men can't tell.

But you can't fool a woman. Especially one who's actually had them. Orgasms, I mean. This time my strangled laugh was drowned out by *her* strangling noises, or the jig would have been up for sure.

And then a strange thing happened. She grabbed him and started moaning for him to "come inside her," the sure sign of a semifrigid woman—not in the request, but in the manner of asking. He politely but gently pulled away from her.

"No, little one," he said. "There are other levels that you don't see."

"But . . . but, *dahling*," she whined.

No pleading or cajoling would induce him back in, though. At first I thought it was funny. Poor Bernadette. He was just giving out the M.F.—mercy fuck—and she didn't see that. But then I realized that I was the one who wasn't seeing.

He stood up, and if I know my men at all, it should have been the case that he either still had a hard-on, or at least some pain from blue balls. But no. Something had transpired, although *what*, I couldn't say.

"Pleeceeease, Punkin," she was whining.

He dressed quickly, with a certain attention to it that was in some way strange to me. It seemed that there was nothing else in the world that occupied his attention. Just putting his clothes on. And, if it can be imagined, he put his clothes on exceedingly well. Odd, thought I.

And then, without ever showing his face, he left the room, pausing only to say, "You really should call downstairs and say something about the sloppy way the maid leaves her things in the rooms."

That was the last I was to see of G for quite a while.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the last I was to see of Bernadette Faber, who lay on the bed for nearly half an hour (though it seemed more like an eternity), making little sniffing noises and rearranging her negligee carefully lest G return. It was the classical pity-poor-baby ploy, but G didn't show any sign of returning to comfort her, so she carefully daubed the mascara from around her

eyes where she'd inadvertently made it run. Mostly, though, she'd managed that most ancient of feminine feats and cried without setting her makeup amiss. I had to give her credit. At some level she was pure female in her instincts.

Finally, she drew herself up from the bed and, regarding her reflections as if to silence them in advance, walked imperiously back into her suite.

I painfully dragged myself from under the bed and listened at her door to make sure she wasn't coming back immediately. The telltale sound of the shower came through the heavy wood of the door, so I collected my cart and wheeled it carefully to the hall door. I had this funny feeling that G had known what was going on the entire time. Even without seeing his face, he had left a lasting impression on me. It was hard to pin down, but it seemed as though every action had masked something more important from my eyes—like the hand movements of a stage magician. But this effect showed naturally in everything G had done, seemingly without any effort. I was hooked now. There was no turning back. I wanted to . . . I don't know. Fuck him? Well, yes, but that wasn't quite it. Talk to him? That too, but still inadequate. I didn't know. Be in his presence, I suppose. There is no one that has produced that effect in me, and I knew, just from recognizing it in me, that I had to find out what sort of man could make me feel that way.

I checked the hall. The coast was clear. I wheeled the cart out and into the hallway, just in time to see G disappearing into the elevator. And I still didn't get a look at his face. The next time we met, I was afraid that I'd have to look at his cock. That, at least, I could recognize.

I took the cart downstairs. D'Allesandro was out, which was a pity, since I really was feeling awfully randy after watching the scene upstairs. I turned in my uniform and went in search of Sulieman Jones, who I hoped could shed some light on the matter.

• • •

"And she was crying?" Lee asked. "It sounds par for the course."

"You're not being fair," I said, tasting my cognac stinger for a second time to make sure it was as good as the first. It was. "She's not really a bad person," I said.

He sipped his. I'd convinced him to try another one. "Pretty good," he said. "But I think I'll stick with Stolichnaya." He belched loudly. No one in the pub noticed. They were all belching or farting even louder. "She's all right."

"You still haven't told me what the tiles are for," I said, indicating the tiles that covered the floor and went up the wall to nearly my height.

"In Australia," Lee said, "they run tile up the walls about five feet so they can hose down the bar in the evening. You know, puke, spit, piss. People here tend to be very serious drinkers."

"Is that anything to do with the fact that you can only get one brand of beer here?" I asked.

Lee smiled. "Each pub has an exclusive contract with a brewery. The brewery supplies that pub. You want another brand, you go to a different pub." He finished his stinger. "Vodka!" he told the bartender, pointing to his brand. Then to me: "Now we'll change the subject back. You don't want to tell me something, right?"

I nodded.

"You feel strange. Like you trespassed. Like you sinned."

I nodded again. "I don't really know what I feel," I said. "But you're right. I did change the subject. I actually felt sorry for her."

"But you're not in any position to feel sorry for her. That's it, isn't it?" Lee asked.

I shrugged. "Something like that. G made me feel . . . I don't know. Ashamed. It's weird."

"He has that effect on people. Bernadette's okay. She's just trying too hard to be something that she thinks she should be."

"I scared her. On the plane, I mean," I said.

He nodded. "You'd better watch out," he said. There was a twinkle in his eye.

I took the bait. "Why?" I asked.

"You just might find out that you're growing up."

I guess he was right. I was finding it harder and harder to think only of myself. The longer I hung around this scene, the harder it was getting to remain unattached. To pretend that I was just playacting at being a reporter—which is just playacting at being objective and above the battle.

"What does being grown-up mean?" I asked. "Does anybody know what it is?"

Lee smiled. "Maybe yes, maybe no. Maybe it's just a cellular response. You grow up biologically, you have a child. You take responsibility for that creature. You spread out that sense of responsibility to other people, and you're 'mature.'"

"That's not an answer," I said.

"It's as close as you're going to get tonight."

"Another round," I said.

"Sure," Lee said. "Why not?"

We were walking. I was feeling restless and not at all reckless, and I wanted to fuck. Lee picked it up. We were back at the Botanical Gardens and it was a lovely cool evening, with a breeze blowing in from the ocean. Christmas was one day over a week away. I didn't really have any sense of it, though. I asked Lee what day it was. I'd lost track.

"Wednesday," he said. "G speaks in L.A. in four days."

"L.A.?"

"You'll have just enough time to take a jet tomorrow and get there early Saturday. You'll be lagged Saturday and rested up for Sunday."

I was stunned. "Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"You didn't ask."

"I didn't ask this time."

"I know."

"So?"

"So," he said, "it didn't look like you were going to ask. G left for L.A. this evening."

"How do you know?"

"I have my sources."

"Well," I said, taking deliberate slowness with my words, "it looks like I've got all night with nothing to do."

"You want a suggestion?"

"Something like that," I said.

"Got anyone in mind?"

"Could be," I said, catching the latch of his zipper.

"I see," he said.

"No," I said. "I see. Going down," I said, and did.

His cock was growing in my hands and mouth. That was the sensation. One of pulsing to life, of expanding, of growth. But this was, in some mysterious way, not the Lee that I knew. Nor, in an equally mysterious manner, was I the Christina he knew. The mystery again. The scent was different, the taste unfamiliar.

Of all the mysteries of life, that of cock and cunt and their joining is at once the simplest and the most profound. There is always something new.

That acid glow began to show itself, bubbling through my skin, through the velvet flesh of his cock, and we were once more transported. The texture of the world altered so that while we were in the Botanical Gardens (a real place that exists on real maps), we were at the same time in a place that exists on no map—terra incognita.

The world began to dissolve in the manner I've come to associate with drug-related experiences, but this time there were no drugs and I was afraid. "Lee," I whispered, "something's different . . . something . . ."

"It's all right," he said. "*We'll be safe*," he seemed to say, and I was comforted. I continued to suck him. All fluids were suddenly amber and musk. All scents

were sandalwood and myrrh. I cast aside resistance and accepted the rising unreality.

In the corner of my eye, I detected movement among the trees. Something luminous. Not human. Not real in the sense that I am used to reality. I felt a chill rising up my spine, but I was not afraid. For the first time, I recognized that rising of tingles as a flash of the *kundalini*. In some mysterious way, this was all related to my experience of G. I no longer existed in the rational world but, rather, in the magical. I had crossed over.

I continued to suck Lee's cock, and I could feel the spongy flesh of the crown pressing upward against my palate. The taste was no longer merely a taste, but carried with it a color, a sound. I could hear a humming in the background, as if a power generator had switched on. It grew louder, but it was deep, resonant, like the pull of horsehair across a bass viol. It rose in pitch, and returned, ululating. I felt the presence of a forgotten race, of persons who now appeared as luminous beings, circling us, flickering, rising and diminishing in magnitude with the music. Or perhaps they *were* the music. The light was cold blue. And then indigo. Purple, almost ultraviolet.

Waves of orange light were rising from Lee's cock as I mouthed it. I realized that I could actually see his balls through the sac of his scrotum. They glowed orange like coals fanned by an invisible wind. My flesh seemed transparent also. I stood and stripped myself of the clothing which was suddenly unnecessary. Animal forms, outlined in blue-white light and magnified far beyond their normal size, danced about us. Rabbits, koalas, and kangaroos. Sparks of different colors shot from the tips of our fingers. Lee reached out to cup my breast, and I felt the sparks on my skin cold and hot at the same time. I took his cock in my hand, and it was outlined in energy from my fingers. It glowed like the aurora australis. Above us, the Southern Cross glowed in the night sky, and I was taken by the sudden strange-

ness of perspective, as though I could merely reach upward and touch the individual stars. My mind rebelled. I *knew* they were light-years away, but my perception refused to heed reason. They were inches away from my face.

Lee's mouth dipped to my breast, and as he took my nipple in his mouth, I could see a whitish fluid sucked from me. The Milky Way flowed from tit to mouth. And I saw the lines of energy extending through my body and his, until we were twin spiderwebs of minute lines, touching and joined at several points, glowing all the more brightly where we touched.

Above me the music grew louder, and I began to hear, behind the music, voices. I began to make them out.

"My Lord Shiva . . ."

"My Lady Shakti . . ."

And then I was displaced again. I could not contain my consciousness within my body. My body did not exist. Or it existed as a poor net trying to trap water. I flowed out as through a sieve, no longer contained, but *containing* my physical being. I was the color of *yin*. Lee, *yang*. We blended, flowing together as paints of different colors. Nebulae and spiral galaxies formed, and stars began to glow within those clouds. His cock was in my mouth, though I cannot recall moving. Movement was an alien concept. I wanted to laugh, and I did, wordlessly. My light pulsed golden everywhere. My cunt was on his lips, and each flick of his tongue sent orange sparks shooting through the vast grid of energy that was my body.

His cock was in my cunt, and he was licking me at the same time. The experiences were not connected, but *parallel*, and I found that I could change tracks at will. At the same time, I was fucking *and* sucking his cock, and each memory was continuous. It was as though I was traveling several different paths at the same time, and there was no way to compare paths as one might not compare apples and oranges. I could experience each as I chose, or slide backward and forward along each

separate track. I experienced orgasm in many ways. Oral. Anal. With my cunt. And slid back again to the point previous to coming. I experienced Lee's experience of fucking me, and suddenly it was hard to imagine not having a cock and not fucking me with it.

Around us, the creatures glowed brighter, and I saw the spirit of Bennelong wandering among them as they stepped aside for his passage. He was not one of them. He vanished. I was afraid again, but Lee's voice comforted me. I drove upward again. Every minute detail of our sexual union was recorded by my senses, but each action was overlaid with an infinite number of other experiences. Our bodies were vast machines, piston driving, shaft accepting. Our bodies were lakes, streams entering the placid pool. Our bodies were clouds interpenetrating and condensing within one another. Our bodies were flame, flickering in and out of existence. Consuming all available fuel. Around this bonfire, the creatures of the *Dream Time*—for I understood that this was what they were—danced in time to the celestial music that seemed to fill every part of my being.

The force of Heaven flowed down through Lee and into me through his cock. The force of Earth flowed upward through me, and as the two met, there was a terrible conflagration. I felt as though I had been plugged into a 220-volt outlet, not unpleasant, but more energy than I felt I could bear.

I began to become truly afraid, but I did my best to shut off my mind. Each wave of fear turned all colors toward red, and as I rejected the fear, my body pulsed up the spectrum, closer and closer to violet.

Time ceased to have meaning. Space contracted, and I had no idea if Lee was an inch or a million miles away.

And then, as if by a silent clap of thunder, it was gone.

He was in me, churning away, and the scent of cock in cunt was overpowering. His sweat dripped from the end of his nose onto my lips, and I licked the salt into

my mouth. It was cool and aromatic.

I spread further, and he reached around me to run his fingers up the slick walls of my labia as he continued to pound himself into me. Suddenly we were in the familiar world, and I felt safe. A deep portion of me had been frightened, terrorized to the core, and there was a cold void somewhere inside. I thought that in such conditions the best place to be is fucking, since you've got someone to hold onto.

"Squeeze my tits, Lee," I demanded, and he did.

He sucked and bit his way down my neck, and bit my nipple with a strength that nearly made me cry out. I pushed him away, but then he rammed me with a series of strokes that wore away all resistance. I was superheated, attenuated to the slightest touch, sound, taste, scent. I wrapped my legs around his, twining like a vine, and taking him by the cheeks, pressed him to my rhythm, so that I could grind my clitoris against his pubic bone.

He was no longer in the driver's seat, but he continued to drive into me. I rolled us over, and I was on top, his legs trapped by mine, his cock trapped by my cunt. I had all the leverage, and he had none. I began to set my rhythm, and he held my breasts as I pumped on his captive prick. I reached to grasp it at the base, which was fortunate, for a moment later he stared at me wide-mouthed and eyed, and I squeezed off his orgasm as it began to pulse upwards. He wasn't getting away *that* easily.

And then the shift. I was the one who was losing control, and his hands were around my waist, holding me back. The joyous combat enthusiastically joined. And over, me on my back with the grass at my ass and Lee at my cunt. His tongue all over me, licking, licking, caressing and touching, like a flame over my cunt, my ass, my belly, and my breasts.

I took his cock in hand and guided him in yet again, and we were fucking for all we were worth. I raked my nails over his back, and his teeth found my neck, gently,

gently o'er the peaks and valleys of my desire. I clamped my legs around him and gave back as good as I got. I could tell that he was finding his second wind, and he clenched me close with strong arms as we tried to crush each other with our mutual embrace.

And yet again: me on my belly, him on my back. In and out of my cunt from behind, he took me. Over and over, he rammed deeply, penetrating my deepest recesses. Now I was on top and now I was beneath. Lee kept at me, matching my energy and pace stroke for stroke. Yearning, thrusting, rolling, and writhing, we fucked. God! Only a few moments ago we were in another dimension, and now we were fucking madly in the grass, totally here, wherever "here" happened to be.

Once, I came. Down and moaning for two. Flung back with my legs locked around his waist made three. On top of him, with my fingers buried in my velveteen bush for four. Riding again, facing his feet for five; on hands and knees for six.

Then I felt the telltale pulsings against my clit, and I knew that he was going to come. Hanging on for dear life, I opened to his frenzied strokes, and he grunted, his face drawn into a mask of ecstatic, exquisite release. I felt him from deep inside. Spurt and spurt again, he filled my warm egress with his seed.

When he was finished, so was I. He rolled onto his side, breathing heavily. "You're . . . you're . . ." he began.

"Now, now," I comforted. "Only someone like you can bring out the best in me. *Two to tango*, you know."

"Easy, girl," he said as I moved astride him yet again. "Here's a boat that hasn't got a kitchen."

I looked at him with a question on my face.

He didn't say anything. He was falling asleep.

"Lee?" I prodded. "Are you listening to me?"

"Mmmmf?" he asked.

"You're amazing, you know that?" I asked.

"Thank youzzzz," he muttered.

Jesus! Now what was I going to do? Falling asleep in

the Botanical Gardens with one's privates hanging in the breeze is nothing if not a thing to be avoided at all costs. Lee had succumbed to that ancient biological imperative, but biology is one thing and judges another, and I had no interest in seeing the inside of a Sydney jail.

"Come on!" I whispered, elbowing him in the ribs.

And in the distance, a light appeared. Unfortunately, it looked like it was powered by two "D" cells, and propelled by a night watchman of some sort.

"Watch out for the beavers," Lee muttered. "Nice dam, madam. Gloria?"

Now, let me explain: Lee is not a small man. He isn't even a medium-sized specimen. He's big, and all that dead weight was pinioning me quite nicely to tarmac. The light moved closer. Lee began to snore.

I clapped a hand over his mouth, but he just started an even raspier sound through his nose. I tried to lever him over, but I couldn't get a proper position to move him.

I heard a voice in the bush. "Hello there! I say! Come on out of there!"

There was just enough of a quaver in the voice that I could make out the speaker wasn't sure there was anybody there, or if there was he was a little afraid.

I plugged Lee's nose. I held my breath. The flashlight beamed wavered, then continued onward.

And then Lee knocked my hands away and snorted loudly. "Mrrrgh!"

The flashlight beam froze. It swung around. "Come out of there, whoever you are!" came the voice. "I've got a gun so don't you try anything!"

Shit. I twisted Lee's ear. Hard. He screeched in pain.

The flashlight beam quavered and pointed at us through the brush. I began to move forward slowly. Lee wouldn't wake up. So I twisted again and howled as loud as I could at the same time.

The flashlight dropped and rose. It began to move back, quivering. "C' or, blimey!"

I twisted Lee's ear again, and he woke up, howling. I

howled and drowned out his abusive language. After all, it wouldn't do for the watchman to know he was dealing with something human.

Lee, just waking up, was disoriented, and when I howled I think I scared him just as much as we'd scared the night watchman. He jumped up and rushed for the light, tripping over his pants and howling in pain as his knee hit a stone.

This was too much for the night watchman, and the flashlight fell to the ground. He ran off screaming into the night. I think he was right. After all, if I saw a six-foot black thing scrambling out of the brush howling, I think I'd run too. Or maybe he'd read too much Lovecraft. Who can say?

I managed to get Lee calmed and back to the hotel. Later, I explained the situation to him, and he was highly amused. I was too, but for an entirely different reason. You see, Lee had managed to bruise a very sensitive portion of his anatomy during his fall, and he was inspecting the damaged area with a concern that seemed to me entirely too worried under the circumstances.

"It will still work," I said gently.

He looked at me with an I-don't-believe-you look that melted me and moved my Florence Nightingale persona into action.

"Poor baby," I said, taking the injured part in hand. "Mama Christina will kiss it and make it all better."

I took it and kissed the length gently, following with my tongue. "Better?" I asked.

"A little."

I kissed it a little more. It stirred to life. I drew its length into my mouth and let it lengthen to its full extension. Lee moaned a little. His pubic hair tickled my nose. Years ago, when it was chic to nip a trick or two from sword swallows, I'd perfected the technique. Evidently, like most fads, it passed and no one knows how to do it any more. Me, I like it. Feeling filled up, I mean. Of course I have to make sure I'm in control of the rhythm, or breathing can get a little difficult. But

the men seem to like it. Lee did.

I was on my knees, his legs straddling me on either side. I took it all down and out again a few times, and wrapped my fingers around his shaft. Someone hipped me a long time ago that it's the hand that's the key, rather than the mouth. The hand supplies the real stimulation; the mouth supplies the excitement and overall ambience. A good blow-job is a work of art, albeit the art of the chef, whose masterpiece is soon eaten and forgotten. So with a good blow-job. The eating is soon forgotten, though the taste may linger for a while.

I stroked him with my hand, applying discreet pressure to the underside, along the curve of the urethra. My other hand was carefully working at the base of the sac, manipulating the tender nerves of Lee's perineum. Slowly: sucking and massaging him until the hurt was forgotten and pleasure replaced pain. The reflection of golden light in fluid, of the slick textured velvet of cock and lip and tongue, of mirrors that allowed voyeurism and the plants framing us in the room. The scent of recent lust and new musk. The all but inaudible rasp of air crossing larynx in purrings and growls of excitement, anticipation, of pleasure and plea.

And then the inevitability. The pulsing, the balls drawing up in the thickening flesh of the scrotum, the heat, and the full-to-bursting of shaft in mouth. The first tentative pulses and the eager pumping of lust-warmed semen in my mouth. I matched rhythm and helped his cock. A glacé on my lip and chin. A thick strand laid across my tongue like a rune. A thin, slightly viscous spurt of liquid across soft palate and uvula, and the gentle sound of my swallow.

And after—the gauzelike sheen of his ejaculate covering the end of his cock, and the velvet against my cheek as I nuzzled it, drying it with human tissue. In the mirror, a beautiful woman kissing her lover's cock. The glistening juices of their cojoining spread across her cheek. The fine line of her aristocratic nose counterpointed by the softness of shape and curve of cock. The

appreciative gesturings and caresses of her lover's hand in fine blond hair, and the delicate flick of the head that thrust wayward strands back across her shoulder. The plants in golden light—green, greener than plants have a right to be. The soft light. The scent of satiety, of friendship. And the stillness of the room.

We spent the night spooned together, Drained of desire but melded closely, in one creature, sleeping contentedly.

As I checked out the next morning, I saw Thomas D'Allesandro again, standing just away from the desk, a mournful look in his eyes.

"Checking out?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Surely you'll visit our country again?"

I nodded. "Soon," I said, a promise in my eyes.

Poor Thomas, and poor me. There's not enough time to have your cake and eat it too. Not enough time to take every avenue of opportunity. We choose, and fate draws us onward. Away from family, friends, lovers, and finally, from life itself. There was no way to explain this to him, so I did the best I could to buffer his disappointment. And mine. I had wanted to explore it further. When I would return, I could not say. And that he would still be here, no one knew.

Perhaps my nameless friend was wisest of us all. He asked for no addresses, gave no promises except the short time we had. When he was with me, he was with me completely, as if only I, of all powers and principalities, existed in that moment. If we were to meet again, so be it. If not, why dwell on it?

I stared out of the airplane window at the disappearing continent, still thinking of these things.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The final day of the conference dawned and I should have been asleep, which I was, though still walking. Lee and I were drooping in the coffee shop, trying to perk up our wilted blooms with Columbia's other, more legal drug. Huge potfuls. I still hadn't a clue as to how to find Georgiades. I actually felt farther away from finding him than I was when I started. He was undoubtedly aware that a woman from *World* magazine was looking for him, and if I'd thought he was difficult to trace before, it would be much more so now.

Besides, looking for Georgiades had been like trying to screw fog. Nothing to pin down, nowhere to start, and thousands of miles of useless airfare. So we sat at the counter drinking coffee and feeling like shit. Last night felt like a bad dream. Last night *was* a bad dream. Lee didn't want to talk. I didn't feel much like it either. Bedraggled and befuddled. Sucking down java. No sleep. No G. I felt like shit and old gym socks.

To top it all off, I was sure that every eye in the place was on that slob van Bell. You'd think with all her money she could at least dress better than a UCLA coed out of cash at the end of the semester. I was wearing my

oldest, most threadbare jeans, and a Who '76 tour T. Anything else rubbed my sensitized skin raw. I'd have sworn there was a little strychnine in the dope last night. Was it disapproval I felt around me or my own paranoia? I couldn't say. I was still coming down, and afterglow (or *afterburn* more like) was fueling the fires of self-consciousness, of embarrassment, of feeling grotty and dirty and scaly.

But I barely cared. Exhaustion and drugs and lag had fueled me to the point of not giving a shit about anyone or anything. Who gave a good goddamn whether anyone ever caught up with G? Wasn't privacy his right? Didn't I guard mine? Odd, it hadn't occurred to me before. I'd been dogging a man whose life was devoted to anonymity without once stopping to consider whether he wanted that anonymity shattered by almighty *World* magazine. Fuck it. I didn't care. If I didn't find him, someone else would. I stared into the murk of my coffee cup and noticed Homer Laughlin had failed to paint a perfect line around the rim in green. Well, fuck Homer Laughlin, then. For some reason, this thought filled me with a great good humor, and I giggled to myself.

"Mmmf!" A woman in a gray business dress sniffed behind me.

I had broken her concentration. I was acting like an irresponsible buffoon. I was being politely reminded of our unwritten social contract.

"Fuck you, you old dried-up bitch," I riposted.

Her eyes grew wide. She looked around for some authority to chastise me. Lee was none too happy himself. Fuck 'em, I thought. I'd had enough of this shit. I'd been halfway around the world. Maybe more—definitely more. I'd lost Christmas in godforsaken southern latitudes; I'd been steamed and rubbed and raped, and dumped on and pushed around by rent-a-pigs and hotel managers. I'd been humidified and baked in rotten weather and stultified by dry speeches and technical treatises and attacked by angry mobs. I was sick to

death of it. I'd pissed away half the holiday season, and missed all the once-a-year parties looking for a chimera that I still wasn't sure existed. And now if some asshole wanted to jump to the conclusion that my giggling was offending her right to a Sunday grump, well that was just too fucking bad, wasn't it?

New York time, it would be about nine-thirty. I'd call Malcolm and make sure somebody was at Kennedy to pick me up and drive me home. The more I thought about it the more it appealed to me.

I turned to Lee. "I've got to go up to my room."

He nodded and gulped down his last cup. "I was just leaving myself."

"No thanks," I said. "You stay here. I'll see you later."

He shrugged. He didn't seem to catch on that I was lying.

I went up to my room after taking care of my check. I dialed New York and got Malcolm's phone machine.

"Hello. You have reached Rick's Cafe Americain. Mistah Rick has gone to the airport to see a friend off. If you'd like to leave a message, he'll be glad to get back to you before too long."

It beeped. I like Malcolm's phone messages. They sort of seduce you into leaving a message. Even for those of us who don't like talking to machines.

"Malcolm, it's Christina. Call me A.S.A.P. That means pronto. And no stopping off at the Free French Garrison. I . . ."

On the other end, Malcolm picked up the phone.

"Christina! Is everything okay?"

"Malcolm," I pouted. "I want to come home. I'm sick of this damned town."

"Giving up?" he said.

I sighed. "I guess so. It's not that I can't do it," I rationalized. "It's just—it's Christmas, Malcolm. Or almost. And I'm tired and fucked up and I miss New York."

"So you've learned your little lesson."

"Yes," I said. "Maybe it can be done, but I'm not even sure I should be doing it. Book me on a plane, Malcolm."

He should have said yes. He should have just said I'll call back in half an hour. But human beings have this defect. The bastards like to kick you when you're down in the mud, and Malcolm, being human, couldn't help himself, I guess.

What he did say was this: "Giving orders? Can't tolerate that from a slave. I'll see what I can do, but you're going to have to ask nicely. And I'd appreciate it if you called me 'Master' from now on."

Great, I thought. Just fucking great. A little compassion maybe, or some understanding. But no, this arrogant fucker had to rub it in. As if I didn't feel shitty enough as it was. Now I knew how revolutions got started. "Malcolm?"

"Yes?"

"Go fuck yourself, you stuck-up pig." I hung up. Well, damn it anyway. I'd been being reckless, and I probably deserved it, but Malcolm was just as bad as I was, and maybe worse, and it'd be a cold fucking day in hell before I kissed his ass over this one. If I couldn't be noble and quit with honor, then I'd be ignoble and have revenge, at least.

I'd interview Georgiades, even if I had to make it all up. Now I was stuck. I couldn't go home and I didn't feel like staying here. The game wasn't fun any more. It was just a hopeless quest after a grail full of shit. What if I *did* succeed? Would it help anything?

Seven-thirty. Eight o'clock. A little more activity in the coffee shop. Twelve hours now, and counting down. Georgiades was scheduled in the main room at eight P.M. I did my best to get on track, but I was at that point where it seems to take forever to decide anything. I was feeling that exhausted, run-down paralysis of the will where anything from standing up to buying a pack of gum becomes an endless, difficult experience. I locked my key in my room, I realized. I debated going to the

desk and getting a spare now, or doing it later, and eight-thirty came before I could make the decision to procrastinate. That done, I still had a cold cup of coffee to choke down and another to order, and Lee wasn't looking any better than I felt.

Several times I tried to start conversation, or he did, but we just weren't firing on all cylinders. The problem at hand was growing. And the deadline loomed closer and closer. I couldn't afford to waste time, but the less time I had, the more profligately I used it. I was almost to that point of no return. Like when you've got a hundred-page term paper and three weeks to finish it, and pretty soon it's three days, and still a hundred pages. And then you've got to either do something, or give up trying to beat the deadline. I had a few hours left, and if I got off my ass and kicked it into high gear, I just might get something for my trouble. Or I could just sit in the coffee shop on my ass and watch the Sunday morning crowd with their newspapers and their fancy slices of pie until G was irretrievably and irrevocably gone.

Finally, at about nine A.M., I turned to Lee.

"We've got to get out of here," I said.

He just looked at me.

"Come on!" I barked, grabbing his sleeve. "Time's awasting." I dragged him up and towed him out, stopping to pay my check and his.

When we were out in the hall, I pulled my emergency uppers from my purse and stuffed one in his mouth, jamming it into the back of his mouth so he'd swallow, like you do with a dog. I did the same. I figured, given the choice between the effects of speed on exhaustion, and falling over in a heap, I'd take the speed. And since I needed Lee, I decided for him too. He could get pissed off at me later.

"Wuzzat?" he muttered.

"Upper," I said. "Now hold still. Here's another."

He looked like he needed it. I popped it in.

"Water," he choked.

"There's a cooler down the hall," I said, popping another for good luck. "Come on."

We staggered down the hall to the cooler, and took enough water to wash them all the way down. They were jacketed with those kind of coatings that get just sticky enough with moisture to lodge halfway between throat and stomach.

A few minutes later, he announced, "'I'm coming on, I think.'"

"Great," I said. We were on the left top half of the T, watching a documentary called *The Lost Years of Jesus*. I figured a little dark would come as close to sleep as we were likely to get before the drugs took effect. A few moments later I began to feel that solar plexus rush, as though someone were cranking my internal clock from 16 rpm to 78. From the Blob, I went to Alvin and the Chipmunks in one long modulation.

Much better. Now, to drink my beer and slow it down enough to think at a more or less human speed. I don't like fucking with my internal ecology in a drastic way, as a rule, but extraordinary times require extraordinary measures, as my *I Ching* says.

Okay. Bango, boomo, I was awake. In the meantime, nearly four hours had passed. It was nearly ten-thirty. Almost time for the final orgasmic blowout to begin. The White Rose Festival was getting ready to cook. Everybody who'd absented himself during the preceding week was hanging out, and suddenly the sparse attendance became a mad crush of humanity.

Before, at each city, about a quarter of the folks present had been in the festival area at any one time. Now, with everyone present from all three cities, a definite mass-mind gestalt was forming.

The flick ended with some mishmash about the Grail and the Spear of Destiny (filler, I guess, to pad out a rather spare ninety minutes). And that was it for the film room. We went out into the anteroom while the hotel staff cleared chairs and projector.

There Bernadette Faber was waiting. Not waiting, but

she saw us, which was good enough. She came over, entourage of hangers-on in tow.

"Like the party?" she asked me pointedly.

"Loved it," I shot back.

"I thought you would," she said.

"I know you did," I said over my shoulder as I dragged Lee out of her circle of influence. "And fuck you too."

"Bye, Bernadette," Lee said, dragged away like a leaf in a tornado.

I didn't hear her reply, if any. We were heading for the main desk. I wanted to get my key while there was still time to prepare. I had this feeling that when things started to happen I wouldn't have any time to be screwing around. I sent Lee out to hail a taxi, and went up to liberate my room.

A thought had occurred to me, and I wanted a chance to act on it before it slipped away. Bernadette Faber had been ensconced next to G in Sydney. It stood to reason that she would make the same arrangements here in L.A. Since G would have moved from Wise's house after last night's debacle, I assumed that he'd be in his room at this point. Sleeping.

I also realized that while I intended to find him, I'd leave the decision of what to do about it for after I'd tracked G down.

Up and down. Lee was waiting with the taxi. A quick call had confirmed that Bernadette Faber was, as expected, not staying at the Ambassador but rather in the Bonaventure downtown. Thus the taxi. All right. Here it went. It was a little fuzzy, due to the speed of its concocting, but in its essentials, it seemed as good a plan as any. We'll see, Malcolm, I thought. We'll see.

The Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles has the unique distinction of being the finest example of twentieth century grain elevator design in existence. It's five green-mirror cellophane packs of Ritz crackers stand in a roughly pentagonal design, with those hip

outside elevators guaranteed to impress acrophobes of all ages and creeds. It's one of those late seventies architectural marvels of impersonality and design on a grand scale that manage to look totally deserted even when fully occupied.

The Chamber of Commerce handouts describe it as the "crowning jewel in the tiara of D.T.L.A." (D.T.-L.A. is the new vogue term for downtown. Hipsters take note.) In my book, it's a rotten shame of bad taste and poor location in a city renowned for some of the most beautiful art deco buildings in the world. From the right vantage, it mirrors the splendor of the nightly traffic jam downtown. From other vantages, one can see the tiered old-folks' asylum complex rising above the ruins of Angel's Flight. Los Angeles has to be the only city with a heart. When the city council found that muggers were finding it more and more difficult to find prey, they imported the elderly and infirm, so as to provide a steady supply of meat for the rest of the century.

Ah, the Bonaventure, hotel of new legend. Inside, the central circle of the pentangle contains hanging gardens around a pool where you can sit and breathe humid concrete dust. Certainly my favorite thing to do after a hard day. You can even sit at a table and order drinks. Let's see: Crème d'Alabaster? No. Too heavy this close to lunch. How about a Smog Sunrise? Tequila, orange juice, and industrial waste. Great for breakfast, but it's a little late in the day, don't you think? What else? Try our famous L.A.P.D. Special. Guaranteed to bash your skull in without the slightest provocation. You'll choke on this one, for sure. No? How about a Developer's Daiquiri? Bananas and inadequate landfill, and you get an umbrella that leaks. Cute touch, that. For those rainy days when you're waiting for the next house down Laurel Canyon to Sunset, how about a Hollywood Hills Surprise: Yes indeed. Naphtha and mesquite. The surprise is when you find you can't put it out. Or our Producer's Special? It's made from whatever we've got hanging around under the bar, and we keep double

checks on it. Ours says we get a buck. Yours is you pay triple. How about our Fairfax Stinger? It's kosher, of course, and you can complain about the black stuff that's seeping slowly up into it.

Or how about our S. C. Niggerbuster? Guaranteed to throw you out of the neighborhood before the '84 Olympics. A real nutcrusher, that drink. Or our Wet-back Colada, guaranteed to go down as often as it comes back up. Maybe something more, ah, Continental. How about our Tarzana Surely Temple? One sip of this, and you'll never be satisfied with the English language again. Totally.

The speed was definitely kicking in the afterburners. Lee and I stepped into the glassine elevators and rode our upwardly mobile aquarium eleven floors. Bernadette Faber's room was 1104. That meant G was in 1106 or 1102. The register hadn't been much help. Both names sounded pseudonymous. On 1106 it was Hart Williams, obviously a transposition of William S. Hart, the silent movies' John Wayne. But in the other room, 1102, it was Avril Roy-Smith, which had to be the phoniest sounding name I'd ever heard. Still, all things considered, Smith is in every hotel register in America, and I hunched that G wouldn't be able to pass up such an obvious pun. Especially after his penchant for far-out pseudonyms. When you play the hotel register game, you've always got to remember that whoever it is will usually succumb to the temptation to brag a little, if only in personal in-joke fashion.

Cash and another passkey. I knocked on the door. No answer. Lee was looking around the hall nervously. Obviously not the type to go in for skulduggery. There was no answer to my second, louder knock, so I inserted the key, and bingo, it opened like a charm. We stepped in.

Jackpot. There was the suitcase I'd seen in Australia. But no sign of G.

"Well?" Lee asked.

"We wait," I said. When you're tracking, or lost, and you're looking for a moving object, you've always

got a better chance if you stay put. Sooner or later, so the theory goes, the moving object will end up in your vicinity. I'd worked too many stakeouts to forget that. We sat down on the bed. I got up and shut the door completely.

We waited. An hour went by, and Lee sort of calmed down. But you know how it is with a nervous person. The minutes pass like hours. Lee kept twitching and bouncing his knee nervously on the floor, which made up, I suppose, for the lack of Magic Fingers in the Bonaventure. I mean really: all those millions, and they couldn't afford to put Magic Fingers in the rooms. Poor planning, I'd call it.

We waited and Lee lit up a cigarette, which I told him to put out and which he did, remembering that he didn't smoke anyway and had no earthly idea where or how he'd managed to put a pack of cigarettes in his corduroy jacket. He reached back and put them away and flushed the butt down the toilet. He came back in the bedroom, and announced that it wasn't his coat. In the coffee shop, we decided, and we'd killed another five minutes.

We waited. I noticed that the print on the wall of the hotel room was a print of an original that a friend of mine in Paris owned, and which had a fascinating story behind it. It seemed that during World War II, it had been spirited out of France just ahead of Goering's looters, and carried across the French border into the Pyrenees, where Franco's men had caught the party and were all set to return them across the border with the painting when a freakish bout of weather had turned the high mountain roads into a morass and assured that the passes would be all but impassable until spring. The painting had been ferried to Barcelona, where, through the intercession of an OSS officer named Martin Wise (yes, the same; I hadn't realized it either) the painting and the party in whose charge it had been kept had been spirited away from the Spanish officers assigned to escort them, into Portugal, and thence to a Free French garrison in North America. The painting had fared bet-

ter than the party, several of whose members died along the way, but had eventually resurfaced in Greece after the war, and had come into the hands of the Greek King, who turned it over to General de Gaulle, who had presented my friend with it as a token of his years of hardship, fighting for the Resistance. Telling all this killed another five minutes.

And still we waited. No G.

And then there was a sound at the door, and a maid entered, picked up the suitcase, failed to notice two very paranoid junior burglars in the bathroom shower, and took the suitcase out. Thus, our waiting ended. G had foxed me again. He had checked out of the Bonaventure by proxy, and I had no way to follow the bag once the maid left. I tried, but elevators were late, and the only taxi at the stand took off with the bag and a mysterious figure in the back seat. Just the form I saw. No face. G, I assumed. How did he know? It was as if some force of nature or fate were keeping me from him. Of course, I had to know that he'd managed to give several better people than I the slip. But that didn't solace me any.

God fucking *damn*!

The ride back to the Ambassador was silent and sullen. My silence, my sullenness. Lee tried to cheer me up, but I wasn't having any. It was now three o'clock. Another five hours shot to hell, and I was as far away as ever. I had five hours remaining in which to locate G. And the clock kept ticking.

The speed was only making me more and more aware of every wasted second. Time had slowed to a crawl, but that only sufficed to keep the adrenaline pumping, and the squeeze kept getting tighter and tighter inside me. We seemed to take an eternity getting back to the Ambassador. I fairly threw the money at the cabbie and dashed inside. Lee went to the coffee shop to try and get his coat back. The hands of the clock kept ticking, and I was fresh out of ideas.

What to do? I stood outside the coffee shop waiting

for Lee, and then we had to go down to the desk, to lost and found, where, with a certain amount of bureaucratic delay, his coat was found, and the owner of the doppelganger jacket was called. Tick, tick, tick, went the clock. The speed had been a very, very bad idea, but then, so had this whole useless, wasted trip. I could only feel depressed at a much faster rate, which gave me more to be depressed about in shorter spans of time. And time was something that I had less and less of.

He was here; I could smell him. Someone, maybe that fellow. Someone in this crush of humanity was G. And I didn't know how to begin to start looking for him. Why, it could be anyone from the fellow talking to the Spanish bartender, to the man in the tweed who'd just bumped up against my ass.

Oh, bother.

So we sat down in the auditorium, where we found two seats together, and listened as the big speakers of the festival gave their spiels. There was the Death Lady, speaking from Sydney, on the researches of persons who had been clinically dead. She spoke about the friendly guides and the white light and current researches in immortality research, and predicted that one way or another—by mapping or eliminating—we'd all conquer death within the next century.

There was the Space Captain, who talked about bubble cities in space, and mining the moon for raw materials. Factories and schools and farming and suburbia in orbit. By the next century, if we got going.

There was the Chemical Prophet, the drug daddy of the sixties, talking about cybernetics and computers and brain research and a bewildering variety of irreligious experiences which he synthesized polyglot into a fantasy of brain evolution and chemically induced nirvana. I was not feeling very nirvanic myself, though I was shot full of chemicals.

And the Meditation Lady, who tried to convince us all that man's thrust was hereafter inward, and that the Tower of Babel Syndrome must cease between groups

and beliefs. She talked of kabala and sutras and scriptures, invoking deities and principalities not often seen much any more in a vague attempt to convey what seemed to be a real sense of joy. But I couldn't make much sense of it other than that.

And Charley Cyborg, who proceeded to delineate a world of walking, talking, servile calculators to do our bidding. He talked of robots in the marketplace, robots at work, and robots to darn your socks should you get up off your duff long enough to wear holes in them. The socks, I mean. The robots were there to plug all holes.

And then, Maestro Manifesto, who spun a web of political fantasy that included the final entanglement of the world's economy, and thus the world's governmental systems. He spoke of the role of history and the end of our cycle, progressing in a circular manner from ages golden to the Kali Yuga—the age of the common man—and back again.

Talk, talk, talk. What could I do? I was stuck. The last chance was now G's lecture, and that would be here. I moved closer to the stage with each speaker, taking the available seats, Lee beside me as always. He was my rock in this hopeless drama, but I couldn't shake the feeling of helplessness, of hopelessness. I had the irresistible feeling that it was all over. Everything I'd done up to now had been useless. I'd walked a tightrope covered with butter, and I'd fallen off. There was no dishonor in falling, except that I'd bragged and boasted that I wouldn't fall, couldn't fall. Thus are the proud humbled by their own acts. I really didn't have a hope any more. I was just going through the motions. There was very little doubt that Georgiades had some spectacular disappearing act planned for his finale. And with that, I'd have my finale.

I couldn't complain. I'd set out to do the impossible and failed. The only kicker was that I'd been so certain of success that I'd set myself up for the fall. It all came of being reckless, I suppose. It all came of being an arrogant spoiled bitch. I sat there, listening to the endless

flow of words, and wondered if I'd learned anything. Had I? I'd learned the price of being reckless. Of acting irresponsibly. Of thinking that I could impress my will on the world when the world didn't feel like doing what I'd told it to.

Would I do it again, though? That, as someone had explained, was the only question of practical value. I could theorize and chastise and agonize and cauterize for all the good it would do me. But would I do it again? Yes, I decided. I probably would. So all of this soul-searching was nothing but a useless, masturbatory sham. A week or two, and I'd rationalize it all away and the next time I saw a windmill, I'd go tilting at it, if only to show everybody else what a valiant knight I was.

I wondered. Someone told me long ago that my problem was that I thought like a man. They meant it as an insult. I took it as a compliment. Sometimes I could jump on the nearest white charger and go traipsing off to glory or defeat as if I were a knight errant, and not a lady publisher. I don't apologize, but I wonder sometimes if it's fitting. Meaningless question. But as long as I was dragging the trunks down from the attic, something else to agonize over. My own little contribution to the punditry on the future: at least I live in an age where a woman can make a fool of herself just as easily as a man. No more false pretenses that there are "women's ways" and men's. We've all got the same way now, expressed in different terms, in different circumstances, and suited to different ways of living, but at least now we can all make the same mistakes, and learn from them. Maybe if we're lucky and manage to avoid a few of the more immediate mistakes, there will *be* a future to grow in. To live in, to laugh in. I remember a man who told me that it was my sense of humor that was going to save me. That it was a sense of humor, in the final analysis, that would save us all. I don't know. I'm still a preterit, living in Purgatory Gulch, like everyone else I know. But if I am saved from my own folly, it'll be my sense of humor that does it.

I thought about it and looked to see if I could find the humor in it all. Take one spoiled rich girl and give her a carrot. Tie it on a stick, and call it Georgiades. Hang it over her head and call her travel agent and she'll roam the globe trying to get at it. That was me. Watch her stumble across South America. Watch her bumble through Australia. Watch her arc as she swings back home to North America and blunders her way through Los Angeles. Watch her try to bend the laws of nature and man to get her way, and then let her sit despairing with that carrot still dangling in front of her face.

Funny stuff, I guess. Hilarious. I just couldn't see the punch line. Five o'clock in the afternoon. T minus three hours and counting. Lee and I broke for dinner. I hadn't said a word to him in four hours. Funny that I should be so lucky as to find Kipling's Thousandth Man sitting so close to me. And funnier still that I should so easily take him for granted. Reckless with friendship, reckless in love; maybe I should change my name to something more fitting. Christina van Bull. Christina van Boor. Christina van Vain.

We staggered out of the lecture hall in search of a restaurant.

CHAPTER NINE

It was nearly seven when we got back. T minus one hour and counting. Lee got us inside, and talked some people into moving around so we could sit down in the auditorium. It was filled, but he managed to get us seats. I guess I should have felt grateful for a shoulder to cry on and a strong arm to lean on, but I didn't feel that way at all. I just resented him for being strong, and for being there. We still hadn't spoken more than a few words.

The minutes dragged, and the auditorium was filled with a hushed chatter. It was just like the theater had been before *Star Crusaders*. Just like it had been at the beginning of this whole fiasco. Too long a trip. I lost myself somewhere back there along the way, and there was too much road to go back. How innocent and naive I'd been then. Sitting in bangles and beads and buttons and bows waiting to see the movie, to be entertained by someone else's misdeeds and not crushed by my own.

Finally, the man came to the lectern, and I saw that the hotel's roughnecks were moving a grand piano to the center of the platform. I just watched. The screen was rolled up, and behind it was a tile and brass display, brass sticking out away from the faded turquoise tiles. I

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saw patterns in the brass ornaments, found the Tree of Life if I blotted out Death. Then the man at the lectern tapped the mike. It worked.

Bernadette Faber came out, all made up and public. Nice dress, if you like that sort of thing. "Ladies and gentlemen, our very special guest will be here shortly. I'd like to thank you all for making this year's White Rose Festival such a success, and I hope you'll all attend next year."

Polite applause. The audience seemed to heave a collective sigh of relief. The marathon was grinding to a halt, and the last energy had been saved for the finale. I know. I felt the same way. I wasn't depressed any more. I wasn't elated or soul-searching or even relieved. Just empty. The big moment and I didn't give a damn. Well, at least I'd get the only article out of it. I was the only member of the press present.

"Now, you've all heard of G. I. Georgiades, I am sure," Bernadette continued. "But let me give you a little background for the benefit of those who might not be acquainted with all the fields he's touched.

"I know we're running a little behind, but bear with me. G. I. Georgiades has been an enigma to the world for over thirty years. He has been involved in making the history of those thirty years, and preparing for the next thirty years. He has been active in international politics, economics, philosophy, and academics. He has been a leader in the ecology movement and in the search for new energy sources. He has been active in the quest for disarmament and in the great turning inward that so many of us have begun. It would take too much time to catalogue all that he has done, and it is a staggering amount. Suffice it to say that G. I. Georgiades is, in the truest sense of the word, a renaissance man. And now, without further ado, will you please welcome G. I. Georgiades."

The room burst into applause. Several people stood, and soon a thunderous standing ovation was accorded even before Georgiades had stepped onto the stage. And

out he came, dressed in a khaki bush outfit, and a pith helmet with bee screen around the rim, covering his face and neck. A little disappointment, but not much. It was G. At long last.

He stepped to the microphone and spoke.

"Some of you saw my speech in Australia, although I'm told there were transmission problems, and all of it wasn't seen. So you'll recognize my outfit.

"I'd like to thank the organizers of this festival for doing such an outstanding job and for putting together such a unique forum for us to meet and hear one another."

Applause.

"And I suppose that you could say that such a thing was necessary. Our species is, for better or for ill, charged with the future of this ball of dust, and for those of us who worry about such things, this festival is an invaluable tool for facilitating communication.

"But that's not what I'm here to talk about tonight. I have something to say to you, and I feel that it must be said now. This will be my last foray into the world arena. Tonight, I'm retiring."

A shudder from the audience.

"I have carried my torch long enough. Now, I'm passing it on to you. So let us sit awhile and talk awhile about this world we're in and what we can do about it. And let us see where our future lies, and why.

"I have lived a long time. Longer than I probably look. It's on record. There is documentation, if anyone cares to look it up, on a Chinese monk who lived at least two hundred fifty years. He outlived his British missionary friend, the missionary's son, and the son's son. So, these things are quite well-known and quite real. In my rather short lifetime, I have seen three great empires vanish. I have seen currencies once regarded as perhaps the only eternal verity of their age revert to worthless paper. I have seen wives and children die and witnessed the birth of babes who would one day be close friends and lovers. I have witnessed many things few would

believe and seen and believed in many things no one has witnessed.

"But I'm not here to talk about truth and falsity. God knows you've got enough problems without worrying about the fact that you live in a world that probably doesn't exist anywhere but in your own mind.

"I have done many things in this long life too. I have made all the mistakes you have made—in love, in lust, in doing the wrong thing or acting according to what I feel is right and finding that it was not right at all. I have watched this great drama of Life, of world go by, and I have seen the great problems of one age become the trivia of another, and vice versa. I have seen sex and its permutations go from something everyone did and no one talked about to something that everyone talks about and no one does. I have watched supposedly sane and rational men arguing about lights seen in the heavens and stake careers, reputations, and lives on their beliefs. And I have seen men ignore mass slaughters as terrible and apocalyptic as anything ever fantasized by writers of fiction. I knew a man who lived a stone's throw from Buchenwald, whose home was downwind from the furnaces and whose kitchen was filled with a horrible smoke, more days than not. He didn't believe that anything was amiss. He didn't know. He didn't see it. And he was right. To him, it did not exist because such a thing would have been intolerable. And perhaps he was right.

"I have seen men and women marking time with their lives. They pretend that life is no great gift, but rather a burden, and take it for granted, because to them, death is intolerable. And I have seen the look of surprise on the faces of the dead when at last they are claimed. They had not believed it, and therefore had never bothered to live.

"But I have not come to talk about that either. I have seen all the dramas enacted. Birth, death, marriage, children. I have seen wars and plagues and peace and prosperity. I have acted out my role on the world's stage

and had no one know my name. And I have seen others who have known only a name and who have lived and fought and died for that name. I have seen corpses stacked like so much firewood and seen the living huddled together, fourteen to a room smaller than a small closet or bathroom, who didn't notice anything amiss and were glad to be out of the cold.

"But even that is not what I came to speak about. I came to tell you that there is no future. When I say that, many of you will gasp and choke and say to me, 'But there is! There *has* to be!' Well, believe what you want. When the future comes, it will be now, and we will treat now as we treat it today. In just eighty years, we have done incredible things. Things beyond belief. We have sprouted wings and flown to the moon. We have built a sun and dropped it from the heavens on cities and deserts. We have built mountains and seas and changed the face of the earth. What sane man of the last century would believe us? None. Not even the mad would listen to us if we were magically transported back a hundred years. They'd call us mad. And who knows? Soon we may travel in time. It would not be as great a leap as some that we have made.

"So, we have in a few short years taken unto us powers that were previously reserved to the gods. And now we have to accept that responsibility that the gods used to hold. For we can lay waste to a world without much trouble. If mankind were to sneeze today, the sun would fall from the heavens. Do you begin to understand what power this is? No. Of course you don't. You live in the future. I will tell you this: when the world is turned to cinder, it will not be by a man who lives in the now. No. It will be by a man who does not remember his past, who believes in the future, and who is not even vaguely aware that now he is destroying the world. Why? you ask. Because he does not live in the now, and only in the now can the world be destroyed.

"But this is not important. Not important? you ask. How can this be important? I ask you. If you do not live

in the now, you will die and not notice it, so you need not worry. Since all the things you want exist in the future, you might as well have died, since you will never have them now and you live in a place that never exists. What difference is there between that and being dead, I ask you?

“But I did not come to talk about this either. I didn’t even come to talk at all. I came to say good-bye to you and to dance with you.”

A murmur in the audience. I myself was confused at all of this. He didn’t seem to feel that it really mattered, even though it would seem like a sermon to most and a polemic to the rest. He didn’t want us to change our minds or our ways in the way that all the other speakers did. He wasn’t advocating action. He wasn’t propounding solutions or delineating problems. He was just sitting down at the piano.

He began to play. Softly, at first. So softly that you couldn’t hear it with your ears at all. It was not major or minor. It was pure. Octaves and fifths. It grew in volume and danced in the stillness. The notes commanded the very air to dance, and the music moved into a major key, singing a song of hope. In the overtones could be heard separate, distinct parts, musical voices that were not piano, were not even there. And I heard them, we all heard them, because we were hearing them with his ears, Georgiades’ ears, if that was possible.

The music danced on the ears of us all, and sang to us. I could not fail to be moved. Someone began to clap and everyone clapped. I alone I think looked to see where it had begun. In the back of the room. My nameless friend. In a white tuxedo dinner jacket and jeans.

The music began to grow, and someone, a musician, sat down beside G. Without missing a note, he accepted the bass and then the melody. G stood and jumped from the stage. He grabbed Bernadette and began to dance around the front of the stage. He took a woman, pulled her from her seat and inserted her between himself and Bernadette. And they moved as a line. G began to pluck

people from their chairs, adding them to the chain, and they moved around the room, counterclockwise. Then he reversed, and it was clockwise, encompassing the entire room. More and more were added, and soon the seats were emptying. The music grew in volume and we danced to it, or our dance grew and the music responded. The dance wound round and round, and G collected us all in a single unbroken chain. When I was collected, I felt a tingle, as though I had been plugged into a circuit, and it passed through me to the one whose hand I was holding. I was separated from Lee, taken into the dance, alone and a part of the whole. Only later did I see how we had lost our individual identity and become part of the whole. We were free, somehow, from the normal constraints, from our identity as discrete personalities, and we danced round and round and round. It became us, and we it. We danced beyond boundaries, and soon we were dancing over chairs, the normal, invisible bounds of action suspended for the moment. The circle became a spiral, and G broke us into two rings, concentric and opposite in rotation. And then three, and four, until at last I found myself in the middle of the room, dancing with G himself.

No words were exchanged. We merely danced. And then it was completely broken and everyone danced separately, alone or in twos and threes, and while my attention wavered, G slipped away. I saw him standing at the lectern again before the shot rang out.

His body was thrown back by the impact, and the pith helmet went flying off. I saw his face in death. Bald and tanned, with an immaculate white beard. Only, that beard was spattered with blood and the front of his khaki shirt was spattered with blood. The room froze and erupted in a kind of panic. Someone shouted that they’d got the gunman, and a man broke away from the crowd at the back of the room. He got through the door, and a collective gasp went out. People weren’t sure which way to run. Lee was near the front of the room, and I saw him bend down and pick up the body

and run with it, shouting for someone to get a doctor, for people to get out of his way. People were bowled over in his path, and he made his way to the side of the room, where the well-meaning impeded his progress. "He's dying!" Lee screamed. "Get out of my way!" And somehow he managed to make the side exit before these who would save G could complete the assassin's work by rubbernecking the man to death.

I realized that my mouth was open in a wordless scream and that I was crying.

Malcolm got through to me in my room, hours later. I picked up the phone numbly. I was switching from channel to channel on the TV set, but there was no mention of the shooting. Insipid sitcoms and commercials. Evidently it wasn't important enough to warrant special coverage. They'd wait till eleven. And then I caught a newsbreak. It was running when the phone rang.

"A bizarre shooting in Los Angeles tonight. The Rams win, the Raiders lose. These stories and more after the movie."

"Christina, are you all right?"

"Malcolm?"

"You don't sound too good."

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"He was pronounced D.O.A. at 9:32 PST."

"Oh my God, Malcolm. Oh my God . . ."

"Were you there? Did you see it?"

"They're not even saying anything about it on TV. It was horrible. Oh my God."

"Christina!"

I put the phone down on the bed and tried to dial New York. I didn't realize that Malcolm was already on the line.

"Malcolm?"

"Yes? Christina, are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Malcolm. I just heard that Georgiades is dead. D.O.A. . . . He's been *shot*, Malcolm."

"I know, I know, Crissy," Malcolm said.

I was in a fog. Shock. I had no idea how I'd gotten up to my room or why the TV was on or why I was talking to Malcolm. I just kept seeing him falling backward onto the stage in slow motion. An endlessly repeating loop. No sense of time. All that blood. The face, forever caught in memory, an insect trapped in amber.

"You're in shock, Crissy. Do you hear me, Crissy?"

I nodded. On the TV set, three cars crashed into one another.

"Crissy!"

"They shot him, Malcolm," I said. "He was pronounced D.O.A. at 9:32 PST."

"Just stay put," Malcolm said desperately. "I'll have someone there within ten minutes. Can you understand me?"

"I understand you, Malcolm. They shot him. Did you hear?"

"I'm going to hang up now, Crissy. All right?"

"Sure," I said. "Good-bye Malcolm."

I was in fugue state. Time was out of joint, and I can't say I really remember much clearly. Later, I figured out that I must have gone to my room to call Malcolm, and turned on the TV before shock set in. I've been told that shock is funny that way. You don't even know you're in shock. You think that everything's under control, but you're not really there. I saw a reporter for the *Times* go into shock in the Sinai during the '73 war. His Egyptian liaison officer had taken a round in the chest, and he didn't seem to know where he was. He had to be held down. He was somewhere else. He had seen it all in Nam, in a hundred firefights, but for some reason it just hit him one day in Egypt. No reason. Like me.

I remember parts of it. An ambulance. A door being opened and my being taken from the bed. Football footage on the TV. I can't really remember the order of things. The doctor checking my eyes with his flashlight.

Malcolm was beside me when I woke up on Tuesday afternoon. He said the doctors thought it was exhaustion and shock, and the drugs I said I'd taken. He said that it was being kept out of the newspapers. Professional courtesy. He said I didn't have to worry about the bet, or about anything. He said to get plenty of rest and he'd see me later on in the afternoon. He said that reporters were waiting downstairs to talk to me and that since I was the only member of the press who'd been in attendance, we could be sitting on the story of the year.

I started crying and he said he was sorry, that he just forgot himself, and left in midapology, and I kept seeing the blood and the beard and Georgiades falling backward onto the stage. The nurses wouldn't tell me anything about it, and I would forget whether or not Georgiades had died, and I kept going in and out of a troubled sleep where I could see it as a bad dream, and I was really still in New York, just coming out of a theater on a cold December night. There were Christmas decorations in the hallway of the hospital, and I heard people singing Christmas carols, and they kept giving me sedatives which didn't really work. I was stuck in twilight between waking and sleeping, and everything just blended together in one long nightmare of death and hospitals and dancing with leering assassins in harlequins' tights. I kept seeing Santa Claus falling back on the stage of an auditorium bloody and dying. Jingle bells, jingle bells, they kept singing.

They released me on Christmas Eve. I was still a little woozy with sedatives, and Malcolm pretty much guided me to all the places we had to go. To the ambulance. To the airport. Onto the chartered Lear jet. Out and to my apartment. There was snow on the ground in New York City. I kept asking about Georgiades, but Malcolm wouldn't tell me anything. He just gave me the sedatives the doctor prescribed and stayed by my bedside that night and through Christmas morning. By the after-

noon, I felt better, and he left to get some things done, after I demanded that he leave me alone to think and after he had extracted a promise from me that I'd stay in bed.

The knock came on the door at about four in the afternoon. I dragged myself from a fitful doze and stumbled through the apartment, woozy from sedatives. I opened the peephole and saw Lee with another man I didn't recognize.

I let them in.

Lee grabbed me and hugged me, and I started to cry on his shoulder until the man I didn't recognize tapped me on the shoulder and asked,

"All of this grief over me? Come, come, child. It's all right."

"G?" I sniffled.

He pulled the hairpiece from his head. "Sorry about the beard," he said, "but what's gone is gone."

I stared at him. I didn't know what to do. What to say. And then I was all over him, hitting and punching at him. "You bastard!" I screamed and sobbed. "Bastard, bastard, *bastard!*"

He dodged or warded my blows effortlessly, then stood and allowed me to flail at him until my anger and surprise had subsided. Finally, I allowed myself to be led to the sofa, where I sat, sobbing silently.

"It was necessary," Lee said, trying to comfort me.

I was not comforted. "Necessary?! You've fucking got gah-gall, muh-muh-mister." I felt like someone had pulled me from a sauna just about the time my nose hairs were starting to singe and dropped me in an ice-water lake. I was shivering uncontrollably.

"Christina . . ." Lee began.

Georgiades raised a hand and gave a look. "I felt I owed it to you to come and see you. I felt that you deserved an explanation."

I wanted to hit him again, but I couldn't. He looked at me with . . . I don't know. Love, I guess. Like the

father I always wished that I had. Like the lover I never managed to find, somehow. "Explain," I demanded childishly.

He smiled gently, like sun on an autumn lake, and I couldn't be angry with him. "You came as close as anyone has," G said.

"Don't try to salve my fucking ego," I said.

"Georgiades is a legend then," he said. "That's part of the explanation. Another part is that I have very little to do with that legend. It belongs to people like the ones at the White Rose Festival. 'G' is a creation that I made up one day long ago and that took on a life of its own."

I stared at him. "You're trying to say you're someone else?"

"In a way," he said. "In a way, yes."

"I don't understand."

"Lee? You're the writer," G said.

Lee looked at me. Vice versa. "I'll tell you a story," he said. "And then you'll just have to ask him."

I nodded and wiped the last of my tears from my eyes, a little girl whose nightmare has just been ended by Daddy's hug.

"When I first started writing," Lee began, "I worked for one of the old men's magazines as a copy editor. There was an old man there. Nobody liked him much. He was a reformed alcoholic who kept falling off the wagon and had been around since the year one. He babbled on about all kinds of things that nobody was interested in and never noticed that no one was listening. At first, I tried to be cool and I ignored him too, but I wanted to learn the business of writing, and I started to find out things that I'd always wondered about. You couldn't help it. He was always babbling about something. So I started listening to him, thinking maybe one day I could use him as a character or something. And one of the things he told me has stuck with me for a long, long time. He said that he first started writing for men's magazines in the late fifties. They tended to be very dangerous, outlaw venues, and everyone had to

write under a variety of pseudonyms if they wanted to write for other magazines. And there was a problem with the bluenoses and the censorship groups and the courts. There were all kinds of strange rules that made one thing pornography and another thing art. After the *Ulysses* decision and the *Lady Chatterly's Lover* decision in the courts, the game that had to be played was called 'redeeming social value.' That meant that any work dealing with sexuality had to make some sort of pretense at being relevant and valuable, aside from being merely titillating. America in those days was a place where it was generally acknowledged that viewing pornography led inevitably to rape and sex crimes in the same way that smoking grass led to heroin addiction. Anyway, the old man came up with a dodge to satisfy both his readers and the bluenoses.

"He manufactured a doctor of psychology and named his phony doctor after his parakeet—Lance Always. And then he sent off to a phony diploma mill and got the parakeet a Ph.D. Then, he would take case histories, say, from Krafft-Ebing, or from Havelock Ellis, and rewrite them to make them a little hotter, the way they rewrite letters to some magazines to make them more salacious. Well, Dr. Lance Always never existed except in print, but when the sexual renaissance of the late sixties and early seventies arrived, graduate students began going back to the old men's magazines for material. And Dr. Lance Always, Ph.D., was quoted along with his case histories, and pretty soon articles and bibliographies in serious medical journals began to appear, and Dr. Lance Always was right up there with Freud and Jung, a historical personage, and because of his existence somewhere, *anywhere*, as having a Ph.D., he became as real as any historical character you read about but can never meet. Like George Washington or Napoleon or Blake or Disraeli. There was evidence of Dr. Lance Always, and so he exists. In a hundred years, perhaps someone will do a serious biography of a forgotten trailblazer named Dr. Lance Al-

ways, and Dr. Lance Always will be as *real*, as *historical*, as, say, Shakespeare.

"Now, the evidence that Shakespeare existed is just about as flimsy as Dr. Lance Always, but it doesn't matter. Shakespeare exists in people's minds, and it is no longer a matter of evidence but of belief. And there Shakespeare will continue to exist until he's forgotten entirely. The same with Dr. Lance Always." Lee looked at G. "You'll have to take it from here." Lee got up and left the apartment.

I looked at Georgiades. "What are you trying to say?" I asked.

He smiled. "How's this: G is just as real, or unreal, as Dr. Lance Always. He's a character I invented years ago when I was working for Allied intelligence during the war. I got passports and birth certificates, and several times keeping G on the move from hotel to hotel or across borders saved my life. The Germans became so obsessed with tracking down Georgiades that they missed me in the process. Since I worked on and off as a double agent, I was able to wangle an assignment to track Georgiades, which gave me free access throughout the theater, on both sides. I took the idea from a Russian whose name, westernized, was rendered as Georgiades. During the Bolshevik Revolution, he played the same kinds of games, with a letter of passage that on one side was signed by the commander of the White armies and on the other by the commander of the Red armies. It wasn't a new game, even then. But that was where my troubles began.

"The Allied War Office, to boost morale, decided to make Georgiades a hero, and when he was decorated in print the legend began to grow. Only a few people knew that G was a figment of my imagination, and several of those died during the war. G became a hobby among a certain group of us—Lee's father and Martin Wise among us. Over the course of the war, G became a character in his own right. A figment of the collective imagination. And he drove the Germans crazy. I remember

once Hermann Goering calling me into his office and telling me that 'that damned G' had to be rubbed out. Hitler, he told me, considered it to be top priority. Well, G, or the *belief*, in G, helped free the Greek peninsula from German influence.

"Once the war ended, I thought that I could bury G. But he was too strong a personality. And the temptation to use him was always there. When Martin Wise wanted to write a serious economic treatise that could have done serious harm to his science fiction reputation, he asked me if he could use G. I agreed, and it started all over again.

"A little later, due to some questionable dealings on my part, I found it necessary to 'kill' myself in the same way I'd invented G. I've always been a soldier of fortune, I guess. Over the years, I found it easier to manufacture new names and histories, and that's pretty much how I've lived. But I kept G alive out of necessity. And some others, a very select fraternity, have always known. They have been free to use G, and over the years, the 'Man of Mystery' has done just about everything. And in a way, I suppose, G *did* do all those things, since we couldn't have done whatever we attributed to G under our own names.

"Now, there is a situation that I won't go into. Let's just say it's a very tricky political situation having to do with some people I work for in Afghanistan and some politicians in Pakistan who take money under the table from the Russians. I've been using G when I deal with the Russians, since they are aware of his activities for the Allies in the war. But now G's activities have gotten me in a fix that means either G must finally die or several real, breathing, living people will die.

"So we staged this little play and put the ghost of G to rest. The best way to die is publicly and scandalously, and Martin Wise and I cooked up this little scheme for the Russian KGB. They're so full of ambitious young men that *someone* will take credit for it, and that shred of evidence will put the final nail in the coffin of a man

who never lived. It's ironic. Poor G was never so truly alive as when he died for all to see."

"And that's it?" I asked.

"Pretty much," he admitted.

"But I never caught your name," I said.

He winked. "I never gave it to you. What's in a name, after all?"

"You're not going to tell me?"

"I might as well. I've trusted you this far. I assume you can keep all of this secret?"

"You bet your ass I can," I said.

"Good girl," he said. "I told Lee we could trust you. You can't work wars and political upheavals unless you can keep some things secret. But he's a *writer*, not a journalist, and he doesn't understand that. Don't be hard on him."

It was my turn to wink.

"Good," he said. "Just for the record, I'm Sam Wise, Martin's brother. If you'll check the records, you'll find that I was killed in Korea. Wars are very good places to lose people and documents, although they're not good for much else."

"That's it? That's almost beyond belief," I said.

"But it makes too much sense not to be true," Sam Wise said.

"Yes," I admitted. "It does."

"And now, if there's nothing else . . ."

"There is one thing," I said.

"What is that?" he asked.

"You could make love to me."

"It would be a pleasure," he said.

"No," I countered. "The pleasure would be all mine."

We moved into each other's arms gracefully, automatically. I opened my mouth and his tongue explored the inside of my lips, the traces of my tongue. Physically, he was much younger than his age would indicate. Clean living, I guess. I couldn't restrain myself. I

reached out and caressed his basket through his pants and I felt his cock outlined against the soft wool. I traced its outline with my fingers and thrilled to the firm sponginess as it hardened to my touch.

He opened my robe and his mouth moved down, exploring the hollow of my neck, my chest, the gentle slope of my breasts. I felt the hot circle of his mouth on my nipple, his tongue probing, prodding. I could feel the heat rising in my loins, and the stiffness in my hand evidenced his need.

I held his head as he sucked at my breasts, teasing the flesh, stiffening the pink nipples with the heat of his tongue. Around and under, tracing the curve of my breasts with his hands, trained fingers trailing in long fluttering caresses that wove delicate tendrils of heat and need, sucking and biting and pinching me into white heat, suffusing me with his sex. The aroma rose, hot and immediate, and I felt the flush of labia, of moistening, of opening and flowering within my cunt.

I was under the spell now, feeling the mystery of passion that put all other mysteries to shame, even that which I'd just heard. My emotions were alchemically transmuted, and my pain, my sorrow, my anger were channeled elsewhere, into a violent physical need for fusion, for joining, for the intermingling of essence with essence. My body outstripped the ability of poor mind to keep peace, and my hips bucked as hand held head to tit, fingers fastened, zipping zips and holding his velvet prick. Palm around the head, feeling the wet drop of his need, fingers holding the hot, moist outer softness of his iron cock. It leapt and pulsed in my hand, and I squeezed the spongy flesh of the head, each touch bringing the angry rearing up and back, the powerful muscles making his cock dance in my hand.

I felt his hand under my robe, probing me, prising open my flower and burying itself, by slow degrees, into the depths of my furnace. I guided the head of his prick to it, drew him into me, and in a moment I could feel him driving it deeply into me. I felt that first sharp pain,

as though a virgin again, and then he was buried to the hilt. He drew back, and I was open, ready. I wrapped my legs around him, the scratchy wool of his trousers against my thighs and calves, and my hands slipped down the back of his pants to clutch at the tight muscles of his cheeks. He thrust into me, and the muscles rippled in my hands. His prick spread me open, his tongue forced its way into mine, his hands milked my breasts as we fucked right there on the couch.

With each stroke, a gasp was torn from me, and I felt the heat: of his cock, of his loins, of hands on me, and lips on mine. I breathed his scented breath and tasted the nectar of his passion with my tongue. And then he pulled away, his mouth trailing hot down my body, finding my cunt and exploring the inner recesses, licking me, tonguing and sucking me, hands on hipbones to hold me down. I strained up against him, and we met, pressure for pressure, thrust for counterthrust, and back up again, slow motion dancing. I reached for him and planted him once more in my velvet furrow, drew him once more to my depths. That strange feeling of straining away and together, of attraction and repulsion of flesh against flesh, of melding and ripping apart as we matched rhythms. I guided his thrusts with my hands on his ass, and his fingers probed me from around and under—wetting themselves in my fluids, sliding up along my labia, circling the tight button of my ass. I felt his fingers on my clit, touching and teasing, grabbing a handful of hair and pulling my cunt up to his prick, gloving himself with me.

I milked him with my inner muscles, and he stopped to lie there, unmoving, while I controlled. I thrust myself against him, impaling myself on his cock again and again, a butterfly of iron suspended on a magnetic flower stalk.

We rolled to the floor, and he reentered me from behind, plumbing my depths. I felt his fingers in my crack, manipulating me, hand on tit, levering me back against him, timing his thrusts to his need. And we fell

to the floor, his cock still buried in me, my body face down on the carpet, he above, driving into me. I writhed and wriggled, my body heat-flushed and sweating as above me hands caught my breasts and cunt, ground upward into them. I felt the muscles of his belly against my ass, his arms encircling me, and his prick driven in deep pistonlike strokes into the bore of my cunt.

And over, our bodies mottled with red heat and need, sweat for sweat, facing the heavens, still taken from behind, I was suspended above, legs open, his body carrying me like a feather as he drove upward, more and more savage with each ecstatic thrust. I couldn't keep silent, and I moaned with the heat of lust, words without meaning, singing the ancient song of blood to his rhythm.

And then off and in and up and around, legs around his neck, ankles at shoulders, my cunt open like a mollusk for his thrust, belly and balls slapping against my ass, the backs of my thighs. A steady pounding rhythm, a steady monotone of sounds, of the couch giving under us, of flesh against flesh, of breath in and out in quick-time, ragged, harmonized. My pulse hot in my temples, pumping at my crotch. I looked into his eyes and contact was electric. Sparks shot between us, and I saw myself, my cunt, our fuck mirrored, though not in a manner literal, nor even metaphorical, but mirrored exact and true as a map though the points of correspondence did not, in any accepted sense, correspond—each stroke, each step of this long journey was taking me farther and farther out, and this was the climax, in some weirdling way, to a shadow play I enacted without ever understanding.

Though we were fucking as fucking is normally understood, in some other, more arcane manner much more was going on than surface appearances indicated. I felt as if I were viewing our coupling through the reflection in a time-corroded mirror, as though I were seeing only the tips of things poking out of the surface. And I knew in a strange way that although Sam Wise had told me a

truth of sorts, it was in no wise the complete truth; if such truth there be. He had given me detail—even as I viewed, smelled, tasted, felt the detail of our copulation—but mere detail completed the picture as a frame does in the absence of the painting. The canvas was present, as was the frame. The colored palette contained all the pigments, and all tools were neatly laid out, but the *Mona Lisa* was not present, not even in smile.

We fucked, and I perceived this man (was he really any more Sam Wise than he had been G?) as though through a double layer of glass. And some gauze besides. I felt his cock churning me into butter. I tasted his breath and breathed his heat, but I did not see him. I was, would be, had been, as far from the truth now as I had been before I began my voyage, and now for the final revelation—I was, again, Icarus who could rise only so far before falling. I felt his cock, experienced all the human and familiar trappings and was still apart. Still in the dark, still unseeing.

I rose toward an orgasm that I was strangely antipathetic toward, and I did my best to still my mind. If I could not understand what was happening to me, then at least I could feel it. The thinking would take care of itself by and by. And in the cessation of thought, I felt unbound, and I soared upward like a balloon, nerves tingling, heart racing, pulse pounding like drums through my veins.

And I was once again in that emerald ocean, rising, though this time in a lover's embrace, and we soared upward, the light becoming clearer and clearer. I was only vaguely aware of my body, so far below, and I saw two humans on a couch, but they might as well have been a million miles away. Two small specks far, far below. Soaring on eagle's wings, up, up, up through the green and electric water, and breaking the surface into that endless expanse of sky. The sun was in the heavens, blazing with all his might, and I, no longer mere Christina, could see all of the firmament around, unobscured by the light of the golden sun. There, the clouds rising in

majestic castles of impossible form, like deco cities in the sky, and moons and stars without number.

We rose together, this man and I, and below us two lay on a couch, moving mechanically, distant and farther and lost from sight.

And I saw part of the mystery: that sex was nothing to do with what I had been told. And I laughed because that was the way that They would see it. And while blind men and elephants dropped from the heavens in a painting Magritte neglected to canvas, I soared higher, in the embrace of eagles and lions and bulls and gods.

Laughter rang around me, and the skies were not at all as I had at first perceived—empty—but were filled. The wheels rotated within wheels, and the choir celestial was everywhere and nowhere heard. And I rose still higher toward the heart of the sun blazing in the heavens.

I came in a blaze of white light and fell a million light-years to land like a feather on the floor of my apartment.

CHAPTER TEN

When I opened my eyes, He was gone.

I had this feeling that I would never see "G" again. Indeed, I felt that it was possible no one would see him again. After all, he had retired, and whoever or whatever Sam Wise was would not be seen again in his familiar haunts.

In the months that followed, I tracked and traced, and followed up on odd bits of information supplied to me by fellow reporters, and through more devious methods. When I saw Lee—and we saw quite a bit of each other in the months that followed—we never discussed it. And I never breathed a word to Malcolm. The irony was that the very thing that had sent me off on my journey—Malcolm's snobbery—hadn't been altered, but that *my* reaction to it had. There was no point in his believing anything other than what he had seen: Georgiades had been assassinated, I had been in shock. So I told him nothing. Nor did I tell anyone else, for that matter. But I did a little investigating on my own.

Another odd result of all my travels was the sudden friendship that sprang up between Bernadette Faber and

myself. I ran into her in New York, attending a conference on cetacean preservation. I had taken to attending such weird happenings off and on, although I couldn't say why.

When I saw her, I thought that I should have known better, but she did not, as anticipated, throw a scowl or sneer or marshal the evil eye in my direction. She actually smiled cordially and walked over to me.

"Christina. So good to see you again." As though all unpleasantness was forgotten and we had just finished our tryst on the plane.

"How have you been?" I asked. I don't tend to bear grudges. If she wanted to be friends, that was fine by me.

"Fine," she said. "Running here and there and not getting anything accomplished."

I saw a layer, a level of melancholy I hadn't seen before. I was pretty sure that it hadn't been there before. Such sadness in green eyes. I felt a twinge of . . . what? I don't know. Compassion, I suppose. "You look troubled," I said.

She smiled a sad smile. "I've been feeling that way a lot lately."

"Him?" I asked.

She nodded. "Why don't we go somewhere and get some coffee."

"You're an achiever?" I asked, making reference to a commercial for coffee that's been fouling the airwaves of late.

"Oh, yes," she said, grateful for the opportunity to put on the smile mask. She didn't fool me.

"Sure," I said. "Let's go."

We went someplace nondescript. Someplace a little dim and quiet. When coffee was served and a cup gone apiece, she finally spoke.

"Christina, I want to apologize."

"For what?" I asked.

"For being such a cunt," she said. "For treating you so miserably. I'm—"

"I know," I cut in. "Say no more. I acted pretty shitty myself."

"No," she said. "Let me finish. You see, I've always, I mean, I'm always doing it. I don't know why. You put me in a room with a beautiful, talented, or intelligent woman and I do everything I can to try and cut her down to size."

"If you were a man, I'd swear you were trying to make a pass," I said, laughing. With—not at.

"Maybe I ought to," she said. "Maybe I will. It wasn't so awful? On the plane, I mean."

"It was fine," I said. "Just fine." Somewhere something in my brain went click and I realized that I had probably been the only person she had been intimate with other than G in who knew how long. And the only woman. I was sure of that. She was scared, I guess. She was like anyone else. She needed reassurance, she needed to know that what she had done was all right and that she hadn't been as horrible as she feared she was. It was the sort of thing you think about late at night, alone in strange hotel rooms with an indentation in the mattress beside you and the fading scent of cologne. I've been there.

"Thank you," she said. "I know you're just being kind, but thank you anyway."

"Shit," I said. "Am I going to have to put up with your shitty fucked-up self-image *and* this miserable coffee too?" I had to do it. It was the Zen-stroke.

Happily, my timing was right, and she started laughing. It was dangerous laughter, though. The laughter that's too loud and too shrill. Under the table I popped my high heel from my left foot and slipped my foot up her skirt. She looked at me, nervous as a startled fawn.

"The only way I'm going to convince you," I said, "is by getting the hell out of here and fucking you."

She seemed to sag. It was a strange acquiescence. In retrospect, I wonder how many times she had surrendered in just that way to any man who'd shown an interest, or made a blustering pass at her. I could see that G's

"death" had broken something in her. I wondered if she knew.

"All right," she said meekly. "Whenever you'd like to go."

I couldn't believe that this shell of a creature was the same woman who'd played such a bitch fight with me on three continents. "Uh, sure," I said. "Just let me get the check."

"Oh no," she said. "It's on me."

I let her pay and got her the hell out of there and back to my apartment. Inside, I started as soon as the door was closed. "Take your clothes off," I commanded.

She did. First, unbuttoning her blouse and shedding it. She failed to undo her cuffs, in her haste, and ended up standing helpless with the shirt inside out around her wrists. I helped her undo them and unzipped her skirt. She stepped out of it and stood before me in half-slip and panties and bra. It was a nondescript bra, white and elastic. She opened the front catch and exposed her breasts shyly, angry red marks on her skin where the bra had cut into it. She was wearing a bra that was too small. On her breasts, yellowish patches, still healing, where some unknown lover had groped her a little too amorously, and the tracks of teeth on her ribs.

Then the slip, with its tattered lace fringe. Who would have thought under that immaculate outfit she wore such shabby undergarments? A symptom, I suppose, a facade of glamor to cover the rags. She shed her white cotton panties. They were stained from her flowers, threads unraveling. Such a forlorn little girl. Lost and preyed upon in the land of the Dew Drop Inns and Bide-A-Wees—that territory of the damned and lonely. I felt more like crying than making love. And I could understand why G had taken her in, why he had taken the broken bird under his wing.

Bernadette Faber was an exquisitely formed woman. But her breasts sagged, and her tummy drooped from years of bad posture, from years of trying to hide herself. "Stand straight," I said. "No, stand *erect*, dam-

mit. You do know how to stand properly, don't you?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, Christ," I said. I grabbed a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* from the bookshelf nearest me and put it on her head. "It looks like we're going to have to start from scratch."

"But you . . . I mean, Christina, I'm *naked*."

"You're always naked under your clothes. It's the way you were born. Now shut up and listen."

And so I inadvertently inherited Bernadette Faber from Georgiades. "Georgiades" because I know some way that's what he really is. Or was, or whatever. For the next few months, I would have a houseguest, although I didn't realize it at the time. It began with showing her how to stand up straight and how to walk. Then, how to talk without either frying people—her compensation for years of shyness—or in a shy whisper that was barely audible.

When Malcolm called on me that evening, I introduced him to my houseguest and shot him withering glances when he failed to notice that neither Bernadette nor I were warming to his macho patter. I had to take him gently aside and explain that the "Off Limits" sign was up and would remain so until I said it came down. He took it well, which was to his benefit.

Then came weeks and weeks of work. I didn't see my old friends much, and even Malcolm came by less frequently, taking to calling me Auntie Mame when he did.

But that was okay. It was precisely what I was doing. It felt strange, adopting another person. Almost as though that roll with G had produced a psychic pregnancy, and my strange wanderings were akin to a pregnancy. Well, now I had a child, and for better or worse, Bernadette Faber was my child, although not in a sense that anyone would recognize. I taught her how to walk, how to eat, how to talk, how to dress. I taught her how to comb and brush her hair, and how to apply makeup. I showed her what perfumes to wear and how to douche—which she'd never learned and was actually a little

frightened of. I taught her how to make love. At first, it was how to receive. I spent hours at her cunt, lapping up the dew, finding her peaks and valleys and her rhythms. I learned her sensitive places and how to masturbate her as well as she did it herself.

And then I reversed the polarities and taught her how to give, at first teaching her how to eat me. During *that* period I didn't let anybody come to the apartment. I didn't dare. I understood how a parent must feel when they are trying to teach their little one the ways of the world and are not at all sure that they're doing the right thing. There's always a mother or a nosy aunt around to chide them on their failings. Well, I had no need for Malcolm's chidings, and I already *knew* what he'd say about me. After all, my methods were somewhat severe. I had Bernadette doing my housework and kept her in the nude at all times, and I will admit that it did seem like something from *The Story of O*; her dressed in an apron and very little else, dusting and sweeping and under orders to drop whatever she was doing at any time and suck my pussy whenever I was feeling restless. I felt restless quite a bit after I had taught her to eat cunt properly. The trouble was, she had a talented tongue but just didn't trust her own responses.

At times I felt like a total bitch, but having accepted authority, I couldn't let my mask drop lest she see that I was in many ways just as frightened and unsure of myself as she. I made all sorts of mistakes. I spent a lot of time feeling like a character from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* named Simon, and I spent a lot of time feeling sorry for every poor bastard who's ever held a position of authority over other people. The problem is, I like to live my life as I see it. I can take care of myself, thank you. And you're perfectly free to go to hell in a handbasket if that's what you want. But to take on the responsibility of another human being was not, and *is* not (I guess) in my temperament. Still, I worked as hard as she did. A lot of the rough edges seemed to rub off my personality, and an awful lot of the bluster and childishness had to

go. Now I understand the old maxim, The teacher learns more in the teaching than the student does.

Some days it seemed like every damned thing I did was wrong and I was only making reverse headway. Like I was tearing down a week's work in ten minutes. But I persevered. I doubt that I could have, except that Bernadette basically seemed to trust me and she *knew* she needed someone to show her the things I was showing her. After a while, I began to take a more patient view toward life. "All things come to she who waits" ended up being my motto. I started to notice that the big changes are compounded of little ones, and that in the final analysis, I couldn't *make* Bernadette change in any way. I could give her the instructions, and I could tell her what part of my clit was most sensitive to her tongue, but if she didn't want to eat pussy, I couldn't make her.

And so, day by day, my little rose grew. From a bud to a bloom to a blossom and thence to a rosehip, dead and waiting for the next cycle. And like the man who wasn't sure whether he was sculpting his bonsai tree or it was sculpting *him*, I seemed to notice that I was learning too. But it was a slow sort of sculpture. I couldn't pull the plant up by the leaves. I could water it and prune it and pull the weeds and keep the bugs off, and that was about it. I'll have to admit that as gardeners go, I was pretty piss-poor at it.

But Bernadette made progress. And I came to love her in a very special way. When I realized that it was time to introduce her back into the world of men, I felt strangely possessive, and jealous in a way. I didn't want to let her out of my sight. I had grown, as the professor said, accustomed to her face. I, half-ass Pygmalion that I was, had fallen in love with my own creation and had blinded myself to her flaws.

There were fights. And I have to say that some of them got pretty violent. But we made up, more often than not in bed. And when, on the day I had invited David Nettleton to the apartment, I looked in the mirror

and didn't recognize for a long moment the woman I saw, I understood that I'd grown up a little. I'd grown up a lot. I also knew that part of it—part of maturity—is realizing that you've still got a very, very long way to go. How easily we'd fallen into the biological roles of mother and daughter. Why, no one would believe that Bernadette Faber had been a famous, well-known big-timer, to see us in my apartment playing house.

I could only smile a wan smile and watch that strange woman in the mirror as she smiled back. I thought of a little song that I'd taken to humming, so simple and yet so profound:

*Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is but a Dream . . .*

David was tall and dashing at the door—the very figure of a man I wanted Bernadette to take a shine to. My vanity, I guess. I figured I could play godmother, and they hated each other on sight. My fault. I'd spent all afternoon on the phone building Bernadette up to David, and vice versa. But nothing had warned me I was pushing it too far. Or maybe something did. I felt embarrassed and like an ass, which caused me to snap at both of them over drinks while we all suffered through the uncomfortable chitchat and pleasantries of our social evening.

I got us all stoned on Thai stick, and we did some coke. Strange, I realized. I hadn't done much in the way of drugs for . . . how long? I had last seen G on Christmas past, and adopted Bernadette on a midsummer's day. Thanksgiving was coming and Christmas was right behind it. Nearly a year had passed. Oh well. We smoked our smoke, drank our drinks, and tooted our toot. The nose-candy helped transmute the jittery feeling, but Bernadette kept looking over at me with cow-eyes, and David kept looking over at me questioningly,

and I realized that I'd gotten just a little too much into all of this.

At that moment, it was over. I cut the apron strings inwardly, and my days as a mother were past. I proceeded to get roaring drunk, totally stoned, and highly obnoxious. What my friends failed to notice was that this bit of playacting was to a purpose. Two, in fact. First, it brought me back to sanity. I'd been too fucking preoccupied with being responsible to have much fun. And I'd been failing to notice that the only thing that was keeping Bernadette out of David's arms was my silent, naggy, pushy insistence that they become lovers. In that perverse manner we all recognize as human, they were balking, as I would have in their shoes. So I said fuck it and had a good time. I got very, very reckless, but this time with a difference: now was the time for recklessness. My previous problem hadn't been being reckless. God knew I'd tried to shed that character failing with all the zeal of an alcoholic new on the wagon, and I hadn't realized that *it* wasn't the problem. The problem was my *timing*.

So I kicked out the jams and the Christina that I've come to know and love came roaring back and Auntie Mame went back into the closet with last year's fashions. And when they dragged me bodily from the room and undressed me and put me to bed, I caught the knowing glances and the gentle bumpings and touches, and I knew right away where they were heading. Lord help me for being a sneak, but I was happy that I'd overplayed my state of inebriation. Tee hee.

I waited five minutes and crept out of bed in the half-light of dawn to Bernadette's room where she'd obligingly left the door open a crack. I peered in and was greeted with a happy sight.

There on her bed, David was intertwined with her, leg between her thighs, their clothes already semi-shed and hands fumbling. Her blouse was open and his shirt was bunched up around his shoulders. Bernadette had one shoe on and the other was somewhere up around the

head of the bed. His boots were on the floor, still sagging into slumber.

In the stillness of dawn, I watched them. So I was playing matchmaker. Big deal. I'd been right. Just wrong in my methods. His hand was working inside her blouse, and I saw her hand slip down with an ease developed on my jeans to his. Fingers long and tipped with red gracefully unlatching David's belt, undoing the top button of his jeans—the true mark of sexual prowess. It isn't how you use the gift, it's how you unwrap it. Zip and grasp, his cock pulsing in his hand. Lucky for her she'd been with G, or David might have frightened her. She ran her thumb around the head of his cock, all the while wriggling against his embrace like an amorous eel.

"I want to suck you," she whispered.

"Please be my guest," he groaned.

A sly grin spread over Bernadette's face as she dropped to take him in her mouth. This time she didn't have to fake her expression. It was perfect lust. She took pleasure in his cock. Held it in her hand and examined it, milking the delicate flesh and looking up at him to gauge his reaction. He looked down at her, blown away by her technique. She smiled seductively and without looking away from his eyes, pumped it lustily, drawing a look of awe or overwhelming pleasure, or both, from him. Still looking up at him, she held his cock to her lips and kissed it gently. Then she took it in her mouth, nibbling at it delicately, as one might nibble canapés or croissants. He just about lost it right there. She bit her lower lip and licked the cleft of David's frenum, and he *did* lose it. Again there was no awkwardness in her technique. She held the head of his cock to her lips and let his come splash into her mouth. She lolled it on her tongue and swallowed, a barnyard cat at milking time. And then, before he could soften, she grasped his cock at the root, shutting off the outflow of blood, and, pulling her panties aside under her dress, rose to straddle his cock, burying it inside her the way she had done so many times with her black dildo. She was in the driver's

seat in a way that I'd never have believed before. I stuck a finger in my cunt and played with myself. I couldn't tell whether it was because of her, him, or both, but the heat was contagious.

Who would have believed that this tiger (before my training) could be such a lamb in bed; and now the lamb of public view was a man-eater in bed. Not castrating, not pushy. Just a girl who knew what she wanted and knew how to get it. I didn't see that David had any reason to complain. They screwed this way and that, on top, over, under, all over the bedroom. It was wild and wooly: his cock in her cunt, her lean torso moving in time with his, rippling and shuddering in accord, two beautiful bodies locked in cooperative struggle, trying to rise above the boundaries of flesh and event. Two swimmers in a secret sea, trying to heat it into a fiery caldera of white-heat. They didn't seem to be having any trouble, from what I could see.

Finally, I had to slink back to my room, content yet unsatisfied. They had moved closer and closer to the door, and my view of the finality was occluded. They were angled away from my vantage, and I could only listen to the shudders and imagine it.

I imagined that it was good.

Later, on my bed, I masturbated furiously, then fell off to sleep, still unfinished and strangely unable to come. It had taken me some time before I realized that I really wasn't interested, was just going through the motions.

I had been having strange dreams, though of what I could not say. And I woke suddenly, unable to contain the need rising up in me. All sorts of strange thoughts assailed me—to call Malcolm (I remembered that he was engaged elsewhere on company business), to creep in and seduce David (I couldn't do that to Bernadette under any circumstances), to call someone, to find someone. Each I rejected for some reason. The only thing to do was to do myself. I did myself too. Only

something seemed to be missing. My fantasies were exhausted. I could climb so high and no farther. And again I was unable and finally uninterested. I slept again.

And then, awakening again, I was in that place where I wanted, needed to be, and I could not contain it. I felt my orgasm rising, even as my hand was dropping once more into the breach. And I came, up and up, my disappointment mounting even as I rose. It was a pale explosion compared to my need. Something was/is wrong, that our one place of true ecstasy on this earth is always transitive. It always creeps away before we've even begun to feel it. It is like sunset—just as the perfection of the event is reached, it is passed and we are left in the dying light wondering what it was that we so yearned to feel, to see.

I felt like crying, but I didn't. At least the Christina that I know had returned. And things would pretty much come back to normal again. It had been an odd year. I reached for my bedside phone to call Malcolm, and a slip of paper fluttered to the floor. I'd put it by the phone to remind me and forgotten about it. The Halloween party that *World* threw every year. I still didn't know what to wear. I hadn't, until that moment, even considered going. But I decided to make Halloween my reemerging from the long, strange interlude I'd been in. It seemed like a good idea. It was only two days away and I was pretty sure I felt like myself again.

I dialed Malcolm and got a faintly snooty runaround from Cyndy, his new secretary (he'd been through several since Margie left). Finally, he came on the line.

"How's Auntie Mame?" he asked.

"Cut it out, Malcolm," I said.

"Christina? Christina van Bell? Is it really you?" he said in mock-astonishment.

I laughed. "Yes, Malcolm dear. I suppose it is."

"You're not kidding," he said. "It sounds like you."

"It's been a strange year," I said. "But it's ending on Halloween."

"We could end it tonight," he said. "You know, I don't think I've seen you more than six or seven times outside of business in the last six months."

"Halloween, Malcolm," I said. "And don't you dare bring a date. I'm not sure I remember what your cock looks like any more."

"C'mon, Crissy."

"Malcolm, you know how I hate to hear you whine. There's nothing worse than hearing you beg for pussy."

"But I need it," he wheedled, injecting just enough humor in his inflection to let me know that he wasn't completely serious.

"You'll get it soon enough," I said. "Besides, as my frigid aunt used to say, 'Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.'"

"Good to have you back, lady," he said.

"I was feeling reckless," I said.

"Huh?"

"Nothing. I'm feeling *restless* now."

"I don't think I follow you," Malcolm said.

"I don't want you to," I said. "I just want you to screw me. See you in two days. And in the meantime . . ."

"Yes?"

"Lay off the meat. I want you nice and ready. Deal?"

"Deal," he said, laughing.

Bernadette saved me a lot of wondering and worrying by announcing that she was moving in with David that very evening. Tearful hugs and good-byes and a silence that was a thanks. Our strange symbiosis had ended as suddenly as it began. A little later, while I was helping her pack, Lee called. Strange, I thought, since I hadn't seen Lee in nearly as long as I'd seen Malcolm. Lee had stopped by to show us the proofs of his latest book. It was called *A Flight of Angels* and dedicated to "the Girls in the nunnery, C & B, with love and bewilderment." I hadn't seen him or heard since then, but perhaps it wasn't so strange. Lee and I were in a strange

sort of psychic accord that didn't seem to notice the passage of time.

"I just called to say that I'll be in New York on Friday to kick off my new horror novel. I'd like to see you two."

"One," I said.

"She's gone?"

"Going," I said. "Want to talk to her?"

"Sure."

They talked mysteriously and privately for a time. I left the room when I realized that I wasn't supposed to listen in. Then Bernadette handed the phone back to me.

"Christina?"

"Please do stop by when you get in," I said. "I'd like you to come to a little Halloween party with me."

"Can't. Sorry. There's a big kickoff party at Elaine's the whole evening. I'd have to stop by in the afternoon."

I sighed. "Well, maybe I can drop by. We've got a company party, and it wouldn't look good for me not to be there for a goodly while."

"I hope you can come," he said, and proceeded to tell me lots of things that seemingly made it more and more impossible. Sometimes the timing works that way. Elaine's was full dress, and I'd looked pretty ridiculous in costume. So, figuring changing and et cetera, it wouldn't be very practical.

I apologized, "Maybe next time. Come over for the afternoon at least."

"I'll do my best," he said, and rang off.

I helped Bernadette finish packing and talked about David girlishly. I agreed that he was quite a guy. And so forth.

Separation came and so did David, and Bernadette moved her boxes and said good-bye. Then they left to come, and I came to feel very lonely very quickly. The sense of freedom vanished very soon after the quiet in my apartment became stifling, which was about the time

I heard the elevator doors closing down the hall.

A long lonely night, and I still didn't know what costume to wear. In the morning I decided the hell with it, and since all the costume shops in New York were down to bare nothings, I threw together some odds and ends and decided to go to the party as a charwoman.

Afternoon came and went, with me waiting for Lee. He finally called to say he'd been held up and would have to catch me the next time he was in town.

Finally, somewhat disgusted with a deadly dull day, I dressed and called for my limo. I had to say that I did a great job on the costume. I'd gotten a pair of worn-out boots at a thrift shop a few blocks away, and a work frock, and a little makeup. By the time I was finished, I looked just like a prematurely gray washerwoman, and to tell you the truth, that's exactly what I felt like.

I didn't feel any better when I got to the party and saw everyone else arrayed in a bewildering assortment of glitzy, glittery costumes. It seemed that this year everyone had gone all out to win the costume competition (which I wasn't in contention for, as boss lady). I felt like a real plain Jane, inwardly and outwardly. I felt shitty about even coming, if the truth were known.

The band was some heavy metal group from Long Island that was supposed to be all the rage and would undoubtedly get a fat record contract and lots of groupies, but the somewhat darkling overtones of the music made me feel even worse. Malcolm had come looking like Errol Flynn at his most swashbuckling. Merritt Dane had come dressed as a bear, which is what Merritt is anyway, so no one really noticed. David was there with Bernadette, and they were dressed as Titania and Oberon, and David's son (about ten; David gets visitation now and then) trailed along between them as Puck. It gave me quite a start for a moment because their idea of Puck was—you guessed it—a harlequin outfit.

Bernadette looked transported. She had found a ready-made little family, and she and David's son,

Davey, seemed utterly taken with one another.

I was very happy for them and felt like shit. I felt as though I'd suddenly ceased to be important, which was not true at all, but I still felt that way anyhow.

Malcolm, Bernadette, David, Davey, and I were all seated at my table, at my request, and we regarded the revelers. Everyone thought my costume was really cute and original, but no one seemed very enthusiastic. The problem was that it was supposed to be a role reversal: lady masquerading as lowly menial while her menials comported themselves as kings, queens, and duchesses. Even before I'd gotten to the party, the joke was sour, and I think everyone who saw me picked up on my feelings.

So I just sat and watched, and was feeling very poorly. Malcolm kept having to go and mingle for this or that reason, to mollify some new artist or curry the favor of an honored guest, and I felt very much like a stranger at my own party. Not having gone out much in the preceding months, I felt rusty, out of place. And that damned harlequin costume kept reminding me of my long, senseless quest for G, and its bizarre climax. I had spent three seasons trying to forget, but it still nagged at me.

I had thought of the whole thing as a bad dream, and even though it had seemingly turned out well, I couldn't shake the experience of G's death, which may have been staged and false, but which everyone in the media, including to an extent myself, considered real.

It had left a deep wound in me somewhere that time and my strange game of family with Bernadette had done nothing to really heal. It had scabbed over, sure. But I still couldn't make sense of it. I felt removed from the world, as though I were still in Sydney, watching the world on a bank of TV sets. I seemed to feel those things that affected me as I would in a movie theater: I could empathize, I could even identify, but I knew that it wasn't me and that whatever happened to me, I'd still be there when the curtains closed and the lights came

on. Sometimes I even felt as though I could slip out for popcorn and a soft drink and my life would still be going on when I got back, up there on the screen.

A dreadful Halloween. Somewhere along the line, I'd dropped my mask, and I couldn't find it again. Christina van Bell was dead, and I mourned her, if that doesn't sound strange. Hell, it *was* strange. Like being a mourner at your own funeral. All of the things I'd come to cherish about myself were dead, and while I could still *act* them, my heart just wasn't in it.

I sat and drank and watched the party, unable to control my doubts. I had gone looking for Georgiades, a man who never really existed, and now he was more real than I was. Somewhere along the line, I'd lost myself, and I didn't know where to find it. Perhaps I should have gone as the Ugly Duckling, except that the duckling became a swan, and I'd gone back the other way. I thought I was a swan, with my body and my mind and my talents. I was a great beautiful bird only a year ago. And now here I was, my plumage stripped and beak horny with dead stuff. I was just an ugly duckling again. My charwoman outfit felt uncomfortably comfortable.

And then a great feathered serpent wandered up to my table in peacock feathers and gold lamé. "May I have this dance?" the serpent asked.

"Lee!"

He grabbed me and hugged me and whirled me around, and I felt a little better. And Malcolm and Bernadette and David were suddenly around me, and the eyes of everyone in the room were on me as the crowd began to sing, "For she's a jolly good fellow!"

I was overwhelmed. I was stunned, and, yes, I was shocked. Only, this time it was in the other direction, and the smile on my face was no longer a stranger's smile. Somewhere, sometime someone must describe what it feels like to be a cosmic yo-yo. You're all the way at the bottom of the pit, and the three-headed dog is just about to start chewing on you, and then you do a half rotation and you're shooting up again. The audi-

ence knew, and the guy with the string around his finger knew, and the only one who didn't know was you.

I went shooting straight up. Suddenly I remembered that I was loved and that I loved these people and everything was changed in the twinkling of an eye. I was no longer restless, and I was no longer reckless. But most important I was no longer useless, and I started to cry tears of happiness.

"Thish ish the besht party I've ever . . ." I sniffled.

And the crowd let out a collective sigh, and I felt as though I'd gone from duck to swan. Now I know what they meant by a snake shedding its skin. Suddenly I was no longer a charwoman masquerading as a publisher, but a publisher masquerading as a charwoman, and it's a difference of light-years.

Lee and I trod out onto the dance floor, and as he held me close (the heavy metal band was actually playing a soft slow-dance piece) I felt a rushing in my body. I felt as though I'd recovered my sex besides, and the feeling between Lee and me was electric. That was no gun. He was just happy to see me. The feeling was mutual.

And Malcolm cut in, and he was happy to see me too. We whirled around in the danse macabre, with all the ghouls and goblins and ghosties cavorting around us in a silly symphony of shapes and forms, and I think it was the best Halloween I've ever had. David cut in, and I hate to say it but I was very happy to feel that he was happy just to dance with me too. About ten inches worth right up against my thigh.

Call me a flirtatious little bitch, but as long as the lights were low, I didn't see any harm in rubbing it along its length with my palm. I caught the surprised look in David's eye, but I rubbed his hard-on anyway, and I think I took a little delight in the fact that it was pointing down so that he couldn't readjust it without being obvious and he couldn't will it back down. Down, cock! Down, I say!

Fortunately, Malcolm cut in again, and I'm afraid

that I was just a little greedy in asking him to hold off for two days, because by the time Lee cut in again, there was something wet and sticky spreading out across Captain Blood's fligh.

And then I was in Lee's arms again, and Captain Blood was stiff-legging it for the men's room with a stain in his pants and a smile on his lips. I let Lee grope me through the charwoman's smock and was delighted by the feel of stiff nipple against rough fabric. I was feeling frisky and, well, young again. That lump hadn't subsided, and feeling cautiously reckless, I searched amid the feathers for a fly to catch—had I come as a princess, I'd have probably had to kiss a frog—and once caught, the feathered serpent's serpent did a little dance in my hand until it spit all over my smock, which was all right, since the stain would go very well with the others that covered the fabric.

All around us, my merry employees were cavorting, and I noted with some satisfaction that Halloween had decided to double-date with saturnalia this year. In the gallery, several of my secretaries seemed to be dancing in their dates' laps, or perhaps they were sitting on something hot, who can say?

And then someone cut in on Lee, necessitating the quick stuffing of the serpent back in his plumed trousers. It was a lion. His eyes I knew, but the face was coupled to no name. I danced with the lion, and he held me tight enough to his crotch that I could count pubic hairs through the material. And there was no doubt that he'd been circumcised. Dutifully, this little charwoman reached for the broom handle that had unaccountably, uh, gotten lodged against my crotch, and I slipped a hand under the lion's skin and felt the satiny texture of the lion's cock.

Tapered and somewhat large, but not overly so. And I knew who it was. I may forget a face, but never a cock. It was my nameless friend from Australia.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered.

"I suppose the same thing you are," he said. "I'm dancing."

"No, I mean what brings you to my party?"

"This is *your* party?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Well, what can I say?" he asked. "I told you I had a feeling we'd meet again."

Weird coincidences. My life was full of them. I kind of stared up at the ballroom ceiling, taking it all in. G, Lee, trips and travels, roommates and finally charwomen. It did make sense after all. I just don't know how to describe it. Let's just say that where a moment before my face had been pressed up against a dark ceiling, now there was nothing but blue sky above me.

"Don't mind me," I said, suddenly realizing that he was staring at me. "I'm just trying to get a grip on things."

His eyes twinkled. "I'd say you've already got a pretty good grip on things." He winked and rubbed against me. I gave him an affectionate squeeze. He looked at my costume.

"Hello, Cinderella," he said.

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